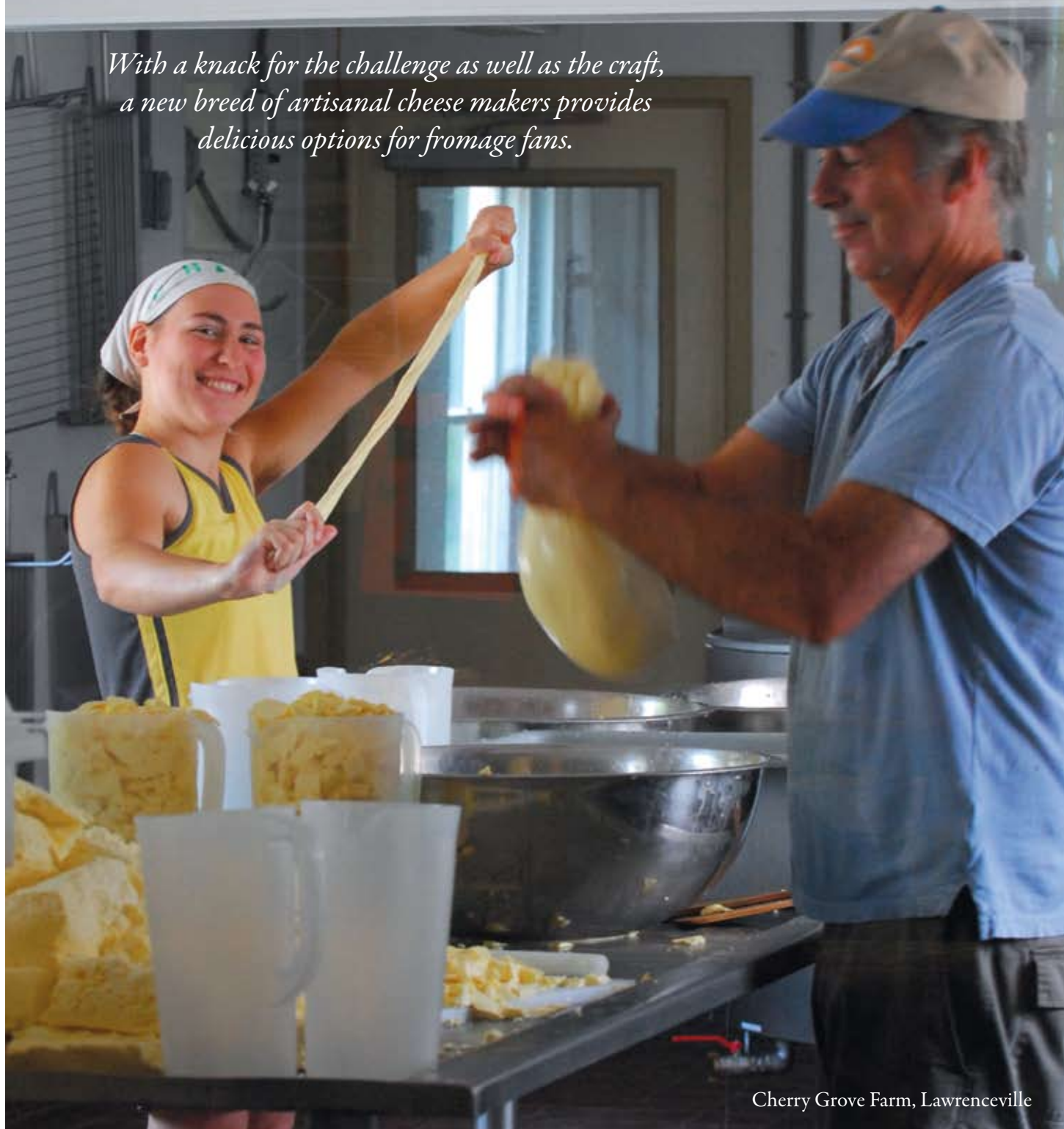


FROM THE LAND

BY JOHN DUNPHY

NURTURING TRADITION

*With a knack for the challenge as well as the craft,
a new breed of artisanal cheese makers provides
delicious options for fromage fans.*



Cherry Grove Farm, Lawrenceville

On all sides, land stretches out to touch the horizon. Wild grasses mingle with large, craggy trees that look older than Sussex County itself. And a short walk down the road, within shouting distance of the New York State border, lounge the cows that produce the milk for **Bobolink Dairy and Bakeyard's** cheeses.

