

New Cornerstone Project Created To Define 'American Original' Artisan Cheese

Westminster West, VT—A new project has been launched by a handful of eastern US artisan cheese makers in an effort to create a true "American Original" cheese.

The endeavor is spearheaded by seasonal artisan cheese company Parish Hill Creamery here, owned and operated by Peter Dixon and Rachel Fritz Schaal.

The project was first developed in response to the American Cheese Society's (ACS) Judging Committee's call for American Original cheeses.

It was some cheese makers hanging around after the Rhode Island conference and competition, getting a little frustrated and wondering what "American Originals" really means, Fritz Schaal said.

What does it mean to be an "American Original," as small-scale producers trying to capture the essence of their geography, their herd and their particular style of cheesemaking, she said, when "so many of us are trying to copy traditional European cheeses."

My husband's take on this issue was that there's nothing really new under the sun, and that if we're really going to be unique, we're going to have to be "artisan and small scale," Fritz Schaal said.

"Once you get to a certain scale, it's necessary to become more efficient," she said. "That requires a certain amount of streamlining and dare I say commodification of cheesemaking."

When you make cheese up to 20,000 pounds a year, or even up to 50,000 pounds a year – when you double that, it changes what you can do and how you can do it, she continued.

The premise of the project is to encourage cheese makers to make

a cheese that is essentially an expression of their particular land, animals, aging environment and technique – an approach to cheesemaking that demonstrates the elemental nature of the raw milk.

By limiting the input variables, we allow the raw milk to determine the nuances of texture and flavor unique to each Cornerstone cheese, Fritz Schaal said.

Its a way to encourage other American cheese makers to make sure the milk they're using is the best possible milk, she said.

"It isn't just fluid milk that's repurposed to make dairy products," Fritz Schaal said. "They're making sure that the milk they're either making or acquiring is the best milk for cheesemaking."

Other members of the Cornerstone Project include Cato Corner Farm and Creamery in Colchester, CT; and Birchrun Hills Farm in Chester Springs, PA. The Mystic Cheese Company of Mystic, CT, was a founding member, but had to put the project temporarily aside due to a current plant expansion.

To make Cornerstone – a lightly cooked, lightly pressed cheese – producers must follow a certain, simple recipe:

- Cornerstone must be made with raw milk, and the key is that cheese makers need to make their own cultures.

At Parish Hill, we don't buy commercial cultures. When my husband started making cheese back in 1983, direct vat cultures weren't available in little foil packets, so he had to use bulk cultures sent to the creamery in dry ice, Fritz Schaal said. Because they were meant for giant vats, he ended up using only a portion and throwing away most of it.

He found out about Flora Danica cultures, and that was how he started making cheese, she said.

"He didn't want to be trying to mimic cheeses that are already made," she said. "We were actually able to make our own rennet, using the same types of preparation they use in the Alps and other places where they have less commercial products."

- All Cornerstone cheeses are made in the same form and they all look alike.

- There's no rind treatment. There's obviously flipping, patting and inspecting, but no washing, beer or herbs.

"When we reduce these variables, what we're left with is something that can sit next to each other and people tasting it will be able to discern differences. It's just about the milk, the cultures made from that milk, and the hands of the cheese makers," Fritz Schaal said.

- No one company can make more than 5,000 pounds of cheese annually.

Hopefully, as more cheese makers get on board, no one gluts the market, Fritz Schaal said. It remains something that's small-scale and unique.

Also, if a cheese company wants to be part of the project, the name "Cornerstone" must be printed somewhere on the cheese label,

particularly for future marketing purposes.

Parish Hill Creamery was able to secure a Saturday morning tasting session at the 2018 ACS Conference, to be held July 25-28 at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center in Pittsburgh, PA.

Moderated by Mystic Creamery, the session will feature Cornerstone cheeses from all three participating companies.

"Hopefully from there, we'll be able to open it up to more cheese makers," Fritz Schaal said.

We wanted to wait until the two other producers were ready, felt confident and actually had cheese out in the marketplace, Fritz Schaal said.

Ultimately, it's my hope that we'll be able to get other cheese makers around the country to become part of the initiative, she said. We're still not quite sure how that's going to work. Some people have suggested that we try to form an AOP or something like that. We also need to find a lawyer to help us set up.

"Ideally, I'd like to see in five years having a meeting someplace where there might be a dozen cheese companies making Cornerstone and being able to taste each one," she said. "What a cool way to talk and learn about terror."

For more information, visit www.parishhillcreamery.com



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