



Cheese aging in the underground caves at Fifth Town

## THE *GRANDES DAMES* OF ARTISANAL CHEESE

# WHERE THERE'S A WHEEL, THERE'S A WHEY

BY LAURA BUCKLEY

When Ruth Klahsen of Monforte Dairy was told she was too old to apply to midwifery college, cheesemaking seemed a logical alternative. Klahsen believes it takes the same kind of patience to make cheese as to birth a baby. “You can’t rush it,” she says. “You have to wait for the cheese to be ready.” Patience is why she thinks women are better suited to cheesemaking than men.

After years of mostly industrial-scale cheddar production, artisanal cheesemaking is a burgeoning industry in Ontario as consumers become more interested in local food and are willing to pay for quality. Cheesemaking has traditionally been the job of women on the farm, but women like Ruth Klahsen, Elisabeth Bzikot of the Ewenity Dairy Co-operative, and Petra Cooper of Fifth Town Artisan Cheese Co., are anything but traditional. They’ve given up other careers to become cheese entrepreneurs. And they’ve found a way around the Ontario Milk Act (and its numerous obstacles to using cow’s milk) by working with sheep and goat milk, which are not regulated by the government.

Elisabeth Bzikot of Ewenity Dairy Co-op and Best Baa Farm in Conn, Ontario (about an hour north of Guelph), is convinced that the demand for her cheese will grow as more people start questioning where their food is coming from and how the animals that produce their food

are raised. Bzikot, a former schoolteacher, clearly enjoys her work. When I meet up with her, she’s happily chatting with customers at the St. Lawrence North Market, where she sells her cheese every Saturday – along with the meat from the unlucky male lambs who can’t provide milk. “Today I must have been asked more than four times what we feed our sheep,” she says. “And this isn’t unusual.” This is when the schoolteacher in her comes out to give a lesson about nature and nurture: that it’s not just about the feed. “The problem I have with organic [labelling] is that it doesn’t mean the animals are well looked after. If you are going to use animals for your own benefit, you must respect them. For me, that’s extremely important.”

Bzikot and her husband Eric, both originally from England, purchased their 150-acre sheep farm after moving here from Manitoba in 1998. They started out raising sheep strictly for their meat, but Bzikot discovered there was a market for sheep’s milk here. “I’m very fond of my sheep,” she says, “and the nice thing about milking is you’re not killing them.” In 2001 she formed, and became chair of, the Ewenity Dairy Co-operative with a half-dozen neighbouring sheep farmers. Stephanie Diamant, a member of the co-op, had cheese-making experience. Bzikot learned to make cheese from Diamant, took the Cheesemaking Technol-



**Petra Cooper at Fifth Town**

ogy course at the University of Guelph, and then travelled to France to learn from a woman who makes sheep's milk cheese from her own flock. In 2007, when Diamant moved to Prince Edward County to make cheese for Fifth Town, Bzikot became Ewenity's main cheesemaker.

Since then, Bzikot has been turning 50,000 litres of sheep's milk a year into a variety of cheeses, working out of an industrial condominium in nearby Fergus. Sheep's milk is mild and sweet, not as strongly flavoured as goat's milk. Bzikot's Ramembert (think Camembert) is a white round with a smooth, creamy interior. Her Eweda (think gouda) is a semi-firm style. Brebis Fraies (a fresh creamed cheese) is perfect to spread on a bagel. She also makes yogurt and a creamy, non-salty feta. A new addition, Sheep in the Meadow, has thyme and rosemary under a bloomy rind.

Bzikot's entire family plays a role in the business. Her husband takes care of the farm and son Peter does the distribution. Her daughter-in-law, Nicole, helps with the cheesemaking, as well as publicity and running their small store in Fergus. The other sheep farmers in the co-op are happy to supply the milk and have Bzikot take care of the cheesemaking. "Their interest is purely in producing milk and getting a cheque for it," says Bzikot. "It's an attractive deal for them because we commit to buying pre-determined quantities of milk at a much better price than they would get for selling their milk elsewhere." And she's very proud of the fact that her cheesemaking provides a stable income for her farmers.

Petra Cooper of Fifth Town Artisan Cheese Co. spent eighteen years in textbook publishing before moving to the country and embarking on a career in cheese. Surprisingly, her only previous experience with country life was reading about Laura Ingalls Wilder in *Little House on the Prairie*. But five years ago, Cooper, her husband and their young daughter decided to leave the city for Prince Edward County, where her husband had grown up. "You hit your forties and decide to do something different because, well, that might be fun," she says. Cooper con-



**Elizabeth Bzikot at St. Lawrence Market**

sidered a few options. Wine was an obvious possibility, but she and her husband felt they weren't up to the requisite investment in time and money. "So," she says, "we thought, 'Hey, wine goes with cheese,' and there was already a cow's milk cheesemaker out there, so let's make goat and sheep cheese."

After a few difficult years spent learning and dealing with architects and contractors, Cooper's Fifth Town Artisan Cheese Co. opened in June. The company is housed in a 4,800-square-foot state-of-the-art facility that is North America's only platinum LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design)-certified dairy, adhering to strict environmental standards including geothermal, solar and wind power for energy, and using recycled building materials and wood from sustainable forests. Along with the high-tech elements, Cooper included underground cheese-ripening caves, a centuries-old European practice for aging the cheese using nature's own cooling and humidifying system. The green theme is a priority for Cooper. She's persuaded the local farmers, whose animals are providing her with milk, to use non-GMO feed. "This," she admits "was a big change for some of them."

