

ed her foundation dog from Wales... a dog already bred to a double international champion, and now this country doc was knee-deep in the Border Collies.

So, she got to thinking. "I stood down there in that aisle one day," she points to a fenced alley leading to the nursery barn. "How can these sheep support themselves? Maybe I could milk them," I dunno," she shrugs and asides, "I didn't know that you could then."

The consummate do-it-yourselfer, Dr. Elliott was already making her own bread, beer, and soap, so why not cheese made from sheep's milk. Before you wrinkle your nose, consider this: sheep's milk cheese is not uncommon. Have you every heard of Pecorino? That's sheep's milk cheese from Italy. In Spain they call it Manchego. In Greece, it's called Feta. In fact, around the world, more sheep are milked for cheese than cows or goats.

So, in 1998, Pat Elliott secured a license to make artisanal farmstead cheese. She explains. "This is an artisanal cheese which means it is hand-made in small batches. And it's also a farmstead cheese, which means we only use milk from our own animals, so we know what those animals are doing all of the time, where they've been, what they're eating. We don't buy milk or anything; it's all our own animals, which means it takes us a while to expand

because we expand from the ground up."

Here it is 10 years later and Pat Elliott has an alcove full of trophies and blue ribbons for her cheeses. She started by taking a Wisconsin cheese course, "and then I've done a lot of reading. I go to the American Cheese Society meetings, and actually those awards over there are from the United States Cheese Championship Contest." She has also "picked up some ideas here and there," like the time she watched Greek shepherds make Feta in their stone huts 4,000 feet above the Aegean Sea.

Back home in little ole Everona; what is even more rewarding than the ribbons and trophies is the knowledge that her cheeses are being served in top-notch restaurants and sold in specialty gourmet food shops from one end of this country to the other. Close to home, Palladio, the top-flight Italian restaurant in Barboursville serves it exclusively. You can buy chunks of it, to the tune of \$18 to \$20 per pound, at Feast in Charlottesville. In the dark walk-in fridge known as the "cave" at Everona Dairy, about a dozen wheels of cheese have been reserved for the Aspen Wine and Cheese Festival....yes, that's right, *the* Aspen Wine and Cheese Festival. And if you are lucky enough the next time you're in the San Francisco Bay area, and have had the forethought to make

# how to make cheese...if you really must know

It's late afternoon and a low winter sun will soon set. Strolling across the yard with Everona's Chief of Security, a delightful dog of Polish breeding named Julie, we enter the nursery.

This is where it all begins. Built into the wall of the ante room, is a cozy little nook complete with mattress, bedding and reading light. This is where Dr. Pat Elliott will spend the night "for the next several months." Every night she will arise multiple times and check the nursery next door, and if needed she will help expecting moms deliver their babies.

These are Friesian sheep, a milking breed from Germany. Black and brown wool colors are not the exception here; they are the rule. Almost all deliver a minimum of two babies, usually more. The record at Everona Dairy is a litter of six.

The lambing process is indeed the first crucial step in the cheese making process because it acts as a catalyst for lactation. One of the best moms here, Pert is her name, has been producing lambs and rich milk since the beginning 10 years ago. "She's produced two or three lambs per year since she was one. She's quite a girl," says Pat proudly.

After a day and a half on mom's colostrum, the babies are separated and are bottle-fed formula. If you are born a female in this barn, you're in luck. You will live a long and productive life producing babies of your own and giving milk that will be immortalized as cheese. If you have the misfortune to be a little boy, however, you will leave this place frozen in a butcher paper package.

Friesians are good milkers, producing about two quarts each twice a day. "One of the nice things about these girls, they have high fat, high protein, and they keep going with the milk production," says Pat Elliott. In fact the milking season runs all the way from early January to early November. By September they've tailed off to one milking per day, but "that's still pretty good production; that's a long time," notes Dr. Pat.

Like dairy cows, the lactating moms are trained to come into the milking parlor. After their udders are sanitized, they are milked by machine, six at a time, as they contentedly

munch corn and soybean meal from a trough. From there, the milk is taken to the "middle" room of the dairy, refrigerated and stored until there is enough to make cheese.

