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Foodlink Waterloo Region

Fresh In Focus
Artisanal Sheep's Milk Cheese

LocalHarvest

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Features

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Facts on Cheese Making in Canada

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Local Farm Profile: Monforte Dairy

Housed in the old Parmalat dairy in Millbank is a small, unadvertised cheese production facility that is anything but unassuming. A self-taught cheese maker, Ruth Klahsen, is the dynamo behind Monforte, one of the few artisanal sheep cheese producers in Ontario. No stranger to good food, Ruth's previous career as a Stratford chef prodded her into creating simple, nourishing cheese from an old world staple – sheep's milk. And true to her values on the importance of promoting local food, Ruth sources her East Friesen/Dorset cross sheep milk from Amish farmers near Ingersoll.

Photo: Diesel Design

Monforte Dairy's 16 varieties of aged & fresh sheep's milk cheese are true masterpieces

Ruth has a powerful vision for food production, believing in a fair deal for all participants in the cheese making process – whether they are the sheep, the farmers, the cheese maker or the consumer. As such, Ruth's sheep are hormone free. Dairy animals are cyclical in their fertility and the natural production of milk is therefore season-dependant. Ruth believes in keeping her dairy products as a seasonal food and refuses to artificially synchronize their breeding times and thus their milk production. Ruth is a strong advocate for re-establishing the farming profession as an honest and profitable enterprise – she believes that her farmers should work only as hard as the cheese maker, and be paid fair value for their work. This has created some difficulties in securing financing for her operation as she refuses to increase her profit margin by reducing the price she pays for her milk.

As a cheese maker, Ruth believes in protecting the heritage of food and in creating food that tastes good and neither harms the environment nor the animals. Part of Ruth's job is to help people rediscover the joys of eating simple, well-made food, and to understand the importance of caring where their food comes from, who makes it and how it's made.

Monforte produces fresh and aged cheeses as well as yogurt from the dairy sheep. Fresh cheeses are the simplest of cheeses whereby the milk is curdled and drained, with little other processing. These cheeses tend to be bland, so they're often used as vehicles for other flavourings. Monforte's offerings include **Sheepdip,** their signature soft cheese with sun-dried tomatoes, capers, and hot peppers; **Bauman's Smoke,** firm cheese naturally smoked over maple hardwood in a Mennonite family smoke house; or **Halloumi,** a traditional Arabic cheese poached in whey to a tangy chewiness.

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Local Farm Profile continued

One of the favourite aged cheeses from Monforte is **Piacere,** a most seductive cheese modelled on the French classic fleur du maquis. Covered with rosemary, savoury, chilli pepper and juniper berries, Ruth claims it to be one of their most addictive offerings. A stroll through Monforte's website will acquaint the reader with all fresh and aged cheeses produced in Millbank.

Photo: Diesel Design

Ruth Klahsen of Monforte Dairy

Ruth's entrepreneurial spirit has surpassed production and extended out into marketing and sales of her 16 varieties of cheese. In an average week, Monforte's truck makes 24 stops in the Waterloo, Guelph, and Niagara Regions where the cheese is deposited at specialty markets and vineyards. In Toronto alone, cheese is delivered to 12 different locations, including the celebrated Jamie Kennedy Restaurant. If you want to meet the cheese maker, she is at her St. Laurence market stall in downtown Toronto every Saturday. Closer to home, Ruth sells her cheeses at the St. Jacobs Farmers' Market and Vincenzos, although several local restaurants, such as Verses and Art Bar, are showcasing her products on their menus. For Ruth, markets are ideal locations for selling artisanal food products since face to face contact is crucial to persuading consumers on the merits of buying locally produced food, despite a higher price tag.

But Ruth's vision doesn't stop here. Realizing that infrastructure costs are so high as to almost prohibit the start up of new dairies, Ruth envisions creative ways to ensure every potential dollar is extracted from her milk. In order to make cheese, the liquid whey is separated from the solids in the milk. Many dairies have simply disposed of this whey as a worthless by product. But Ruth sees a more purposeful value chain that solves the problem of whey disposal by turning whey into pig feed. These pigs have the potential to be marketed as heritage pigs and be featured prominently on restaurant and household dinner plates.

There is an emerging artisanal cheese industry in this province, and cheese makers like Ruth Klahsen are spearheading its advance into the consumer psyche. Led by sheep milk producers for whom milk quotas are not an issue, sheep milk cheeses are satisfying a hunger for real, old-world food in a modern fast paced world. There is a move among thoughtful consumers to buy locally grown products, and many urbanities favour the continued existence and growth of the family farm, which, in their view, is based on a commitment to land stewardship and animal welfare. Monforte Dairy aims to satisfy the public's expectations and perceptions by supporting local farmers and producing a first-class product.

To view Monforte's selection of cheeses, visit the website at www.monfortedairy.com

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Ewe-nique Flavour: Artisanal Sheep's Milk Cheese

Sheep milk is a relatively new milk in North America, but it has been consumed for centuries in other parts of the world, such as Southern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Nomads in these regions required animals such as sheep to provide them with the necessities of life. From the wool they made felt and yarn, with which they covered their nomadic dwellings and made carpets to cover the grounds within. The wool was also turned into warm clothing. However, more importantly, the sheep provided the people with meat and milk in lands that could not otherwise support domesticated animals like dairy cows.

Then, as now, sheep milk provided an excellent source of nutrition and surpassed cow milk in many ways. Whereas it takes three cups of cow milk to provide the average person with 800 mg of calcium, only two cups of sheep milk is required. Sheep milk also contains approximately 75-100% more protein than cow milk, as well as higher concentrations of phosphorous, zinc, and vitamins A, D and C.