On a chilly afternoon, Bobolink co-owner Nina White, wearing a bonnet over strawberry hair, is in the farm's tasting room, chatting with customers about the nuances of flavor in one cheese over another. She cuts a small piece of Baudolino—a strong cheese, she tells the customer—and spreads it over a bite-size wedge of flaxseed bread, made fresh in the farm's custom-built brick oven earlier that morning. Though the surroundings—yellow concrete walls reflecting low light from small, cloudy windows—are simple and rustic, the whole affair has the vibe of an elaborate wine tasting.

It would be easy to imagine this scene unfolding on a quaint dairy farm somewhere in Wisconsin or Vermont. Instead, it's happening within 90 minutes of New York City, in the most densely populated state in the nation.

This doesn't surprise Kelly Harding, manager of **Cherry Grove Farm**, in Lawrenceville in Mercer County, whose six-year-old organic meat farm got involved in dairy last April. In a state with nearly nine million potential customers, he says, why not?

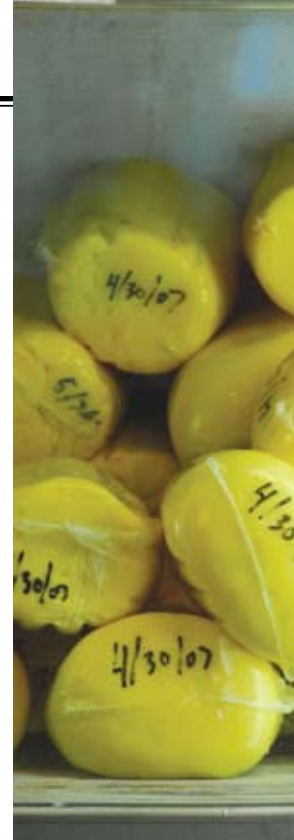
"I think in New Jersey, anything is possible," the affable Maryland transplant says as he walks through the farm's modest cheese making facilities on 400 acres just outside Princeton. "Even a niche market is huge in New Jersey because of our population. When you're trying

to poke at those niches, there's always a consumer base out there as long as you can communicate with them."

Eran Wajswol, owner and cheese maker of **Valley Shepherd Creamery**, knows that philosophy well. Since founding his creamery in April 2005, the native of Belgium and Israel has taken a 120-acre plot of fallow land in Long Valley, Morris County, and turned it into a profitable, well-known agricultural tourism destination specializing in sheep's milk cheese.

Of course, Wajswol, the only artisanal, or handmade, cheese maker in New Jersey who owns his land as opposed to leasing it, recognizes his advantage over others looking to break into the cheese making industry: money.

"I built high-rises," he says, noting the successes in development in Hoboken and Tewksbury that allowed him the opportunity to pursue cheese making as a hobby, and, eventually, a career. While developing their business, he and his wife, Debra, traveled extensively throughout the traditional cheese-making regions of Europe, learning the craft. Back home, they hand milked 12 sheep, whose contributions would eventually produce Wajswol's first cheese.



A FRESH CUT

Independent cheese stores would be happy to sell local products—if they could find them.

"Life is too short to eat supermarket cheese." Those words, on display at **The Cheese Shop of Ridgewood**, summarize the mantra of owner Rick Breitstein, a self-described foodie who bought the 47-year-old Bergen County fixture three years ago.

"They're prewrapping everything. It sits on the shelves," explains Breitstein. "At the cheese shops, we're always cutting fresh."

And educating the customers. At **The Cheese Store**, which opened in July on Monroe Street in Hoboken, owner Chung Park will make sure everyone, from the gourmand to those cutting their teeth on processed slices, walks away with the right kind of cheese for the right kind of tastes.

"My best customers don't know what they want but want to be guided," says Park, a likable character (his store's website features a photo of his baby son with the quote, "I wuv cheese!"), as he unveils a Midnight Moon from Cyprus Grove in California, along with a Crottin from Wisconsin aged on-site. "Our expertise is caring for the customer, making the customer happy and knowing what tastes good."

