

## Marion farm transitioned from dairy to great Blue cheese maker

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Editor**

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MARION — When Tim Stone was growing up, he spent summers working on his grandfather's farm in Marion. Called Great Hill Farm, it is now the home of Great Hill Blue cheese.

Stone's great grandfather, a banker, bought the farm in 1908.

"He fell in love with it," Stone said.

Today, the farm sells 150,000 pounds annually of Great Hill Blue cheese, a gourmet, non-homogenized, raw milk blue cheese. Distributors come to the farm to get it, some for regional stores, some for transport to New York and some shipped nationwide.

Among the most recent awards the cheese has won in its category are a gold prize in the Los Angeles cheese competition and eighth place in the 2018 World Cheese Championships. Stone takes great pride in taking eighth place in the

world championship because most of the winners were from Denmark.

The farm was a big part of Stone's childhood. Although he grew up in Connecticut, "We called this home," Stone said. "Every summer I had to work here."

There were pigs and chickens, greenhouses and flowers. His great grandfather started a herd of Guernseys and, later, his grandfather expanded the dairy herd.

Stone said his grandfather had him work in a different aspect of farming each time he came. He recalled working one summer in the garden, "which I hated because I had to weed." But he said he fell in love with the animals and the dairy farm.

Stone went off to college and worked for a short while in Washington, D.C. Then his grandfather passed away. By that time, the cows had been sold and Stone "started to think about coming back here with the intent of reestablishing the dairy herd." He came back to the farm in 1986 and started to bring back the dairy herd in late 1987.

Stone brought back Guernseys, which he said "had a great disposition" and are "nice cows to work with." Their milk has a high butter fat and protein.

Unfortunately, after about 10 years, as with many dairy farmers, earning a living became difficult because, "The price of milk kept going down." Stone said they also lost support services like a veterinarian that treated large animals. It also became harder to find someone who repaired farm machinery "because so many farms had gone out of business."

He said, "We were basically losing money and working incredible hours."

As a result, he decided to disband the dairy operation around 1995. Nevertheless, he said, "I knew there was something we could do on this land to make a living."

Stone explored the idea of value-added products like beefalo, deer and even tillapia, a fresh water fish that he could farm in the greenhouses. He hired a consultant, "But in the end, it seemed too far out of my wheelhouse so I came back to dairy and specifically cheese."

Stone talked to local chefs and retailers to see what there was a need for. They told him the market was already flooded with cheddar from Vermont and Wisconsin, but he kept hearing, "There is no Blue cheese being made."

One reason not many cheese makers make blue cheese, Stone said, is that it's one of the harder cheeses to make. Nevertheless, he took on the challenge and shipped his first Blue cheese in 1997.

His cheese maker is Brian Petitpas who was a cook at Sippican Cafe in Marion when Stone met him. About four or five years ago, Petitpas recalled, Stone asked him if he knew anyone who'd be interested in making cheese. Petitpas said he came out to watch the cheese making operation and became "intrigued by the process." He added, "The rest is history."

The cheese is made from Monday to Wednesday. Production starts at 4 a.m.

Asked why their cheese tastes so good and has won such prestigious awards, Petitpas said one reason is that, "Everything is in small batches here and everything is done by hand. It's old ways by hand. There's really nothing mechanical about it."

Of his co-workers, he said, "Everyone has so much pride in the product We try to make it come out perfect. I think's it's won awards because everyone cares so much about it."

The milk comes from local dairy farms, including Andrew Ferry of Westport, Viveiros Farm of Fairhaven and the Santos Farm (Shy Brothers) of Westport. Stone said Great Hill's cheese making "helps local farmers by buying their milk." He called it "a nice symbiotic relationship amongst ourselves and the dairy farmers."

Of the dairy farms that supply the milk, Stone said, "I hope they are proud" of the prizes the cheese has won.

Great Hill Blue cheese can be bought locally at Lees Market in Westport, Alderbrook Farm in South Dartmouth , Farm and Coast Market in Padanaram Village, Marion General Store, Seahorse Seafoods in Marion and Frank's Butcher Shop in Wareham.