
SNAPSHOT SERIES: TRANSITIONING TO VALUE ADDED ENTERPRISES

WHITE COW DAIRY – EAST OTTO, NY

A Variety of Small-Batch, Traditionally-Produced Fresh Dairy Products



Author: Eugene Kim Project Manager: Matthew Kurlanski ©2010 Wallace Center at Winrock International. All rights reserved.

The Wallace Center supports entrepreneurs and communities as they build a new, 21st century food system that is healthier for people, the environment, and the economy. The Center builds and strengthens links in the emerging chain of businesses and civic efforts focused on making good food – healthy, green, fair, affordable food – an everyday reality in every community. Winrock International is a nonprofit organization that works with people in the United States and around the world to increase economic opportunity, sustain natural resources, and protect the environment, implementing projects in more than 65 countries across the globe.



The Snapshot Series examines how traditionally direct marketing farmers are using value added enterprises to supplement and expand their agri-businesses, reaching new markets and consumers through the development of new products. This effort was funded in partnership with the Risk Management Agency as part of a multi-year initiative to develop and distribute risk mitigation resources for the direct marketing community.

More information on the series can be found online at www.wallacecenter.org.

AT A GLANCE: WHITE COW DAIRY

White Cow Dairy produces a complete line of small-batch fresh dairy products, including: plain and flavored yogurts (everything from maple to blueberry, mint to rhubarb); yogurt drinks in half a dozen flavors; custards and puddings; sauces; and caramels, among others. Given their unique combination of antique recipes and a small-batch dairy processing system capable of mechanically imitating traditional European and American production methods, the dairy worked with extension services, agriculture specialists and nonprofits to help meet state agricultural standards. White Cow Dairy products are now sold at a number of locations within a 50-mile radius, as well as Murray's Cheese in New York City.

BACKGROUND

White Cow Dairy is housed at Blue Hill Farm, a fourth generation family farm in East Otto, NY, where small family farms and rolling hills abound. Patrick Lango runs Blue Hill Farm, and is the driving force behind White Cow Dairy. He notes that they are the only on-farm, fresh dairy (non-cheese) operation in the western region of New York state—the third largest milk producing state in the country after California and Wisconsin. Blue Hill Farm encompasses 250 acres of grassy hilltops, sustaining 60 cows with intensive rotational grazing practices during the growing seasons, while providing long-stem, dry-cured hay for winter months. This homegrown herd has been raised entirely hormone-free, using homeopathic 19th century farming practices: no chemical fertilizers or herbicides, with antibiotics used only when the life of an animal is severely threatened.

VALUE-ADDING TO DAIRY

Faced with the slow downward economic spiral for small family farms during the 1980's and 1990's and Patrick decide that, rather than expanding cow numbers into high-volume milk production like some dairymen, or selling out completely and not farming, he would explore the model of the 19th century local village creamery, "where the milk stays home, and everything becomes food." With plenty of experience working in restaurants, Patrick built an on-farm test kitchen designed to produce small-batch traditional fresh dairy products, using antique recipes, tools and practices from both Europe and the United States.

Between 2000 and 2007, Patrick "attempted every kind of fresh dairy food you can possibly think of" trying to seek out what people had forgotten about dairy or simply couldn't find anymore. These foods were based on "antique flavors, traditional recipes, and memories of foods lost or transformed due to the industrial age." While researching which products to develop and market, Patrick explains:

"The idea was to do something uncommon, to reflect upon a time when small family dairy farms still made economic sense in the world, and then, to reproduce the equation of making simple foods from fresh milk, in an updated way."

Patrick developed the process and equipment for a complete line of fresh dairy products: butter, buttermilk, creme fraiche, quark, ricotta, mascarpone, cream cheese, yogurts, sauces, yogurt drinks, yogurt creams, custards, puddings, dairy deserts, caramels and cheesecakes. Patrick steered clear of artisanal cheeses, however, because, “as labor intensive low-yield food, cheese ultimately fails to provide the highest per ounce value from total volume among dairy products.” And farmstead cheeses are more common than the traditional fresh dairy foods he produces.

Patrick arranged with Alice Arlow, owner of the locally famous General Store, in East Concord, NY, to provide samples in her store. Alice’s customers, some of whom drive an hour and a half one way to shop her selection of “whole foods, real foods, and rare foods in a rural setting,” signed up to taste-test these fresh dairy items, with the understanding that their participation and involvement in surveying foods, which were not yet licensed for sale, might enable the project to some day become available to the public.