The perishable ewes' milk was traditionally preserved into longer lasting yogurt and cheese, and many of these remain staples in kitchens around the world: Roquefort, Pecorino Romano, Greek Feta, and Italian Ricotta. Yoghurt is made by introducing into the milk specific bacteria that ingest natural milk sugars and release lactic acid as a waste product. The increased acidity causes milk proteins to tangle into a solid mass and also prevents the proliferation of potentially pathogenic bacteria.

Photos: Diesel Design

Dairy Sheep provide a nutritious, mild tasting milk

Photo at top and bottom: a couple of Monforte's creative offerings

Cheese making on the other hand, although theoretically a *science,* is also very much an *art.* It is a relatively simple process that involves the curdling of milk to separate curds (those milky white clumps in ricotta and cottage cheeses) and whey (a clear to yellowish, watery fluid). While cheese making instructions often appear simple, there are skills and sensitivities that take years to learn in order to create a successful end product.

To begin the process of turning fresh milk into cheese, a cheese maker can start with milk from a variety of animals – cow, goat, sheep, reindeer, camel, and even horse – that will each contribute its own unique flavours. Although sheep don't make much milk (about 1 litre per day), it is an ideal base for cheese production as it contains twice the amount of solids compared to cow or goat milk. For example, whereas ten litres of cow milk is required to make 1 kg of gouda cheese, only five litres of sheep milk is used. Added to the milk is an acidifier such as lemon juice or a special bacterial starter culture that converts milk sugar into lactic acid.

Nearly all cheese making recipes call for the subsequent addition of rennet, the enzyme that separates milk into curds and whey. Traditionally, cheese makers soaked a scrap of the fourth stomach of a newborn calf or kid in warm brine to create rennet. Although animal rennet is still used, vegetable rennet works equally well. After the whey is removed, the curds are salted to draw out more moisture, preserve the curd, hasten aging and impart flavor. Lastly, fresh herbs or fruit can be added to the curd before it is pressed and left to ripen.

The salted curds are loaded into a press which squeezes out the last of the whey and gives form to the cheese. The cheese is then ripened at about 10 degrees C and 90% humidity, breaking down proteins into amides

and free amino acids, as well as triglyceride lipids into free fatty acids. The changes in protein and lipid composition as well as the action of bacteria on the curds are responsible for flavour development and consistency in the curd. Depending on the cheese, this ripening process can last from only a few weeks to more than a year. As with any cheese, the longer it is aged, the lower the amount of lactose.

The method described above is for aged cheeses, but fresh cheeses are also very popular. For these simplest of cheeses, the milk is curdled and drained. When the curds are used to make the cheese, cottage cheese and cream cheese are the final products. However, fresh cheeses can also be made from the whey, giving rise to Italian Ricotta and traditional mozzarella, as well as paneer and queso fresco.

Benefits of Sheep Milk

Unless you are lactose intolerant, sheep milk is an ideal alternative to cow milk as it causes fewer allergic reactions and can often be used by those who cannot consume cow or goat milk. Due to its high digestibility from smaller fat globules, it is used for premature babies when breast milk is unavailable. The sheep themselves are seen to be raised in a more natural way than cows - sheep graze grass and are not fed hormones to increase their milk production. Sheep milk does not have as strong a flavour as goat milk, but rather has a rich, sweet, bland taste. Along with its very high protein content, the high lactose content in sheep milk makes it a popular choice for sports players.

Artisinal Cheese Making

In general, Canada is developing a food culture akin to the way in which people learned to appreciate craft breweries and smaller, local wineries. In fact, as the wine industry in this country has developed, people have naturally sought out what goes best with wine – cheese – extending their learning into a new arena which doesn't only include cheddar. The educated consumer's desire for organic, locally produced, or environmentally friendly food has also led to increased demand for artisan cheese. According to the Ontario Cheese Society, it's the kind of connoisseurship you can feel good about: unlike some wines and good coffees, artisan cheese is decidedly anti-corporate, produced by co-ops and small dairies, often by very few people or families

Ontario has a long history of cheese. During the glory days of cheddar in the 1800s to the industry's peak from 1916 to 1918, there was a cheese plant every 15 kilometres and cheese was a major export industry. In 2003, according to a market evaluation commissioned by the Agricultural Adaptation Council, Ontario produced 96,000 kilograms of cheese, 10 per cent of which was artisanal. Today, there are 200 artisan cheese producers in Canada, most of them in Quebec, where the government has nurtured small cheese producers, and but also a growing industry in Alberta and British Columbia. In Ontario, there are about nine artisan-scale cheese houses.

Some facts on cheese making in Canada	
Percentage of the Canadian cheese market occupied by cheddar and mozzarella:	70
Number of goat-cheese makers in Ontario:	8
Number of sheep-cheese makers in Ontario:	4
Different types of Canadian cheese made from cow's milk:	150
Types of locally produced artisan cheeses in Ontario, excluding cheddar:	30
Number of cheeses listed in the World Cheese Exchange Database:	1,400
Kilograms of artisan cheese estimated to be produced in 2010 in Canada:	11,040

From the Ontario Cheese Society, 2007

DID YOU KNOW?

"Farmstead" usually refers to a small-scale, on-farm cheese operation that uses milk solely from animals on that farm.

"Artisan" usually refers to a small-scale cheese operation that may or may not be located on a farm and may use milk from more than one farm. It views cheese making as an art, and often involves a time-honoured process or recipe.

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