



The *New* American Farmer

David and Cynthia Major, Major Farm

Westminster West, Vermont

Summary of Operation

- *Seasonal, 200-head sheep dairy that helps support Vermont Shepherd specialty cheese*
- *Wool and lamb for ethnic markets, maple syrup*

Problem Addressed

Low profits. Although the Majors always wanted to go into sheep farming, a poor economy and stiff market competition for wool and lamb in the 1980s, when they were just starting out, encouraged them to explore niche markets for sheep products. In 1988, they began milking sheep to make specialty cheeses. At that time, they were two of only a handful of people in the country producing it.

The Majors improved their flock through selective breeding, increasing milk production significantly from one year to the next. Through experimentation they developed a profitable, quality product that they sell to specialty food shops and restaurants, and through mail order and on-site sales. Demand for this premium farmhouse cheese has encouraged them to teach other Vermont farmers how to milk sheep and make raw cheese, which they then ripen in their cheese ripening room, dubbed the “cheese cave,” and market as Vermont Shepherd Cheese.

“With our dairy, and by helping other farmers get into sheep dairying, we are finding a way for small farmers to produce a value-added product while operating in an environmentally sound and sustainable way,” David Major says.

Background

Both David and Cynthia Major come from farming families. David grew up on the farm and spent six years working in the wool industry in southern Vermont, where he and Cynthia now live. Cynthia’s family is in the dairy processing business in Queens, N.Y. The processing facility sits on land that has been in her family for more than a century and was once used for dairy farming.

After they married, David and Cynthia moved in with David’s family, who raised sheep. The Majors tried to make a go of traditional sheep farming, selling lamb and wool from a small flock of Dorset-Rambouillet crosses, but were not successful.

“The economics were so pitiful, we couldn’t make it,” Cynthia explains, “even though we had no start-up costs.”

Her father suggested they try milking sheep, so they researched the subject then traveled to France’s Pyrenees region to learn from experienced cheesemakers firsthand. Although their early attempts at producing cheese were unsuccessful, by 1993 — after a second trip to Europe — they developed a marketable product. In a complete turnaround, the Majors’ cheese, under the “Vermont Shepherd Cheese” label, was named best farmhouse sheep’s milk cheese in a national competition that year. They have continued to win awards, earning “best of show” at the American Cheese Society’s annual competition in Sonoma County, Calif., in 2000.

The Majors have received grants from the Vermont Land Trust and the state Department of Agriculture, Food and Markets to help other farmers start sheep dairies. In 1995, they began offering workshops and six-week internships for prospective sheep dairy farmers to learn the business.

Focal Point of Operation — Production, aging and marketing sheep cheese

A number of producers raising sheep, goats and cows have sold unripened, or “green” cheese, to the Major farm, collaborating to make Vermont Shepherd Cheese. The Majors buy cheese from these local farms when it is a week old and age it in the “cheese cave,” a former apple storage facility, for four to eight months, depending on the type of cheese. The labor-intensive process requires the cave’s affineur, or cheese ripener, to turn and brush each wheel of cheese every other day to develop the flavor to its fullest.



Valerie Barton

David and Cynthia Major have influenced several other Vermont sheep producers to begin making high-value cheese.

The Major Farm is the largest of the participating producers, milking 200 sheep during the season on about 120 acres of pasture. In 2004, the farm produced about 40,000 pounds of cheese. “Since we started, production is up significantly,” David says.

In their first milking year, each sheep produced an average of 60 pounds of milk in a little more than two months. By contrast, in 2000, the average production was 340 pounds per ewe in six months, even with one month off to nurse their lambs.

“The difference is due to improved genetics and better management,” David says. “Production has been going up 20 to 30 percent per year on our farm.”

Quality control is critical, with each farm required to follow the same traditional European mountain cheese recipe. The farmers make cheese only during the spring and summer months when the sheep are grazing on fresh pasture grasses and herbs.

“We grade every batch of Vermont Shepherd Cheese for flavor and texture,” David says, to ensure that “the highest quality cheese” is sold under their label.

A panel of three: a retailer, a cheese ripener and a farmer, grades the cheese each month. Cheeses that meet the panel’s approval are branded with the Vermont Shepherd logo. Recently, the Majors added two cow’s milk cheeses, made from the unpasteurized milk of Jersey cows on a neighboring farm, to their product line.

Having a good product is tantamount to the success of a busi-

ness, but, the Majors have learned, so is how it is marketed. The key to their success is what they call the “essence of the land.”

“We let the stores know where the cheeses are from to create product identity and capture the reality of cheese producers on small farms,” David explains. “They are capturing a piece of that farm in their product — that location and the flavors of that farm.”

