

Sonoma County's Valley Ford Cheese Company Earns Followers With Estero Gold

Valley Ford, CA—Sonoma County's latest farmstead cheese operation is working overtime to satisfy demand for its Estero Gold artisan cheese, an American original similar in style to Montasio.

Just over a year old, The Valley Ford Cheese Company is a farmstead operation united with Mountain View Jerseys – a 640-acre dairy farm in western Sonoma county, continuously operated by the same family since 1918. The farm currently milks about 450 Jersey cows.

Valley Ford Cheese Company was first conceived in 2008. The company wanted to try a style of cheesemaking that would hearken back to the standards of Ticino, the famous dairy canton on the Swiss-Italian border where the family lineage dates back.

Our intention was to produce an aged artisan cheese that would enhance the qualities of local produce, wine, breads and meats, according to Karen Bianchi-Moreda, owner and head cheese maker at Valley Ford.

"I had this idea, and eventually I had a little cheese kit arrive in the mail," she said. "After that, it was full-steam ahead. I read every book I could get my hands on and took a class at Cal Poly."

After the cheese recipe was nailed down, the family renovated an existing structure on the dairy. Since the initial restoration, Valley Ford has completed two expansion projects.

"We managed to maintain the integrity of the building, and it sits right in the middle of our dairy. I have a beautiful view," Bianchi-Moreda said. "Would it be best for me to put in a new facility? I won't for all these reasons. I'll just have to add on as needed."

Earning the necessary licenses and passing inspections took about seven months – working constantly.

The dairy also earned Certified Humane status – a process that included a 15-page application, visits from veterinarians, and inspectors that "go through everything with a fine-tooth comb," Bianchi-Moreda said.

Mountain View passed inspection on its first try, and earned a second certification for the farmstead cheese operation.

"Right now, there's only two of us in the area that are certified," Bianchi-Moreda said.

During the start-up phase, Bianchi-Moreda worked with representatives from the Sonoma County Farm Bureau, Dairy Quality Assurance Program, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation, and the California Milk Advisory Board.

I also visited Petaluma's Bellwether Farms for advice. Bellwether's Carmony cheese is made with Mountain View's Jersey milk, Bianchi-Moreda added.

"They were gracious enough to allow me to ask questions," she said. "They knew I would never make a cheese anything like what they're doing."

Estero Gold, Valley Ford's premier product, is an Italian farmstead cheese made from Jersey milk in the style of an Asiago and reminiscent of a Montasio – two of the famous cheeses from Swiss-Italian dairy country.

The young cheese, at about four months old, is very pliable, with grassy, fruity overtones. As it continues to age, the flavor deepens, becoming complex and nutty, according to Bianchi-Moreda.



Karen Bianchi-Moreda, owner and head cheese maker at Valley Ford Cheese Company, created Estero Gold artisan cheese in the style of an Asiago and reminiscent of Montasio.

"I took Estero Gold to ACS last year and scored a 94 on my first try," she said.

Valley Ford Cheese also makes a Fontina, which Bianchi-Moreda entered on a whim to the 2010 California State Fair Commercial Cheese Competition and earned a Gold Medal.

Fontina is made in very limited production – only about 90 to 180 gallons per week.

"The Estero Gold is my baby; it's my recipe," Bianchi-Moreda said. "The Fontina is new and I will start producing more, but I'm still pretty small, producing between 500 and 600 gallons a week total."

Bianchi-Moreda first took her Estero Gold to the nearby Valley Ford Market. Four retailers later, the cheese started catching on and Bianchi-Moreda had to start strategically setting aside product to fill orders.

"The ones that stuck with me get priority," she said.

Valley Ford Cheese has employed Tomales Bay Foods as its distributor, and has accumulated about 46 of its own clients the company takes care of – restaurants, wineries and both large and small Sonoma county specialty markets.

"What's really fun is pairing up with the wineries and some of the restaurants for cheese and beer pairings, which are really popular now," Bianchi-Moreda said. "I'm exclusively in some brewery houses where they're only pairing beer with my cheese," she said.

While Bianchi-Moreda is justifiably thrilled about her company's success in such a short amount of time, she also wants the business to grow within reason.

"I will up production soon, probably about 200 more gallons a week," she said. "I'm not going to go crazy over it because I still want to have control."

Eventually, I'd like to have a six-month and a 10-month Estero Gold, along with the company's Highway 1 Fontina and a third cheese, yet to be determined.

"Then I'll pull back and focus on those three," Bianchi-Moreda said.

Cheesemaking goes on six days a week. A new vat was just installed, and plans are in place to hire on more staff.

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Karen Bianchi-Moreda,
Valley Ford Cheese

Fortunately, Bianchi-Moreda's son Joe Moreda is slated to graduate from Cal Poly in December, and her other son Jim Moreda is also enrolled at Cal Poly with an animal husbandry major.

In the relatively short time Valley Ford Cheese has been in business, the biggest hurdle has been making enough cheese to satisfy demand.

"When I started, it was 20 gallons a couple times a week. Then it went from 40 gallons to 75 gallons to 90 gallons a day," she said. "Today's a 180-gallon day."

Estero Gold is leaving the farm at five months, and Bianchi-Moreda is hoping to eventually offer a 10-month variety.

"It's growing, but I'm trying to pace myself so I'll have enough storage and enough help," she said.

Ideally, I'd like to incorporate my kids back into the business, and be able to survive and see the market grow in a sustainable way, Bianchi-Moreda said.

For details, call Karen Bianchi-Moreda at (707) 293-5636 or visit www.valleyfordcheeseco.com. 



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