Robert Sickles, owner of **Sickles Market**, in Little Silver, understands the growing demand for a more sophisticated, knowledge-based cheese-purchasing experience. His Monmouth County market's

cheese shop and accompanying cheese-of-the-month club feature varieties from all over the world—Europe, Vermont, California, Wisconsin. But, aside from some mozzarella and ricotta, local artisanal cheese, crafted by hand using traditional methods, is absent.

"With fresh cheese, it's all about the person who is making them," he says. "What matters is the make process." To that end, Sickles would love to see more artisanal cheese from the Garden State. "Wisconsin and Vermont are great cheese states. New Jersey can get there. It's a matter of having milk guys learn the process."

Breitstein and Park, too, say they are open to selling New Jersey cheese. According to Chung Park, however, because the few existing New Jersey cheese makers sell much of their product in-house and at farmers' markets, their cheeses have not been easy to acquire.

"I would love to sell New Jersey cheese," he says. "There is a lot more demand for hand-crafted cheese. Plus, there is definitely a market, especially now; since exchange rates are so bad, importing anything is just a lot more expensive," he says.

As the demand for cheese continues to rise, Sickles sees a market developing for New Jersey cheese. "Demand for things creates the market," he says. "Niche cheese would be great, but people need to know



Today, Valley Shepherd Creamery milks 400 sheep in an elaborate process that involves a rotating feedlot that can milk 300 sheep an hour seven months a year. Wajswol says the farm will ultimately house 600 sheep.

The fruits of his, and the sheep's, labor is housed in a 100-foot-deep aging cave, blasted out of the side of a hill on the property. Farm tours outlining the process are shown to visitors via professionally produced videos presented on flat-screen, high-definition televisions. Behind glass in a recently constructed visitor's area built by Wajswol himself, people get to watch cheese making in progress. In contrast to the simpler processes of Bobolink and Cherry Grove, Valley Shepherd Creamery's operation runs like an elaborate, well-oiled machine.

"To educate the public, we have to take the model of Ben & Jerry's, of Cabot, of Shelburne Farms," he says, noting those companies' successful turns at agritourism. "It had to be done to survive."

Wajswol estimates he put up \$3 million before even opening the doors three years ago. He considers himself lucky, having worked in development long enough that money was not an issue.

Nina White and Jonathan, her husband of 23 years, didn't have the up-front capital to invest in purchasing land or setting up extravagant, tourism-friendly accoutrements. Instead, they sold their Westchester County, New York, home to buy the business's cows and equipment, then moved to New Jersey with their sons, Paulie, now 20, Tobias, now 17, and Jacob, now 15. "When you put it all on the line, you cannot afford to make any silly mistakes," Jonathan says.

This business model of sorts has worked for Bobolink, which has developed a steady, loyal customer base. "We've seen what can happen when people with considerable means pour vast amounts of money into an agricultural project; frequently it doesn't end well," says Jonathan White, who, like Wajswol, received an engineering degree from Stevens Institute of Technology, in Hoboken. "Our project had to work; it's not just a dalliance that can be abandoned when it's no longer fun."

Jonathan recalls a story he heard recently about what he refers to as an "agri-dabbler, who upon deciding that his agricultural projects were no longer fun, actually ripped out his orchard and vines with a backhoe."

"Farmers are, or should be, nurturers at heart. A man who can obliterate his orchard with a backhoe clearly had no calling for farming," Jonathan adds.

Wajswol agrees. "It has to do with quality of life and what the end product is," he says.

The success of the few cheese makers in New Jersey might serve as inspiration for those looking to get into an industry whose three main producers have started within the last five years. "There is demand," Nina White says. "The public, thanks to people like Michael

it's a great product... When it's good and right here in New Jersey, why not be the local person?"

