

Demand underpins cheesemaker's expansion

Haltwhistle's cheeses support demand for local milk

DUNCAN – When cheesemaker Cory Spencer and his wife Kirsten Thorarinson relocated to the Cowichan Valley in 2010 with dreams of raising a small herd of dairy goats, the property they found was seven acres at the former Damar dairy farm in the hills above Duncan.

The initial herd has grown to about 140 goats – mostly Swiss breeds such as Alpine, Saanen and Toggenburg – and, all going well, herd size will double next year thanks to growing demand for the farm's raw milk cheeses.

But the farm's expansion has also resulted in the return of cow's milk to the property, thanks to a partnership with Oliver Balme of Balme Ayr Farms Ltd. in nearby Cobble Hill.

"We were always interested in using the milk from the Balme Ayr farm because he has a herd of Ayrshire cows," says Spencer. "That's an old Scottish breed, and they produce fantastic milk for making cheese. ... It's a really nice, rich fatty milk, and it makes really great cheese for us."

A licensed bulk milk tank grader, Spencer picks up 1,000 litres from Balme Ayr one to three times each week, depending on the season, and delivers it to his on-farm cheesemaking plant, which operates as Haltwhistle Cheese Co. (formerly The Happy Goat).

"Come February, March, when we're really starting to build inventory up for our summer sales which have traditionally been our biggest here, we'll bring in cow's milk two, maybe three times a week," he says.

The farm makes six varieties of cow's milk cheese and six with goat's milk. All are made with raw milk, which means they have to be held for a minimum of 60 days. Spencer prefers to hold them for at least 90 days.

"Generally, we find the best flavour, texture comes out with a 90-day minimum development, depending on what kind of cheese you're going for," he says.

Spencer studied cheesemaking at Moonstruck Organic Cheese Inc. on Salt Spring as well as in England and France. His cow's milk cheeses include a traditional English cheddar, a blue and a Gouda, as well as French-style



Cory Spencer of Haltwhistle Cheese Co. on Vancouver Island is scaling up his goat dairy with the help of cow's milk.

cheeses that parallel the ones he makes from goat's milk.

Spencer met the Balmes through the Cowichan Agricultural Society and a friendship and mutual respect grew. When he began expanding production, Balme Ayr came to mind.

"It's easier to roll up to another dairy and pick up 1,000 litres of milk than it is to double our herd," he says. "It allows us to scale our volumes

more easily."

And, by becoming a licensed grader, it gave him the flexibility to source the milk as he needed it.

"We can do things on our own schedule," he says.

The expansion is breathing new life into the Damar property, bought in 1958 by Harold and Betty Tattam. Harold died in 2008 but his

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DAIRY history

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son David still lives on the property with his wife Janice. Hay has been the primary crop, however.

The farm is one of several that have exited the dairy business in recent years. There are now approximately 39 dairies on Vancouver Island, and some of these are up for sale. The owners are older and the cost of acquiring any one of the operations is in the millions of dollars. That's prohibitive for younger farmers and new entrants.

The loss of farms has left processors undersupplied. Closure of the Saputo plant in Courtenay earlier this year reversed that situation but it now means milk is trucked off island for processing. Having local, on-island buyers for local milk reverses some of the losses.

With milk once again being processed on the Demar farm, the story affirms both the area's long history of dairying and the potential for value-added production.

"Being able to say, 'All this milk comes from this particular farm, and it's all a herd of Ayrshire cows,' is great for us," says Spencer. "It's a neat story. And honestly, it's just really good milk."

Haltwhistle doesn't pay a premium for his milk, but

Oliver Balme says that's not the point. The cheese is good, and it's a way to showcase local milk as well as a local processor.

"We not making more money," says Balme. "The main thing about him using our milk is the pride."

Demand is rapidly catching up with Haltwhistle, however.

Production has increased 250% over the past two years to between 10,000 and 15,000 kilograms of cheese a year, and Spencer expects production to double again over the next three to four years. Thorarinson, who oversees farm administration and handles sales to farmers' markets, has cultivated local markets and the couple is working on a distribution agreement with a major grocer.

"I always expected the ability to grow our sales to come from the cow's side. Cow's milk definitely helps, and there's a lot of people that really prefer cow versus goat," Spencer says. "[But] they basically only want our goat's milk products because we're producing something that no one else [produces]."

Despite approximately 25 artisan cheesemakers in BC, Haltwhistle is the sole raw milk cheesemaker on



The 130 Ayrshire cattle at Balme Ayr Farms in Cobble Hill supply milk for Haltwhistle Cheese Co. in nearby Duncan.

Vancouver Island. It's also notable because its goat cheeses are typically firm-textured French-style cheeses rather than the chevres and other soft styles that dominate among Western Canada's goat's milk creameries. (Several cheesemakers produce goat's milk cheddars and Goudas, however.)

The demand is pushing up against the limits of the 1,000-square-foot cheesemaking facility, located adjacent to the parlour where he milks a dozen goats at a time.

"We're really facing the limits of our space right now," he says.

Haltwhistle doesn't have any immediate plans to relocate. Its long-term lease at

Damar runs until 2034, which is far enough in the future that Spencer isn't worrying about what comes next just yet.

"We started making cheese here," he notes, and with another 15 years left on the lease he quips he might stop making cheese here, too.

"[It] kind of puts me to the end of my cheesemaking days," he says.

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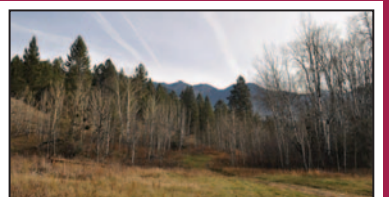
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