

Happy trails

Cheesemakers look for success on the yellow brick road

By GRETCHEN METZ
Staff Writer

Local cheesemakers are taking a page from the Brandywine Valley winemakers' book to partner up and promote their product as a region.

Pennsylvania currently has 70 wineries connected along 11 wine trails, including the Brandywine Valley, each welcoming visitors to tour their grape vineyards and taste their merlots and then travel down the road and do it all over again at a competitor's farm.

With wine trails so successful, Yellow Springs Farm owners Al and Catherine Renzi got to thinking: Hey, let's try that, too.

Working with Chester County Economic Development Council, the Renzis — who milk Nubian goats to make two dozen specialty cheeses — came up with

the idea of the Chester County Cheese Artisans.

The newly formed group consists of eight cheesemakers in the county who make farmstead and artisan cheeses.

"Some have been in business 10 years, eight years, or less than five years," Al Renzi said. "We'll pull together as a regional group."

Renzi envisions a cheese trail much like the Brandywine Valley Wine Trail and would like the opportunity to partner with the winemakers for mutual marketing.

That sounds good to Lee Miller, who owns Chaddsford Winery with her husband, Eric.

"I'd love to work with them for an event," Miller said. Chester County has "great local wine and cheese."

Chaddsford already partners with local bed and breakfasts and other complementary industries for joint



At top, goats look through the fence at Yellow Springs Farm. Bottom left, goats produce milk for 300 days after birthing. The kids are weaned after a few weeks. Bottom right, the evening milking is filtered before it is put up for the night in the processing room.

Staff photos by Amy Dragoo

ONLINE VIDEO



SLIDESHOW ONLINE

More photos from Yellow Springs Farm are available at dailylocal.com

Cheese

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promotions, Miller said.

Blain Mahoney, executive director of the Chester County Conference & Visitors Bureau, thinks the idea of a cheese trail is “wonderful” and would like the opportunity to help market the concept.

The bureau is all about trails, Mahoney said, noting that it already promotes the wine trail as well as an art trail, covered bridge trail, art trail and garden trail on its Web site.

Mahoney said pairing the county winemakers and cheesemakers for events is good business, adding that Virginia already does that quite successfully.

Say cheese

Debbie Milukal, who owns and operates Amazing Acres with her husband, Fred Bloom, joined the artisans’ group because she wanted to get to know the other cheesemakers, as well as combine resources.

“There is power in numbers,” said Milukal, who makes cheese from the milk of her Nubian goats at her Warwick farm. While Milukal acknowledges there are only eight members now, “you have to start somewhere,” she said.

The Vermont Cheese Artisans Trail is very strong. Coming up is the Vermont Cheese Festival, said Milukal, who hopes the Chester County Cheese Artisans efforts will follow in a similar direction.

Hope Rotelle, a member of the Rotelle family that owns September Farm in Honey Brook, said a cheese trail is a good marketing idea for the region.

“People would come to this area for the cheese,” said Rotelle, who makes cheese from cow’s milk. “There are a lot of us so the area would be known for that.”

Cheese made in this region has its own flavor, Yellow Springs’ Catherine Renzi said. The same cheese recipes made from goats from a different country, different part of the U.S., even different part of Pennsylvania would taste different.

“Our goats’ milk has a higher butterfat” than goats that graze in other areas, Al Renzi explained. Much like wines;



Staff photo by Amy Dragoo

At top, Al Renzi applies the milking machine to one of the goats at Yellow Springs Farm. Bottom left, Amazing Acres joined the artisans’ group to combine resources with other cheesemakers. Bottom right, the September Farm in Honey Brook is part of the cheese trail.

grapes grown in different regions produce wines with tastes specific to their own region.

Yellow Springs currently sells its cheese through a Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA, program where the farmer offers a certain number of “shares” to the public.

With a CSA, interested consumers purchase a share before the start of the growing season. In return, the shareholder receives a box of seasonal produce, or in this case cheese, each week throughout the farming season.

Yellow Springs has 100 shareholders.

Renzi likes the CSA marketing concept because it connects the community with agriculture. When

shareholders come to the eight-acre Yellow Springs Farm to pick up the cheese, they visit with the goats and see the process of cheese making up close.

“Cheese making is an opportunity and a privilege,” he said. It is an opportunity to showcase “a product that comes from a farm that has creativity and uniqueness and offer it to people at a local level.”

Getting started in cheese making is a slow process.

The farm purchased a couple of goats in 2004 and started making cheese as gifts for friends and family, Renzi said.

Over the next couple of years, the Renzis bought more goats, a milking machine and professional

cheese making equipment and got licensed. What seemed like baby steps into a business were really major investments for the couple, Renzi said.

Other members of the group are: Birch Run Hills Farm, Conebella Farm and Doe Run Dairy that use cow’s milk.

Those using goat milk are Doe Run Dairy and Shellbark Hollow Farm.

The members using sheep milk are Doe Run Dairy and Highland Farm.

For more information about the individual farms, visit www.chestercountycheese.org.

Marketing help

Suzanne Milshaw, agriculture program manager with

the Development Council’s Agricultural Partnership, is on board with the group to help them get to the next step in marketing their product.

She also is working to get cheese making instructors to visit the county and give seminars on advanced cheese making skills.

Currently, she said, the cheesemakers in Chester County have had to travel to New England to take classes and to learn from longtime professionals.

“There is no availability of advanced cheese making training here,” she said.

Milshaw said the marketing options for artisan cheesemakers are limited. Generally, they sell their products to restaurants, at farmers markets or through a CSA.

Marketing for a small cheese making operation is tough, Milshaw said. It takes so much time to produce the cheese, there is little time left over to promote the product and find new retail avenues.

While the Vermont Cheese Council is busy with its 41 members on its cheese trail, it knows Chester County cheesemakers, said Rachel Schaal, coordinator for that council.

Many of Chester County’s cheesemakers have been to Vermont to learn advanced techniques, she said.

Schaal agrees that marketing for a small cheese operation is tricky.

Many cheesemakers make a “killing at farmers markets,” but they have to be “people people” and be able to chat about the cheese making process with customers.

Cheesemakers making less than 10,000 pounds a year generally do better with a more intimate process of a CSA.

Marketing success is all about partnering.

In Vermont, cheesemakers work closely with both wine and beer makers, even cracker companies, Schaal said.

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