It's working for Steve Crane, of **Crane's Deli and Cheese Shop** in Maplewood, who carries five different cheeses from Valley Shepherd Creamery. "They always do very well; they're a real flavorful cheese. People are very surprised to hear about cheese from New Jersey." Crane's Ploughman's Lunch, an assortment of 4 cheeses, fresh fruit and baguette, is a popular menu item.—John Dunphy

The Cheese Shop
of Ridgewood
134 Ridgewood Avenue
Ridgewood
201-445-1777
thecheeseshopofridgewood.com

Crane's Deli & Cheese Shoppe
175 Maplewood Avenue
Maplewood
973-763-2050
cranesdeli.com

The Cheese Store
720 Monroe Street
Hoboken
201-683-8162
thecheesestorehoboken.com

Sickles Market
Harrison Avenue
Little Silver
732-741-9563
sicklesmarket.com

PAIRING TIP: "White wine, go soft and strong. Red wine is usually better with a hard, milder cheese," says Steve Crane. New Jersey vintners take note: The cheese monger advises customers to "stay regional" when selecting wine and cheese pairings.

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Pollan (*The Omnivore's Dilemma*), as well as groups like NOFA (Northeast Organic Farming Association), are eating better. The public wants it. But, we need to get smart people. You have to be able to farm smarter."

Ed Huff might eventually be one of those farmers. His family's **Central Valley Farm**, in Bethlehem Township in northern Hunterdon County, has been in operation since 1948. Once strictly a dairy farm, it has become a community-supported agriculture (CSA) destination and is in the process of transitioning to organic production.

Nearly two years ago, Huff decided to start utilizing his milk for cheese. He hooked up with Shalom Farm, an organic operation in Berks County, Pennsylvania, which receives the milk, makes cheddar and Gouda, and sends it back to Central Valley Farm for sale on-site and at several farm markets.

Huff considers outsourcing his milk a good way to test the waters. "My milk stays segregated so the cheese is basically mine," he says. "With someone else [making the cheese], it's pay as you go and see if this whole cheese thing will work."

Harding, the Cherry Grove manager who now produces about 400 pounds of cheese a week, can understand the reservations of a dairy farmer like Huff. "With cheese making, it's a whole 'nother realm of knowledge," he says. "Believe me, it's challenging."

Despite the challenge and long hours associated with a successful operation, everyone sees the demand for cheese growing rapidly.

On a busy day at the height of the season, Nina White says, lines of people wait hours to sample some of Bobolink's 7 to 10 specialty

cheeses on display. In the midst of summer, tours of the facilities and "Sheep Shoppe" at Valley Shepherd are constant. Cherry Grove's dairy delicacies are available not only at the farm but at nearby Whole Earth Center in Princeton, and are utilized at several area restaurants.

"The demand is so great," Wajswol says, as he cuts and places in his mouth a piece of Califon Tomme, a creamy sheep- and cow-milk mix. "The public has learned this is good stuff. They don't want [packaged] cheese. With grazing, the milk is better, hence the cheese is better."

"That's a really good finish," he says, cutting another piece.

Laura Giantorio, of Warwick, New York, is one of the converted. In 1999, she moved from New York City, where the closest thing to a farm was the Union Square Greenmarket (where both Bobolink and Valley Shepherd products can be found). She has been a faithful purchaser of Bobolink's cheese and bread for several years.

"It's awesome. I come here practically every Friday," she says as Nina weighs a brick of cheddar. "It's fresh; there are no preservatives. Plus, the whole atmosphere ... it's neat."

In such a small industry, more cheese makers are welcomed, even by competitors. "If New Jersey had more cheese guys, we would form a New Jersey Cheese Makers Association, like in Vermont," Wajswol says. "Then we'd have strength. True strength is in numbers."

Becoming a successful cheese maker in New Jersey, however, is not easy. According to Wajswol, many dairy farmers lack cheese making expertise, and there's a lack of land, as well as funding, for potential small-scale, dairy cheese producers.

"Farmland is just plain scarce in the Garden State," agrees Jonathan White. "We have been trying to find 300 acres to buy, and there are very few parcels left that are over 100 acres."

Huff says he would ultimately prefer his Central Valley Farm to have full control over his product, but isn't sure if cheese making is on the horizon. "Maybe in another generation. Maybe," he says.

While Harding says "the jury is still out" as to whether Cherry Grove Farm has a long-term future in producing Asiago, provolone, toma and mozzarella for the masses, his outlook is positive.

"If everything goes as expected and we're able to sell the product, it certainly will," he says. "I enjoy the creation of it. Profitability is not determined by production, it's determined by how good the cheese is." □

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