They sell Vermont Shepherd Cheese to national distributors, about 50 to 60 restaurants and specialty food outlets from Maine to California, with one of the largest markets being the nearby Brattleboro Food Co-op. It also is sold over the Internet and at the farm.

“At first we sold only through the farmers market and local food outlets,” David says. “It was only after we received a national award that our sales became national, and those customers contacted us.”

Economics and Profitability

Last year, Vermont Shepherd Cheese’s six farms produced 15,000 pounds of cheese, which wholesaled for more than \$10 per pound. Recently, about 25 percent of their mail order sales — \$3,000 to \$20,000 in orders per month from all over the country — came from their web site.

“Our goal is to increase profitability by developing new marketing channels and continuing to hold onto the markets we have,” David says.

Major Farm is the best known of all the sheep dairies in the state, and the most profitable. In addition to its sheep and cow’s milk cheeses, they sell 350 lambs per year, primarily to ethnic markets in Boston and New Haven, Conn. The farm’s best quality wool goes to Green Mountain Spinnery for yarn, with the rest becoming blankets via Vermont Fiberworks. David’s brother and a neighbor manage the grove of maple trees, called sug-

arbus in New England parlance, selling the syrup — around 200 gallons a year — through wholesale, retail, and farmgate sales.

Its name recognition has a downside, too. When news broke that mad sheep disease had been detected in Vermont, the media immediately called the Majors. In response, the Majors contacted all of their customers, assuring them that neither they nor any of the farmers with whom they worked were affected. They also sent out press releases and spoke with a number of TV, radio and newspaper reporters.

Environmental Benefits

In keeping with the Majors' goal of managing an environmentally sound operation, David and Cynthia spread whey and wastewater from cheese processing back onto the land, recycling nutrients back into the soil. Because the sheep are pastured outdoors most of the year, their manure fertilizes the pastureland without need for human labor. They spread their manure from winter confinement on the hayfields.

The Major Farm, along with all the other farms that provide raw cheese to Vermont Shepherd Cheese, practices intensive rotational grazing, which ensures healthy and productive fields. The farm also is involved in a SARE grant, initiated by a University of New Hampshire sheep specialist, to help farmers improve their feeding systems by improving grass quality and feeding efficiency.

Community and Quality of Life Benefits

The Majors have made a firm goal of increasing the number of sheep dairies in Vermont. With their workshops and internships and by converting raw materials from other farmers into a highly profitable product, they have helped a number of farmers in the area become more efficient — and more profitable. Through collaboration, and by centralizing cheese ripening and marketing

efforts, everyone benefits, David believes.

Increased production and growing interest by other Vermont farmers in sheep dairying prompted the University of Vermont to hire its first small ruminant specialist three years ago. David and Cynthia worked with her to secure a SARE grant to bring a French cheesemaker to Vermont for six weeks to work with Vermont Shepherd Cheese producers to help them make better cheese. The Majors also participated in a workshop organized by the food safety specialist on food production.

The Majors welcome visitors to their farm, offering free tours of the cave and cheese tastings twice a week during August, September and October. School classes often visit during lambing season and at milking time. The farm also has hosted other producers and industry people for tours and meetings, including the participants of the Great Lakes Dairy Sheep Symposium in 1999.

“We, and the farmer south of us, also a sheep dairy, take care of a noticeable amount of land in town,” David points out. “Generally speaking, we are looked on favorably in this community, receiving lots of positive feedback. But we have had to put in a great deal of time talking to people about mad cow and mad sheep disease. It’s an uphill battle.”

The Majors have also tried to be sensitive to new landowners, many of whom have purchased second homes and are unfamiliar with farming, to help them know what to expect in the agrarian area.

David likes that their operation allows him to work with his extended family. His parents still live on the property, helping with the day-to-day tasks, as do his two children, ages 9 and 11. His brother, a veterinarian,

also lends a hand as needed.

“I farm because I love it, because it is important for me and the rest of humanity to have a closeness to the land in some fashion,” he says.

Transition Advice

Although David believes the market for specialty cheeses is growing, his advice to farmers considering a sheep dairy, or diversification into cheesemaking, is to wait.

“The agricultural economy in this state has been so dismal this past year for all farmers, not just us, that the best advice I can give is to wait a few years.” He adds that “biotechnology has thrown a lot of uncertainty into the system. We are being affected as well by mad cow and mad sheep disease. Even though it has not affected us directly, the perception is there.”

The Future

Although this farm couple is satisfied with the size of their operation, they are working toward becoming more efficient and will continue to improve the genetics of their flock. Their future vision also includes increasing the number of sheep dairies in Vermont.

“We would like to see farmers working together in the model that we developed to sell products produced on the farm,” he says. “The model has merit for both the farmer and in the marketing world.”

■ Lisa Halvorsen

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Editor's note: This profile, originally published in 2001, was updated in 2004.