Though she clearly knows business, cheese was another story. For the past four years, Cooper has studied the art of cheesemaking – enrolling in the University of Guelph's cheesemaking course, studying the art at the University of Vermont, completing a *stage* at Cowgirl Creamery in northern California, and making goat cheese in the kitchen of her condo in Toronto. Knowing she needed help, she hired Stephanie Diamant from Ewenity Dairy Co-op as her head cheesemaker. Together they have come up with a product line of eighteen types of cheese, including Nettles Gone Wild, an aged semi-soft goat milk cheese with a white mould rind topped with nettle leaves, and Operetta, a soft ripened, crotin-style goat milk cheese. The styles are European, but incorporate other "County" ingredients such as maple syrup, herbs, lavender and, yes, nettle, from neighbouring farms. They're even working on a "Drunken Goat" cheese using the must from County grapes.



**Ruth Klahsen at Trinity Bellwoods Farmers' Market**

Cooper intends to help out with the cheesemaking but knows that her strengths lie in marketing and in building the business. She has already been building the profile of artisan cheese by founding the Ontario Cheese Society – a forum for networking, sharing and education – in 2003. It was an idea borne out of an evening spent chatting with her professor and fellow classmates at the University of Guelph. She wrote a grant proposal, brought together a working group, and formed the society. There are now more than one hundred sixty members and an annual conference.

Ruth Klahsen, who owns Monforte Dairy, is an active member of the Cheese Society. I spent the morning with her at the cheesemaking facility she rents in tiny Millbank, west of Kitchener in the heart of Mennonite country. Klahsen herself is the daughter of a Mennonite doctor and grew up in the country around London, Ontario. She spent more than twenty years working as a chef but has always had an interest in making cheese (she even spent part of her honeymoon learning at a farmstead operation in England).

With her soft features and engaging smile, Klahsen is the picture of country girl innocence. But her cheeses – named Sheep Dip, Vigoroso and Indiscretion – suggest otherwise. She's quick-witted and tough beneath that exterior, perhaps the result of years spent in a professional kitchen. I ask her about the grappa-soaked semi-soft goat cheese she calls Indiscretion. "That's how I get when I drink grappa," she says. "And then I know I just need to go home."

Klahsen is a self-taught cheesemaker who only recently started taking courses at the Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese at the University of Vermont. Most of her learning comes from trial and error, and she's had her share of disasters. She recalls trying to control the over-ripening of her Camembert. "It was like something from the Monty Python cheese shop sketch, very runny."

Good sanitation practices are paramount, Klahsen stresses. The cheesemaking room is scrupulously clean, covered with gleaming white

tile and stainless steel. Before I am allowed to enter, I must change my clothes and shoes and don a hair net. Foam the consistency of shaving cream shoots out intermittently across the doorways to prevent outside contamination. Klahsen washes her hands in a sanitizing solution and dips her hand into a stainless steel vat filled with 300 litres of fresh sheep's milk. She runs her fingers through the soft, snowy-white curds and, with a voice filled with serenity, muses, "It's really nice work."

This year Klahsen will turn 150,000 litres of sheep's milk and 50,000 litres of goat's milk into more than twenty different types of cheese. Unlike cows, sheep and goats have a seasonal breeding cycle and, after a winter of low milk production, supplies start to increase in the spring. In June, when the animals are grazing on fresh young grass, the milk is at its peak flavour.

Klahsen pasteurizes the milk, adds bacterial culture and rennet, and waits for it to separate into curds and whey. She then ladles the curds into various moulds. She makes several different cheeses from one vat of milk, inspired mostly by those she has tasted on her travels in Europe. The pyramid moulds are for Black Sheep, which she will roll in vegetable ash before aging, and the square moulds are for Paradiso, similar to Italian taleggio. Klahsen washes the rind with whey as it ages. My favourite is *Piacere*, a creamy, tangy round rolled in rosemary, savory, chilies and juniper berries, reminiscent of *Fleur de Maquis*, a Corsican cheese. Klahsen heats up some of the leftover whey to make soft, warm pots of ricotta and to poach Middle Eastern-inspired halloumi. Once a week, the local farmers pick up excess whey to use as pig feed. Nothing is wasted.

Later we chat in her office, which also doubles as the lunchroom. In stark contrast to the immaculate cheese room, Klahsen's desk is stacked with papers, the phone rings constantly, and she flips between spreadsheets and emails on the computer. She muses about the future. She would love to have her own facility.

Just a few weeks after she was interviewed for this article, however, Klahsen was advised that the rent on her cheesemaking facility will double when her lease expires, so she must find new premises before February 2009. She's got her eye on a space in Stratford, which would enable her to start a cheesemaking apprenticeship program with the Stratford Chefs School. The problem is, she must come up with \$1 million to turn the space into a certified dairy. As of the beginning of September, when this issue went to press, Klahsen was not hopeful about raising the money. Patience is a virtue for Klahsen, Cooper and Bzikot. In Klahsen's case, unfortunately, all the patience in the world will not keep Monforte Dairy in operation. □

**Ewenity Dairy Co-operative** [www.ewenity.com](http://www.ewenity.com)

**Fifth Town Artisan Cheese Co.** [www.fifthtown.ca](http://www.fifthtown.ca)

**Monforte Dairy Company Ltd.** [www.monfortedairy.com](http://www.monfortedairy.com)

**Ontario Cheese Society** [www.ontariocheese.org](http://www.ontariocheese.org)

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