THE FIRST YEAR

Patrick learned from a local agricultural agent of the Cornell Cooperative Extension Services that the famed cheese shop, Murray’s Cheese in New York City was avidly searching for European-style fresh dairy foods. Patrick shipped a box of samples on ice to Manhattan, where Murray’s proprietor Rob Kaufelt responded:

“A day doesn’t go by that people don’t bring foods into Murray’s and try to get us to sell them. So far, nothing has ever walked in the door like the box that arrived from your farm, this morning. Who are you, where are you, and where in the world did you learn to make foods like these?”

Armed with enthusiasm from Murray’s, and a promise to sell the products as soon as they were licensed and ready, Patrick set about expanding the on-farm test kitchen into a modern micro-creamery, capable of producing any of the foods in the traditional repertoire, while at the same meeting the standards of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets dairy plant regulations.

Dr. Donald L. Downing, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Food Science and Technology at Cornell University’s New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, New York, took each of the antique fresh dairy recipes Patrick submitted to him, and developed formulas and procedures for good manufacturing practices, to be filed in Albany with the New York Department of Agriculture. Based on Dr. Downing’s process work with the fresh dairy recipes, Cheryl Leach of the Northeast Center for Food Entrepreneurship at the New York State Food Venture Center, an extension of the agricultural lab in Geneva, provided grants to allay all of the costs for the complicated formal procedures and filing of the fresh dairy scheduled processes.

The design of the equipment and facilities for White Cow Dairy was conceived during family trips Patrick took to visit relatives in Italy. On these trips, Patrick sought out traditional Italian food and equipment makers, in particular, Roberto Rubino, publisher of Caseus Magazine, and Director of the L’Istituto Sperimentale per la Zootecnia, in Bella Scalo, Basilicata. Roberto leads a world academic food movement that seeks to use agricultural science to support what people have intuitively known for centuries—that traditional foods made from animals close to nature provide not only the satisfaction of regional and cultural diversity in flavors, but that these foods are healthier than their industrial counterparts. Patrick says that it is from Roberto’s Bella Scalo lab that the world has learned much of what it knows about conjugated linoleic acid, which he says has been described as the most potent natural cancer fighting agent, found only in the food products of ruminant animals living on a predominant diet of natural vegetation (for example, grass-fed cows).

“The idea was to do something uncommon, to reflect upon a time when small family dairy farms still made economic sense in the world.” – Patrick Lango

After an invitation from Slow Food to attend the inaugural 2004 Terra Madre, a meeting of the world's food communities, including farmers, bread makers, sausage makers, antique food collectors and others from 132 nations, Patrick traveled to Salerno, Italy to meet with Comat, the company that built all of the specialized food equipment in Roberto's Bella Scalo food lab. The idea was to design and build a small batch dairy processing system capable of mechanically imitating traditional methods while producing a wide variety of fresh specialty dairy foods.

Before any construction of White Cow Dairy facilities and equipment began, Bill Fredericks, Dairy Products Specialist for the New York Department of Agriculture, was provided site plans of the plant and of the proposed equipment. Due to the unusual customization of the actual food process and small-scale batch size, it took a fair amount of time before the plant was licensed. Some of this delay was due to the translation of European standards to New York State regulations, as well as the traditional nature of the actual food process and its essential differences from industrial production.

A formal partnership for White Cow Dairy foods was launched between Patrick and two others instrumental for the instigation of its basic ideas. Patrick describes the partnership:

“These are people who essentially shoved me head-first, financially and motivationally, into the project at a point when I, my sister Marion and her husband Bill Anderson, all partners in Blue Hill Farm, were seriously considering stopping dairy farming completely, because the reality is, small family dairies are doomed to the endgame of all work and no pay.”

White Cow Dairy was christened as an experimental food initiative designed to help make Blue Hill Farm sustainable in a modern economy. As of 2009, “the project has yet to achieve a threshold of success, but continues to be a sound, workable idea.” However, only a fraction of the milk produced from Blue Hill Farm's grass-fed herd is used each week for White Cow Dairy foods. The rest is sold to the Steamburg Milk Cooperative, as “Grade A wholesale fluid product.” Patrick notes that “there is no organic, grass-fed fluid wholesale market in the region.”

MARKETING AND GROWTH

From his products' all natural ingredients to the glass jars they come in, Patrick enthusiastically endorses taking a simple approach—including in sales and marketing. His philosophy is, “think small, stay small and maintain control of every aspect: the soil, the feed, the cattle, the milk and the food.” At the farmer's market, Patrick says he rarely uses signs or samples because “loyal customers tend to sell the products,” by urging the food onto uninitiated or undecided customers. White Cow Dairy's table is piled high with products such as plain and flavored yogurts (everything from maple to blueberry, mint to rhubarb); yogurt drinks in half a dozen flavors; vanilla custard; chocolate pudding; lemon yogurt creams; chili mustard sauce; habanero yogurt sauce; vanilla cream; maple caramels; and mascarpone. Additionally, in using glass jars, which follows Patrick's belief in the “antique creamery example,” he feels it's important to have foods visible to the public and to encourage such visibility through the use of simple, transparent labeling. He also believes that glass containers best capture and control peak freshness and flavor in dairy foods.

