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## Artisanal cheese makers cheesed off

'Complex, inconsistently interpreted regulations' have left one couple near bankruptcy and other small food processors in limbo

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A Manitoba couple says red tape has killed 100 years of cheese history and put them near bankruptcy.

Husband and wife team Dustin Peltier and Rachel Isaak, along with Peltier's parents Gary and Silver Peltier, say the province has blocked them at every turn as they've attempted to bring their traditional, Trappist-style cheese to market — withholding information, changing requirements midstream, misleading, and even laughing at them.

"We have no more funds to continue," the couple wrote in a statement recently. "We will be moving forward with making a different version of this treasured cheese using pasteurized milk — it will not be the same. But it is the only way we can continue to honour the Brother's (sic) legacy."

The couple has spent about \$70,000 on testing and product loss due to testing errors. Now, they've reached the end of their rope.

Peltier told the M [REDACTED] he expects retaliation from the province for going to the press, but he and Isaak have little left to lose.

"We are hoping that by telling our story others will have more confidence to come forward and we can work towards fixing the problems with the system," the couple said.

**Why it matters:** Food advocates say if regulations were streamlined, an artisanal cheese industry could pop up in Manitoba, but prospective producers have been scared off by Peltier and Isaak's ordeal.

Local food advocates say they're not alone. Rather, barriers placed before small food producers send the message that the Manitoba government is not interested in a local food industry, and would rather protect itself than help small-business owners.

"(Getting into the industry is) an uphill battle with very little reward versus risk," said Stefan Regnier, a farmer and board member with Direct Farm Manitoba.

## Preserving history

In 1918, Trappist monks at the St. Norbert Monastery got a cheese recipe as a Christmas present. The monks began making the pale-orange, washed-rind cheese and carried the practice with them to Holland, Manitoba in the 1970s.

In 2016, elderly monk Brother Alberic was the only one making the cheese — likely in North America — and didn't want the recipe to die when he retired. Peltier and Isaak, who are chefs and caterers, took up the mantle along with their parents.

For a week, Peltier lived at the monastery to learn from Alberic and continued to visit monthly afterward — monastic rules kept Isaak from entering the facility. Alberic also gave them 100-year-old letters from the monks to another monastery in Quebec.

"What we're preserving is — we feel — pretty important to Manitoba and to the dairy community," Peltier said.

However, their first meeting with provincial inspectors started on an ominous note.

"We walked in, and they handed us articles on people who have died from raw milk products," Isaak said.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The Trappist-style cheese is made from raw, unpasteurized milk. Sale of unpasteurized milk is illegal in Manitoba due to risk of harmful bacteria like salmonella, E. coli and listeria, according to a fact sheet from the province.

However, through the cheese-making process, beneficial microbes develop and “inoculate” the cheese against pathogens. A level of biofilm or residue is required on equipment, instead of the sterile stainless steel associated with commercial food production, because this maintains a population of helpful micro-organisms.



Dustin Peltier shows off the inside of their cheese aging room. photo [REDACTED]

The cheese ages on wooden boards in a climate-controlled room, which Peltier and Isaak said mimics how cheese was aged in European caves. Brother Alberic had a concrete “bunker” in which he aged his cheeses.

In their first meeting, said Peltier and Isaak, the inspectors did not know what requirements they’d have to meet to prove their cheese safe, but promised to look into it.

It took four months for an inspector to deliver testing requirements — and then by phone and not in writing, Peltier and Isaak said.

While Brother Alberic had been making and selling Trappist cheese in Manitoba for years, Peltier and Isaak said Manitoba Agriculture either had not inspected him or did not have records of Alberic’s requirements.

“The Abbey Cheese Plant’s raw milk cheese process was approved by the federal government’s standards,” a spokesperson from the province wrote in an emailed statement.

“The Abbey Cheese Plant was also inspected on a regular basis by the province to ensure compliance to the Dairy Regulation and the Food and Food Handling Establishments Regulation.

“Operators must demonstrate that their product consistently meets Health Canada microbiological safety standards,” the spokesperson said. They linked to a page of federal food and drug regulations.

The regulation states, “No person shall sell cheese, including cheese curd, that is not made from a pasteurized source unless it has been stored.”

“Stored” means “to have been kept or held at a temperature of 2 C or more for a period of 60 days or more from the date of the beginning of the manufacturing process.”

- **Read more: [The case of the disappearing food act](#)**

The regulation provides standards of what bacteria counts the cheese must not exceed and prescribes which test method must be used to determine this. It doesn't specify how many tests must be passed to validate the cheese-making procedure.

“A consistent, validated production process must be followed, which includes lab testing at an accredited lab,” said the provincial spokesperson. “If a producer is able to meet all the appropriate standards and consistently produce a safe product, they are free to sell their product to the public.”

## Moving goalposts

In a March 2018 document provided to the [REDACTED], the province told Peltier and Isaak it would test their first three lots of cheese.

Because Peltier and Isaak use raw milk, they weren't allowed to use a commercial kitchen to make test batches of cheese. In March 2018, they finished refurbishing a construction trailer into a test kitchen. It passed inspection, and they received a dairy-processing permit.

The first wheels of cheese went for testing at a Manitoba lab in June.



*Trappist-style cheese in process in Peltier and Isaak's refurbished trailer test kitchen near Woodlands, Manitoba. photo: Loaf and Honey*

Early cheese came back high in bacteria, but Peltier and Isaak said this wasn't unexpected. Their new kitchen needed time to build up biofilm and beneficial microbes. They asked for permission to age cheese longer to decrease bacteria — a practice they said is standard in artisan cheese making — but were denied.

