

Profile from the Field

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The Artisan of Cheese

Project Title: Farmstead First- A Dairy Processing Facility

SARE Grant: \$ 17,612

Coordinator: Charuth van Beuzekom Loth

Duration: 2005-2006

Location: Lincoln, NE

To read the full project report, go to www.sare.org/projects and search for project number FNC04-513.

Charuth van Beuzekom-Loth grew up in Holland. Her family raised goats and good cheese was plentiful. Eventually, she moved to the United States and years later settled down with her husband on a small farm named Shadowbrook near Lincoln, Nebraska. The transition went along nicely except for one thing. The cheese just wasn't the same.

"I guess I'd always had a dream of doing some kind of a cheese making venture," said van Beuzekom-Loth. "I love the cheeses in Holland. I never was very satisfied with the cheese that I could buy here unless it came from Europe."

That's where van Beuzekom-Loth's dream of becoming a cheese maker met up with the NCR-SARE Farmer Rancher grant program.

"Talking to [NCR-SARE grant partner] Krista Dittman we kind of thought, wouldn't it be fun to do something like this, but the expense of getting into dairy and the regulations are really stringent. It made it pretty prohibitive for a small producer."

Fortunately, being a small organic vegetable producer, van Beuzekom-Loth did find her way on to the NCR-



Charuth van Beuzekom-Loth pours a morning's worth of milk.

SARE call for proposals mailing list.

"We'd get the paperwork from SARE every year and think, 'We should do that. We should do a project and get a SARE grant.' But we never really had a concrete idea of what we wanted to do and we were kind of intimidated about applying for a grant. So a friend of ours encouraged us and said she would proofread it for

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Charuth van Beuzekom-Loth puts the finishing touches on a morning of milking goats for artisan cheese production.

us and hold our hand and help us feel confident that we could do it. Plus, Krista's a great writer so we didn't have that much of a problem and found the process to be really straight forward. It's geared to producers."

Getting the grant was only a first step. Exploring what it was going to take to become successful artisan cheese makers was the more difficult, yet fascinating part.

"The project we came up with was figuring out how to do an affordable on-farm processing plant. We did research to see if a mobile unit would be appropriate that you could move from one farm to another. We found that actually cheese isn't a one day process. It's generally four days and then the aging after that. So it didn't really work because if you had more than one producer wanting to use the facility it would be on the wrong farm on the day that you needed it. So a stationary plant is what we went to."

Deciding on the stationary plant did mean making some concessions but they were determined to keep one of their main goals intact.

"Our goal is to make it possible for other small producers that were really intimidated by the up front costs to come and use our facility to get started, and test the water of marketing and the production aspect of it. If that worked for them they could figure out how to put their own plant on their farm. That seems to be a concept that people are excited about -- using our facility to get started."

Another important aspect of the project planning was the education necessary to learn all of the detailed knowledge they would need to make cheese.

"Neither of us were really cheese makers when we started. I had made cheese in our home kitchen growing up that was good enough to eat but probably not good enough to sell. So our first goal was to take classes to learn how to make farmstead artisan cheese. We went to Cal Poly. They have a wonderful dairy department. They used to do commodity type cheese classes but they had such a calling for small scale cheese producers who wanted to learn how to make cheese on their farms that for the last ten years or longer they have done farmstead artisan cheese classes. It's a four day short course that was perfectly geared for the kind of cheese that we wanted to make. It was pretty heavy duty science emphasis. You learned about the biochemistry of cheese. You learned about marketing, evaluation, tasting. They even took us on a tour of a sheep dairy that made cheese. That was a wonderful first experience with the overview of artisan cheese."

The cheese education didn't stop in the classroom. The next step involved visiting experienced cheese makers who had already perfected the craft.

"The most valuable part was visiting other farms that were in production. Most of them were using the milk exclusively from their own herd and making the cheese right there on the farm. So in the last three

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years we visited 21 farms all over the country. I went to two farms in Holland. One was a goat farm that had 400 head of goats and the other had about 40 head of cows. They made traditional farmstead gouda cheeses.”

With these foundational experiences van Beuzekom-Loth and Dittman quickly began giving back with some outreach of their own.

“We had a cheese maker come from Vermont. He and his wife taught a class at the University of Nebraska as part of our outreach. After that a Dutch representative from where we got our vat in Holland came and taught us how to make gouda. Altogether we’ve taught three classes and we’ve had two cheese maker classes that we’ve hosted. We had a wine tasting and cheese appreciation at a local winery where we sampled cheeses from around the world. We had 70 people show up for that event. All those things seem to show that we’re on the right track with something that is really interesting to people.”

After gaining the expertise necessary to make cheese there was still the remaining investment decision of getting a vat pasteurizer to facilitate production needs. The initial idea was to find quality used equipment but that hope was quickly dashed.

“We did research on the cost effectiveness of buying used equipment which would have been great except it wasn’t available because everybody who is doing this is already looking for that small equipment. There’s not a lot of that surplus floating around. We ended up buying a pretty expensive vat pasteurizer from the Netherlands. The new American made stuff was really not up to par with the new Dutch made equipment but it was about the same price. So we said, ‘How much is it going to cost to have it shipped over here?’ And it was only about \$1,000 to have the vat shipped and what you got was so much better. So we went ahead and bought from the Netherlands. Charuth van Beuzekom-Loth puts the finishing touches on a morning of milking goats for

artisan cheese production. We were able to do a three way split between Krista, me, and the grant. It really worked out well. That took a giant load off of both of us as beginning producers.”

Beuzekom-Loth and Dittman began making cheese last year by renting space at the University of Nebraska’s food processing center. Much of that cheese was sold at the farmer’s market. Meanwhile, SARE funds continued to be spent on advertising, outreach, and some supply and equipment costs. In the Fall of 2006 with the help of both women’s husbands, their own cheese making facility was ready to go after being installed at Dittman’s Branched Oak Farm in Raymond, Nebraska.

The time required to implement the artisan cheese operation has been significant. What was originally intended as a part time job has turned into a full time endeavor. Eventually Beuzekom-Loth plans to put a pipeline in her milking facility which will speed up the entire process. For now the additional time constraints are all part of a long term plan to create more sustainability at Shadowbrook farm and in the community.

“We did this for a diversification to our farm. We’ve always said that we don’t want to produce more than ten acres of vegetables. So rather than grow more vegetables and having to wholesale them, we decided we would rather continue selling our vegetables direct at farmer’s markets and retail at little grocery stores and restaurants. We didn’t want to be pressured or feel like we have to produce more vegetables. Rather than doing that we can diversify and bring more things in that we can market and that’s what the cheese is.”

Through diversification, a lot of hard work, and a little help from NCR-SARE, Beuzekom-Loth has helped turn her farm into a brand new operation which is also helping other farmers in Eastern Nebraska to sample the value of artisan cheese.

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