

Made in Marion

Farm's blue cheese proves a hit with gourmands

By Robert Lovinger
Standard-Times staff writer

Things are going so well with Tim Stone's new business, he doesn't mind feeling a little blue.

His business, you see, is the making of blue cheese.

One year into the new enterprise, Great Hill blue cheese can be found on the shelves of local gourmet shops and the plates of several area restaurants.

In the past, the Marion farm was known for its collections of acacia and orchids.

Between 1985 and 1995, it was a dairy farm.

But then, Mr. Stone says, "for a lot of reasons," it became difficult to continue with the dairy herd."

In deciding what to do next, he and his wife Tina Stone considered such pursuits as aquaculture and raising deer. "We looked at various options and decided cheese-making would be a good fit," he says, standing inside the cheese plant. "This part of the barn was underutilized space. We kept old equipment and miscellaneous junk here."

In the winter of 1995, plant engineer John Tobbe and assistant cheese-maker Victor Haarrala began building the facility.

"The hardest part was knowing how big to make the plant, but we had a certain footprint to work with," Mr. Stone recalls. "We were winging

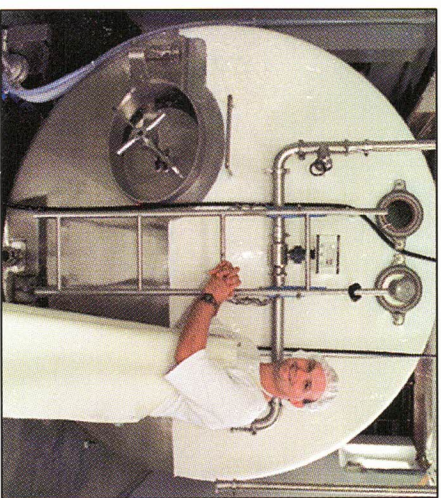
it a bit, no doubt. Basically, I had no idea what the demand for the product would be. I still have no idea what to expect."

"We took bits and pieces of what other people did and what they told us not to do," Mr. Tobbe notes.

One important question was how large the equipment should be. Mr. Stone spoke with other New England cheesemakers, "and they all said they wished they had bigger equipment." So, the Stones decided to be optimistic. They purchased bigger machines than they otherwise might have.

In August 1996, Great Hill -- the Stones and their three-person work force -- began to produce blue cheese. By the end of this first year, they will have produced around 18,000 pounds. Each week, Mr. Stone says, the operation is selling more cheese.

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Great Hill owner Tim Stone stands with forms used in the production of the dairy's blue cheese. The Great Hill cheese is the only one of its kind on the East Coast made from cow's milk.

Plant engineer John Tobbe poses with cheese-making machinery. Great Hill is busy, but orders so far have not tested the equipment's large manufacturing capacity.

Staff photos by
Hank Seaman

Great Hill blue cheese is produced in six-pound wheels and half-pound wedges.



Cheese: Marion farm's a hit

He's happy with his original estimate of how big to think. "It was a pretty good guess. We're certainly not making near our capacity. We have room to grow, and that's good. ... We're still learning and we will be for a long time."

The busiest cheese-making period so far was this past spring, when the plant produced cheese for sale during the Thanksgiving/Christmas holidays.

At the moment, Great Hill's focus is on marketing, Mr. Stone says.

Why did he choose blue cheese and not some other variety?

"I went around to as many people as I could -- retail stores, distributors -- and asked, 'What would you like to see being made?'"

Most told him, "It would be great to have a local blue cheese, especially one made from cows' (milk)."

Great Hill blue cheese is the only East Coast blue cheese made from cows' milk.

It's also the only non-homogenized blue cheese produced in the United States. Homogenized blue cheese is easier to make and takes less time, Mr. Stone says. "You can achieve what you're looking for in a shorter period -- two or three months."

"The downside of homogenizing for us would have been more investment in equipment," he continues.

"Our consultant felt we could recoup our greater holding time (4 to 6 months and longer) by producing a true gourmet cheese."

How long can blue cheese age before its taste starts to head downhill? "The Flavor development levels off

at around a year. It probably reaches its peak at around 10 months."

Great Hill buys raw, unhomogenized milk from local farms. On the other end, it produces six-pound wheels and half-pound wedges that are getting rave reviews locally and beyond.

"It's excellent stuff," says Tim Quinn, executive chef at Not Your Average Joe's restaurant in Dartmouth.

Mr. Quinn hadn't been cooking much with blue cheese. But after sampling Great Hill's blue cheese during a wine tasting this spring at the Westport Rivers winery, "the next week we had it in."

You can now find the cheese in the eatery's pasta specials, on pizza and salads, in sandwiches and more.

"I've worked all over the country. This stuff easily rivals -- if not exceeds -- the best in the country,"

Chef Quinn says. "It's softer than your regular blue cheese, but with absolutely great flavor."

He admits that for him, part of the attraction of Great Hill blue cheese is that it's produced locally.

"Oh, definitely," he says.

Three stores in Marion sell Great Hill blue cheese: the Marion General Store, Seahorse Seafoods and Uncle Jon's Muffins.

Besides Not Your Average Joe's, two other area restaurants use it in their dishes: Worden's at 7 Water Street in Dartmouth and Phoebe's in Seekonk.

Although the plant is open to the public for visits (508-748-2208), Mr. Stone notes that so far, "only some hard-core cheese people" have stopped by.



Since this article was written, Great Hill Blue has achieved nationwide distribution, being served in some of the country's finest restaurants and retail stores.