



Valley Shepherd Creamery sells cheese and yogurt made from 700 head of grass-fed sheep, goats and cows.

Multi-Species Dairy Makes A Lot Of Cheese

Valley Shepherd Creamery makes a lot of cheese and yogurt from their 700 head of pastured sheep, goats and cows. For 9 months out of the year, animals are milked, and cheese and yogurt are made 7 days a week, 15 hrs. a day. They also make cultured butter.

"We make 40 different cheeses and a dozen yogurts," says Eran Wajswol, Valley Shepherd Creamery.

He and his wife Debra Van Sickle met in engineering school, and shared a love for farming. An initial hobby farm with a small beef herd led to a 120-acre farm in Long Valley, Morris, County, N.J. and a herd of Rambouillet sheep. Quickly discovering that a small flock of meat and wool-producing sheep was not economically viable, they looked for an alternative.

Through years of traveling around Europe, they had fallen in love with Old-

World style sheep cheese. They developed a business plan for a sustainable, vertically integrated, Pyrenees style, cave-aged cheese dairy. They replaced the Rambouillet with European East Friesian and Lacauine dairy sheep. They added a mixed goat herd, mainly Alpine and Nubian dairy goats, as well as cows. They also keep a herd of Red Wattle hogs that consume whey from the cheese operation and later are marketed as European-style, dry cured sausage.

While the cheesemaking is Old-World style, the milking operation is modern. Today they operate the only carousel milking parlor for sheep and goats in the U.S. They can milk 600 head an hour. Cows are milked off site.

"We started 23 years ago," says Wajswol. "We took time to develop the recipes, but we knew what we wanted to do and where we were going with it."

Part of the plan involved digging a cave out

of the hillside where they could age cheese. It features 4 climate-controlled, aging rooms for hard cheeses, stinky washed rind cheese, blue cheese, and soft ripened cheese. Cheeses are aged from 2 months to 2 years.

Their vertically integrated production facility takes milk from the animal to the market. While Wajswol considers the annual lamb production a give-away, even they become part of the process. Rennet used in the cheesemaking process is harvested from their stomachs.

"We have 2 stores in New Jersey and 1 in New York City," says Wajswol. "We sell to retailers, wholesalers and at 14 farmers markets every week, mostly in New York City."

Wajswol notes the farmers markets and direct sales were vital this past year, as sales to restaurants disappeared. "The amount of specialty cheese baskets that were ordered was mind-boggling in the early days," says Wajswol. "Lately farmers markets have been our biggest market. It's one way people feel they can get out of the house."

Wajswol cites creating multiple markets for product as one of the keys to setting up a business based on creating product. Marketing is also the biggest challenge.

"We had to find markets that wanted locally made, artisanal cheese in volume," he says. "A single batch of cheese is 30 wheels."

He questions whether anyone could reproduce what he and his wife created, but the rules they followed still make sense.

"Given the money it would cost in both up-front and capital improvements, I don't think something like Valley Shepherd would happen today," he says. "Whatever you do, figure out the product before you spend any

money. Figure out what the market will absorb. Figure out the price you can sell it for and the cost of production."

In the case of dairy products, he advises working backwards - this much product at this price in this volume requires this much milk at this much yield per animal.

Another key factor is labor. "We can't physically do all the work ourselves," he says. "Maintaining the staffing level needed for a vertically integrated business is a challenge. You have to have a lot of good people."

Valley Shepherd does more than just sell cheese; it also sells itself. The original plan included making the farm a family-friendly destination.

The farm hosts tours from spring to fall, as well as wine and cheese tastings and cheesemaking classes (\$169). Class attendees make a 2-lb. wheel of cheese that is aged in the farm's cave for 90 days before being picked up or shipped to the maker.

The farm store (online and brick and mortar) offers cheese by the pound, by the plate, and by the basket, as well as a wide array of other related products. Gift baskets and monthly shipments are also available.

Aside from the pandemic, everything has developed according to plan. "Today you can find our cheese as far away as California, but most of it is sold on the East Coast," says Wajswol. "There is no need to grow nationally when you can sell it all regionally."