White Cow Dairy focuses on local distribution (that is, feeding the community within a 50 mile radius). Asked numerous times to ship his product out-of-state, Patrick explains, “it doesn't make much sense, not if you can easily feed plenty of people nearby.” White Cow Dairy foods are available at Alice Arlow's General Store, the Elmwood-Bidwell farmer's market in Buffalo (about 45 miles away), and at the Lexington Food Coop, on Elmwood Avenue in Buffalo. The only exception to the tenet of keeping distribution local is in supplying Murray's

White Cow Dairy's products are as much about food memory and tapping into people's nutritional taste-buds, as about keeping family farms going by reconnecting the food chain: local farms, local families, local foods.

Cheese, a client with whom White Cow Dairy has had a unique relationship from the very beginning. Patrick says that Murray's was the first location to sell any of White Cow Dairy's foods, and that it will continue to be the only downstate New York City location to offer them.

While White Cow Dairy's reputation has been growing steadily, Patrick admits that "this isn't necessarily food for everyone." As European-style products, White Cow Dairy has flavors most Americans may not be accustomed to. For Patrick, these value-added products are "as much about food memory and tapping into people's nutritional taste-buds, as it is about keeping family farms going by reconnecting the food chain: local farms, local families, local foods."

CUSTOMERS

The majority of sales come from the May-December Elmwood Bidwell Farmers Market which generally sees about 3,000 customers during one of its Saturday sessions. Due to the seasonal nature of farmers markets, and the year-round reality of dairy foods and dairy farming, White Cow Dairy and a number of other farmers and food makers from the Elmwood Bidwell market sought shelter last winter in the Loaves and Fishes dining room of the Lafayette Presbyterian Church in Buffalo. The Wintermarket, as it is now called, instantly energized a contiguous flow of the direct food supply between farmers and consumers which is annually severed after the seasonal markets shut down for winter.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE AND MEASURING SUCCESS

At the end of 2008, White Cow Dairy foods began to be offered in a Wegman's grocery store in Hamburg, NY, 35 miles from Blue Hill Farm. The decision to allow Wegman's to carry his product grew out of Patrick's respect for the store's dedication to providing fresh, local foods to the community and admiration for the store's reputation as being one of the best companies to work for in America. At Wegman's, White Cow Dairy has its own free-standing glass door cooler with a series of food-art fridge magnets on the sides, displaying information on the benefits of grass-fed fresh dairy foods, with a digital picture frame playing footage of the Blue Hill herd, grazing the hilltops of East Otto, NY.

And in terms of success, White Cow Dairy was recently honored for its innovation and leadership as one of six winners of the 2010 Innovate Buffalo Niagara award for businesses that are "terrific examples of how to harness the power of innovation to benefit themselves and their communities."

LESSONS LEARNED

- Create a niche market for your product by developing uncommon value-added foods.
- Collaborate with local resources, such as university extension programs, food labs, businesses, and business incubation centers to develop and license products and facilities.
- Look for inspiration from the past and from abroad for product ideas and process/production ideas.
- Take a simple approach in sales and marketing: stay small and maintain control over every aspect of your product: from production to sales.
- Look for ways to join other farmers and food producers to sell products year-round and to sell products creatively.

RESOURCES

The Small Dairy Resource Book

Vicki H. Dunaway, Project Coordinator

The Hometown Creamery Revival

A project of the Southern Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program of the USDA, January 2000.

Small Scale Food Entrepreneurship: A Technical Guide for Food Ventures

Northeast Center for Food Entrepreneurship, July 2003.

L'Istituto Sperimentale Per La Zootecnia

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Caseus International

A magazine of cheese art and culture, published by the Associazione Nazionale Formaggi Sotto il Cielo ("The National Association of Cheeses Under Open-Air Conditions") or ANFOOSC caseusinternational@anfosc.com

The Complete Dairy Foods Cookbook: How to Make Everything From Cheese to Custard in Your Own Kitchen

E. Annie Proulx and Lew Nichols, Rodale Press, 1982

Slow Food USA

20 Jay Street

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slowfoodusa.org

Alice Arlow

The General Store

11974 Allen Road Rt 240

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Murray's Cheese

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