It is at this point that one witnesses the almost obsessive attention to cleanliness here. No one may enter what's known as the "Make Room," without wearing bright blue plastic booties and hair nets. Everything is sanitized before and after use...everything. Licensed and inspected by both state and federal Departments of Agriculture, this dairy, like all others, is routinely



**Cheesemaker, Carolyn Wentz stirs the warming sheep's milk with a giant whisk with one hand while she reaches for a temperature probe with the other. Note the brown Beta-dine solution in which everything is sterilized before and after use.**

Photo by Susie Audibert

visited by an inspector. "She checks the milk; she checks the way the plant looks; she looks around; she takes samples of cheese and tests them. She checks the water."

On this particular day, Pat Elliott's daughter-in-law, Carolyn Wentz is making cheese. Dressed from head to foot in gleaming white, she is gradually warming five gallons of sheep's milk in a large stainless steel vat. Stirring a giant whisk with one hand, she sanitizes a probe thermometer in Beta-dine solution and takes the temperature of the warming milk. When it is exactly 90 degrees, she extracts two packages of culture from a freezer, carefully measures out a portion of each, and dumps it into the warmed milk, just like you would add yeast to make bread or beer.

This is the creative part. And like the formula for Coca-Cola, it's also a tightly held secret. Like if-you-tell-me-what-this-culture-is, then-you'll-have-to-kill-me

secret? "Yes," grins Carolyn mischievously. Anyway, today we are making Piedmont, their award-winning signature cheese. It takes two cultures. "Some get as many as six," asides Carolyn, as she makes entries into a log. "We have different cultures for every cheese that we do."



**Carolyn Wentz carefully measures freeze dried imported culture to be added to the warmed sheep's milk. A closely guarded secret, some cheeses can use up to six different cultures to achieve the desired flavor.**

Photo by Susie Audibert



**After the rennet has been added, the cultured milk separates into curds and whey. Carolyn Wentz says the curds, "want to be cheese." The watery whey is drained and fed back to the sheep.**

Photo by Susie Audibert

and buys it six months from now it's going to taste the same."

Next comes the rennet. Now brace yourself because rennet comes from the, uh lining of a veal calf's stomach. Hey, get over it; that's how we've made cheese for centuries. Carolyn measures a precise amount with a syringe and adds it to the milk. And then a remarkable thing happens. The milk curdles and solidifies into a custard. Using a wire "harp," Carolyn cuts the curds into small cubes, and as she reheats this gleaming white mess, the watery whey starts to separate out.

And so the nursery rhyme really makes no sense. "Little Miss Muffett, sat on a tuffet, eating her curds and whey." Why would she do that when she could have just drunk the milk?

Anyway, the by-product, whey, contains milk

sugar, some vitamins, a little bit of fat, and it is fed to the moms, which is interesting because that makes them the only other mammal in this world besides ourselves that consumes dairy products beyond childhood.

Anyway, back at the creamery, the curds are rapidly turning into cheese. "The protein and the fat and most of the vitamins stay with the cheese," says Pat. "Look, it wants to become cheese," says Carolyn, holding out a rubber-gloved handful of curds. At this point it tastes bland like a mild mozzarella. Carolyn then packs the curds into round yellow plastic molds with drain holes and squeezes out more whey. And so what started out as five gallons of milk has now been transformed into two wheels of cheese, each weighing about five to six pounds. The entire process has taken a little less than two and a half hours!

The developing cheese will then spend the night in the mold. The following morning it will be turned out, and a batch number imprinted into the developing rind so they can keep track of it. The wheel will sit at room temperature for 24 hours and then be immersed in brine for two days. Finally, in the cave, it sits on a wooden rack at 50 degrees in the dark for 60 days, occasionally being turned and washed with more brine to develop the rind.

It is also tasted at intervals. Using a tool that looks like an old fashioned marrow scoop, they

will take samples from the center

**The drained curds are then packed into molds and left over night to further drain off whey. The following morning the brand new wheels of cheese are turned out for 24 hours, brined for two days, and then aged 60 days in the cave.**

Photo by Susie Audibert



and plug the hole. As the cheese ages, the flavors become more complex, until one fine day four to six months from now, it will be sold and served to an appreciative consumer, be it a gourmet restaurant or the neighbor down the lane.

Dr. Pat inhales deeply as she closes the cave door.

"The aroma is just wonderful," she says dreamily. To her it does not matter one whit whether her cheese is being sampled by a movie star in Aspen or by a weekend drop in customer to her tiny tasting room on Clark's Mountain Road.



**Julie the guard dog looks lovingly to Dr. Pat Elliott in the nursery barn. Dr. Pat will sleep here for the "next several months," until lambing is successfully completed.**

Photo by Susie Audibert