MAKING AND MARKETING SHEEP MILK CHEESE
(OR HOW TO START A SHEEP DAIRY AND LIVE TO TELL ABOUT IT)

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I. Introduction

II. Brief History of Sheep Milk Cheese
A. 8000 BC – Sheep becomes second animal domesticated by the nomads
B. The first cheese – ancient legend
C. Cheesemaking brought to Europe by travelers from Asia
   1. Middle ages
      a) Cheese made in monastaries in Europe
      b) Cow replaced ewe as the major milk producers in the world
   2. Major sheep milk cheeses
      a) France – Roquefort
      b) Italy – Pecorino Romano
      c) Spain – Manchego
      d) Other

III. Bellwether Farms – a Chronology
A. 1986 – moved to Sonoma County
B. 1988 – Began selling lambs
   1. Start accelerated lambing program
   2. Direct marketing to Bay Area restaurants
C. 1990 – Built sheep dairy
D. 1992 – Began making sheep milk cheese
E. 1996 – Added cow milk cheese

IV. Sheep Dairying at Bellwether Farms
A. How it started – 1990
   1. Original flock
      a) Dorset vs. Polypay
      b) Raised market lambs
   2. Visit from Olivia Mills
B. Management of lambs
   1. Creep-fed from the start
   2. Weaned at 35 days of age
   3. Most sold as “milk-fed” to Bay Area restaurants
C. Milking of ewes
   1. Dairy set-up
   2. Milking schedule
   3. Care and feeding of ewes
   4. Length of lactation and milk volume
D. Recent improvements
1. Better genetics
2. New dairy

V. Making Cheese

A. How we learned
   1. Short courses – very valuable for learning the scientific aspects of making cheese
   2. Travel to Italy – Tuscany and Umbria

B. Deciding what cheese to make – some considerations

C. Building a cheese plant on the farm
   1. Consult State regulations at the outset
      a) State will require a plan
   2. Cheese room
      a) Epoxy floors
      b) Walls – how covered?
      c) Drainage
   3. Cheese making equipment
      a) Pasteurizer
      b) Cheese vat
      c) Stainless tables, sinks, etc. – Where to obtain
      d) Cheese forms – determined by the type of cheese you are making
      e) Other

D. Cheesemaking process
   1. Proper care of the milk
      a) Fresh vs. frozen
   2. Pasteurization process
      a) Whether to pasteurize
      b) Batch vs. HTST
   3. Steps in cheesemaking
      a) “The Recipe”
         Each cheese has its own make procedure. To make a specific cheese, it must be followed exactly (or you could make your own recipe)
      b) Cultures
         1) Depends on type of cheese
         2) Direct set – best for small producers
         3) Readily available
      c) Rennet
         1) Animal vs. vegetable
         2) How long to set
      d) Cutting the curds
         1) Determining the correct time to cut
         2) What size to cut
      e) Draining the curds
         1) Curds put in cheese forms
         2) Whey drains off (used for Ricotta)
         3) Turning cheese
      f) Salting and ripening cheese
         1) Brine vs. hand salting
         2) Natural rind ripening
         3) Proper temperature and humidity
4) Waxing

E. Recent Developments at Bellwether Farms
   1. Cow milk cheese
   2. New cheese room
   3. Additional ripening rooms

VI. Marketing
   A. Establish Identity
      1. Name
      2. Logo
      3. Stationary, business cards, brochure, product list, etc.
   B. How we started – lambs
      1. Bay area location
      2. Selling direct to restaurants
   C. Types of markets
      1. Farmers markets
         a) Lamb and cheese
         b) Originally 70% of cheese sales. Today under 1%
         c) Advantage – retail price
         d) Disadvantage – time and labor intensive
      2. Restaurants
         a) Direct
         b) Distributor
      3. Retail stores
         a) Mainly distributors
      4. Mail order
         a) Advantage – retail
         b) Disadvantage – time, packaging
         c) Credit cards
      5. The future – the Internet
   D. How to market – depends on budget
      1. Restaurants
         a) Letters
         b) Sales calls with samples
      2. Participate in food tastings
         a) Wine auctions
         b) Benefits
      3. Fancy Food Show/Trade Shows – When you are ready to expand
      4. Free advertising
         a) Press releases
         b) Articles in newspapers and magazines
      5. Hire a food broker

VII. Economics – General observations
   A. Start up costs
      1. Depends on many factors
         a) Size, State regulations, labor costs, etc.
   B. Operating expenses
      1. Labor is a major expense
C. Develop a plan
   1. Consult the experts – University, dairy advisor, CPA, etc.
   2. Determine State requirements
D. Develop a budget and update on a regular basis
   1. Analyze monthly sales and expenses
   2. Respond to new developments
E. Respond to new developments
   1. Competition

VIII. Closing remarks

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