By September, they'd passed three consecutive rounds of testing with good results. However, the province told them they'd have to continue testing each lot of cheese because "we use different raw milk in each batch," the couple said.

In a later round of testing, Peltier and Isaak sent samples to the Manitoba lab and another lab in Ontario. The samples were from the same batches of cheese, but while the Ontario lab sent back clean results, the Manitoba



lab sent back results with sky-high counts of deadly bacteria.

Peltier said if their bacteria counts were truly that high, their cheese would be a biohazard and the province should shut them down immediately. This did not happen, and inspectors seemed unfazed.

The couple met with an inspector and staff from the Manitoba lab. The inspector assured lab staff that the mistake couldn't have been theirs, said Peltier and Isaak. The lab later refunded them for these tests.

In December 2018, inspectors got CFIA approval for Peltier and Isaak to age their cheese longer if they tested high in harmful bacteria. They'd been asking for permission for over a year.

"We would have been able to save 330 wheels of cheese at a retail cost of \$26,000," the couple said.

Peltier and Isaak also said they were told that to pick up milk directly from a nearby dairy farm, they would need to have a dairy board staff member present, or get a bulk transport licence. However, when they asked how to get this licence, Manitoba Agriculture staff told them there was no course in the province that could train them.

For two years, the couple was unable to get the licence until, in January of 2019, they were told they didn't need it due to a regulation change in 2015.





*Trappist-style cheese in process in Peltier and Isaak's refurbished trailer test kitchen near Woodlands, Manitoba. photo: Loaf and Honey*

They asked inspectors why they weren't told this. The inspector said, "it is not our job to tell you the rules and regulations," the couple said.

In January 2019, they asked the province how many more tests they needed to pass, as they'd passed the prescribed three tests three times. They were told they now needed to pass 10 consecutive tests.

Frustrated, the couple set up a mediation meeting with Manitoba Agriculture. In the meeting, Peltier and Isaak said a senior official said she was "here to protect her staff" and blamed their lost money on going "all in" too soon.

## Not alone

With \$70,000 sunk into testing and discarded cheese, Peltier and Isaak are out of money. They've begun making cheese with pasteurized milk. It won't be the same, but they need cash flow.

Their case bears striking similarity to another, high-profile case.

In 2013, Harborside Farms near Pilot Mound won a provincial award for its cured meat products, writes local food advocate Jeanette Sivilay in her 2019 thesis, *Organizing for Food Sovereignty in Manitoba*. Three months later, a new inspector was assigned to the farm. They reinterpreted guidelines for the meats and ordered Harborside Farms to halt production.

In late summer of that year, inspectors from a different arm of the same department raided the farm, writes Sivilay. They seized cured meat products, claiming the farm had continued to sell them without approval. The products were deemed unfit for human consumption and were destroyed without testing, says Sivilay.

Among 26 people she interviewed from the local food community, Sivilay says many of them raised concerns about "complex, inconsistently interpreted and applied regulations that were not appropriate to the scale and unique production methods of local food providers."

The producers also spoke of distrust for regulators who permeated the community after the Harborside Farms raid, along with feelings of fear and powerlessness.

Fear of retaliation is still present in the local food community. Peltier and Isaak first spoke to the [REDACTED] in July, but asked it not to publish for fear of retaliation.

"People feel vulnerable," said Erin Crampton, a local food advocate.

Crampton said she's often been the one to challenge the province because, as she's not a processor or producer, she can't be punished.

"That's a huge red flag," she said, adding it speaks volumes to the tone and attitude of the organization.

Crampton said with such onerous regulations, people are tempted to sell on the black market until they have enough cash flow to afford to do things legally.

## Unnecessary obstacles

It doesn't need to be so hard, Crampton said. European cheese makers have made raw milk cheese for centuries — and exported it to Manitoba. Other provinces, like Quebec, have raw milk cheese industries. Trappist cheese was made and sold in Manitoba for decades.

Manitoba Agriculture should have plenty of precedent to which it can refer for guidance, Crampton said.

"Why it has gone off the rails is just a bloody mystery to me," she said.

"When you come to Manitoba Ag with an artisanal product that has traditionally been made, maybe for thousands of years even, but is an artisanal product that is not commercially made, the inspectors don't know what they're looking at," said Bruce Berry at a recent Direct Farm Manitoba meeting. Berry is a market gardener and a local food veteran.



“Their only safe, from their job and career standpoint, from a real-people basis, is to stop it because they can’t put themselves at risk,” said Berry.

On the inspector’s part, regulations aren’t always clearcut, said Dave Shambrock, executive director of Food & Beverage Manitoba. They’re also couched in legal language, which inspectors must interpret and apply, sometimes putting them in “a very awkward position,” said Shambrock.

Crampton said if the province streamlined the approval process, an artisanal cheese industry could pop up in Manitoba. She, Peltier and Isaak said they knew cheese makers who want to enter the market but are waiting for Peltier and Isaak to clear the hurdles.

“As soon as you find an advocate, someone who has an attitude of success — suddenly very sensible regulations are found and people are able to move forward,” said Crampton.

She likened this to what happened to the craft beer industry when the province loosened liquor regulations.

The life cycle of regulatory change is “generational,” Direct Farm Manitoba president Phil Veldhuis said at a recent members’ meeting. It works, but it takes years of grinding.

Meanwhile, Peltier and Isaak plan to “bide our time until the powers that be gain common sense.”



asked Minister of Agriculture Blaine Pedersen to comment on accusations against department inspectors. While a provincial spokesperson sent an emailed statement, it did not address these complaints.