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Chainsaw Trencher Fast, Maneuverable

The GeoRipper is a cross between a chainsaw and a motorized trencher. It's handheld and ideal for tight spaces and tight turns. Mount it to its EZ Kart and easily trench through a lawn or open field to depths as much as 27 in.

"The original product was developed around 19 years ago in New Zealand," says Debra McNamara, MiniTrencher. "They used a chainsaw engine, which was fine for their soils. Our soils are too varied. We developed a new version using a concrete saw-type engine from Makita."

"It has a heavier duty chain that is self sharpening," she adds. "The more you use it, the sharper it gets."

The chain moves at about a third the speed of a chainsaw. While it can bounce a few inches if it hits a rock, the slower speed and vibration isolation springs in the arm prevent kickback. Chain life is measured in linear feet, and averages around 1,000 ft. It is affected by digging depth, soil type and operator style. Two chains are included with each GeoRipper.

The GeoRipper is designed to chip through roots up to 3 in. in diameter. While it can't go through solid rock, it can dig through and dig up loose rock the size of an adult fist with repeated up and down sawing action. Larger rocks can be trenched around.

The handheld GeoRipper is available in 7 models, starting with the \$2,600 616. Weighing 32 lbs., it is powered by a 61 cc, 4.4 hp., 2-stroke engine. It is designed to cut trenches up to 16 in. deep.

The largest GeoRipper is the \$4,100 827. It has an 81 cc, 5.6 hp., 2-stroke engine and a maximum trenching depth of 27 in. when used with the included EZ Kart.

The EZ Kart is a \$700 option with models other than the 827. With or without it, the mini trenchers are ideal for use where the only alternative is a shovel. They can be used



Handheld GeoRipper can cut trenches up to 16 in. deep and chip through roots up to 3 in. in diameter.

in close quarters or areas where standard trenchers are not an option.

"Contractors tell us that what once took 8 hrs. with a shovel can be completed in an hour with a GeoRipper," says McNamara, who adds that they and their customers are constantly finding new uses for the GeoRippers.

"It is ideal for any type of digging for irrigation systems, root barriers, landscape lighting and other pipe and wire installations," says McNamara. "It works great in hard soils."

The company also offers kits for use with specific Makita, Stihl and Husqvarna demo saws. And they're working on a battery-powered cordless model. GeoRippers are available direct from MiniTrencher or from their 130+ dealers around the U.S.

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Conexwest modifies shipping containers ranging from 10 to 45 ft. long for a wide variety of needs. "There's no limit to what we can and will do," says the company.

Custom-Modified Shipping Containers

Repurposed shipping containers are everywhere and being used for everything under the sun. Conexwest, considered one of the 5 largest resellers of containers, is a one-stop-shop for customization. In just the past 7 years the company has worked with more than 10,000 customers.

"We sell containers as is, or with as much as \$100,000 in modifications," says a company spokesman. "Some companies do only high-end modifications, while others do only modest ones. There is no limit to what we can and will do."

Variations begin with the containers themselves, ranging in length from 10 ft. to 45 ft. Descriptions include general purpose, side opening, high cube, open-top, flat rack, insulated and refrigerated.

"We have 3 levels of refrigeration, down to negative 76 degrees," according to Conexwest.

The company started out using shipping containers as self-storage units to be rented out to consumers and businesses. They quickly discovered their customers were interested in owning their own and having them customized. In addition, the company

offers units already fabricated for a wide variety of uses, from shelters to restrooms and even bleachers.

"People say this is what we want," says the spokesman. "The first time someone wanted to make one into a restaurant, I thought it was unusual. It isn't anymore."

Rust is one of the biggest factors to be considered when putting a value on a container, according to Conexwest. "If it is going to be used as underground storage or for an in-ground swimming pool, aesthetics don't matter. "However, if it will be sitting in the front yard or used for housing, how it looks is important."

The company's website lets prospective customers select standard modifications and see changes as they are added to a container. Customer specialists are also available to assist in designing and pricing a customized unit.

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