



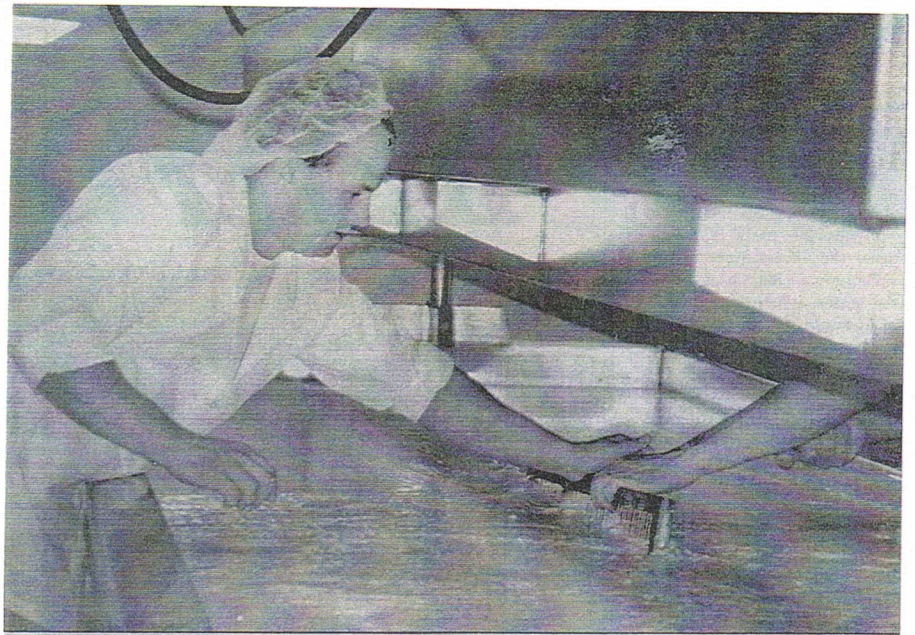
— TRUE —
blue

Made from raw cow's milk, Great Hill Blue cheese is molded with distinction

By Elizabeth Riely
 GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

MARION — Yvette, a Guernsey cow, was ruminating under the tall white pines of Great Hill Dairy. "She's retired from milking," Tim Stone said of the 20-year-old cow. "She's a family pet now," put out to pasture in the meadows overlooking Buzzards Bay.

When Stone left his engineering job in Washington, D.C., and returned home in the mid-'80s, he ran the dairy for a decade at Great Hill, named for its landmark prominence. The estate, established by his great-grandfather after the turn of the century, is now maintained by extended family. But during that 10-year period, dairying became too difficult on this neck of land just west of Cape Cod. The local vet's departure was the last straw, and the prized herd of 70 Guernseys with their rich milk was sold in 1994.



Careful handling and aging of the raw milk are necessary to make the cheese safe and develop its flavor.

Stone explained his dilemma of trying to find a way to support his growing family on the farm as we walked into the large barn, with its slate roof and stucco walls. Clerestory windows filtered light onto the stacked bales of hay, their sweet smell wafting over us. Stone and his wife, Tina, who have two young sons, considered fish farming, market gardening, and raising beefalo or other animals. Drawing on Great Hill's past as a dairy farm, he decided to make cheese. Cheesemongers at local gourmet shops pointed out that the Cheddar, Swiss, and chevre categories were well filled by New England cheese makers. But no one was making a cow's-milk blue of any distinction.

Marketing is the problem, said Howard Morris, professor emeritus of food science and nutrition at the University of

At Great Hill Dairy,

unhurried aging creates a true blue

■ BLUE

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Minnesota, over the telephone. "Most cheese makers in this country go in for mass production," he said. They make one of several Cheddar varieties, and it's either for salad dressing or a gourmet-style cheese.

Morris's authoritative book "Blue-Veined Cheeses" (Pfizer, 1981), one of very few on the subject, inspired Stone to attend some of his classes in St. Paul. Great Hill "has better flavor than most blue cheese" in the United States, said Morris. "It's not as harsh." He pointed out that Stone "uses untreated milk, so it takes longer to ripen. It's a gourmet cheese." (Great Hill Blue does indeed have a distinctive taste; it's creamy and smooth, yet with a tangy flavor.)

The raw milk, unpasteurized and unhomogenized, with neither bleach nor coloring added, has the potential for a finer cheese than that made from treated milk. But it needs careful handling and long aging, not only to make it safe but also to develop its flavor. Sixty days is the legal requirement for blue cheese, but Stone ages his at least six months and usually eight to 10.

The lower level of the Great Hill barn has been converted to a series of cheese-making rooms. A bulk tank holds 3,000 gallons of fresh milk purchased from local farms in Westport, delivered every Sunday. Although this milk comes from Holsteins, which is less rich than Guernseys' milk, Stone considers himself lucky to be able to get it locally.

On Mondays and Wednesdays, starting at 4 a.m., half of that milk — 11,000 pounds, to be precise — goes into the cheese vat, a troughlike tank in the room across the hall, where it is heated to 90 degrees. Cultures are added to produce lactic acid, which is important for expelling moisture from the cheese curds, for structure and texture, and for inhibiting negative organisms. Stone said that he was finding some bitterness early on in the aging process, so he wants to try more lactic cremoris culture. Cheese making takes patience: Next spring, when he eventually tastes what he is making now, he will find

out what difference it makes.

Besides lactic acid, mold — *Penicillium roqueforti* — must be added to the milk, the same used for French Roquefort, made from raw Larzac ewe's milk. Rennet is also introduced, in a yeast-derived, genetically engineered form. In 10 to 15 minutes, the milk begins to form curds, and 40 minutes later — "you can sense it" — Stone cuts the curd with special knives called harps for their shape. The curd is scooped into forms, or molds, and the nutritious whey is piped off to be fed to pigs. These forms are stainless steel rounds with lots of little holes that allow the whey to continue draining.

Stone must flip the forms throughout the afternoon and night to prevent sticking and encourage draining. At first they are turned every 45 minutes, the intervals increasing to every three hours. But since each day's batch yields 200 to 225 forms, holding 1,100 pounds of cheese (a 10 percent yield from the milk), and someone must flip them at the 2 a.m. and 5 a.m. shifts, he shares the task with two other, trusted cheese makers, John Tobbe and Victor Haarala.

The next day a 6-pound cheese is slipped out of each mold and its surface salted by hand. The 200-some wheels go into the mold-development room, where for three days they sit on trays at 53 degrees for the salt to be absorbed. Then 150 holes, 1/8 inch deep, are made in each side of every wheel to let in oxygen. For the mold to grow (and every once in a while a wheel fails to develop the characteristic blue streaks), the balance of salt, moisture, air, and temperature is crucial. Here the cheese waits for three weeks before being sealed in plastic bags to cut off oxygen and check mold growth.

In the aging room, where the rindless bagged rounds ripen, Stone now has 13,000 pounds of cheese on hand in different stages of maturity. What's astonishing is that he started commercial production just over a year ago: Aug. 6, 1996. Ralph Stuart, an experienced cheese maker for Land O'Lakes, has helped him on three visits to Marion, passing on "little tricks" for the occasions when blue cheese presents special chal-

lenges. Blue needs aging for its identity, he said, and Stone's is "way beyond the legal requirement."

► Great Hill Blue cheese is available at Bread & Circus and Roche Bros., among local chain stores, and will soon be sold at Star Market and Wild Harvest. The price is about \$11 per pound. Or order directly from the dairy at 160 Delano Road, Marion, MA 02738; telephone, (508) 748-2208; toll-free telephone and fax, (888) 748-2208.