



Tapping Into the Artisan Cheese Opportunity

Dairy research centers provide short courses and hands-on training, spurring new companies and new products for cheesemakers.

By Bill Graves

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The opportunity is as ripe as the rich aroma from a block of handcrafted artisan cheese. With their oftentimes unusual names, smooth textures and unique flavors, artisan cheese has grown in popularity. Varieties from feta to Gouda to Asiago have become a must on any savvy host's appetizer platter.

Today, across the United States, almost 1 billion pounds of specialty cheese is produced annually. Cheesemakers everywhere are tapping into this growing market and consumers' love affair with these unique cheeses. Many, new to the cheesemaking process, are learning the ropes of specialty cheesemaking at the university-affiliated National Dairy Foods Research Centers located around the country.

The National Dairy Foods Research Center program is a dairy checkoff-funded initiative supported by the Dairy Research Institute, Rosemont, Ill., established by America's dairy farmers who have a commitment to product, nutrition and sustainability research. The program provides the dairy industry with product and ingredient research and technical resources to help increase sales and demand for dairy. There are five research centers across the country that annually offer 13 artisan/specialty/farmstead cheese courses with more than 350 attendees. The centers are located in California (Cal Poly State University and University of California-Davis), the Midwest (University of Minnesota-St. Paul, South Dakota State University-Brookings and Iowa State University-Ames, Utah State University and University of Wisconsin-Madison) and the Southeast (North Carolina State University and Mississippi State University).

Research center short courses, training spur growth

The dairy centers' significant efforts to promote the making of artisan cheese through short courses and training are making an impact on the bottom line. In Wisconsin alone, specialty cheese production has more than doubled in the last decade to more than 500 million pounds. Dairy center technical training and short courses have helped artisan/specialty cheese companies develop domestically produced, high-quality specialty cheeses for this growing market.

Consumer interest and demand for new and complex flavors also has helped artisan cheesemaking grow exponentially, according to Dave McCoy, vice president of product research for the Dairy Research Institute. "The Dairy Research Institute is in step with growing consumer interest and the potential this means to cheesemakers," he says. "We are committed to providing the valuable resources and ongoing training needed to be competitive."

From 2005 to 2010, specialty cheese growth in Wisconsin jumped 26%, based on Chicago-based

SymphonyIRI data, equivalent to a 35% increase in dollar sales. Specialty cheese represents 21% of Wisconsin's yearly total 2.61 billion-pound overall cheese production. The Master Cheese Maker Program at the Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research (WCDR) at University of Wisconsin-Madison, has been a major driver of specialty cheese growth. Seventy-three percent of winners at the U.S. National Cheese Champion contest at WCDR and almost 45% of the winners at the World Cheese Champion Cheese contest attended short course training.

On the other side of the country, the Dairy Products Technology Center at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, Calif., offers a basic cheesemaking short course to artisan and farmstead cheesemakers. The center's annual artisan/farmstead cheese course includes hands-on cheesemaking, where attendees make five varieties of cheese in the center's pilot plant cheesemaking facility.

Interest has definitely spiraled upward, according to Phillip Tong, director of the dairy research center at Cal Poly and a contributing columnist for Dairy Foods. "It is great to see so many of the dairy processors from this course now making and selling high-quality cheeses throughout the country," he says. "Of the 60-plus cheesemakers that showcased their cheeses at the American Cheese Society Meeting in Seattle last year, nearly half of them had taken our course at Cal Poly."

Artisan cheese food safety training

In addition, the dairy centers will be offering artisan cheese-focused food safety short courses and training. The Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy's Food Safety Operating Committee is partnering with the dairy centers to develop a dairy food safety training program for small dairy processors, including specialty artisanal/farmstead operations, on the processes needed to ensure the highest dairy food safety in their unique operations.

With more consumers interested in the unique and broad range of flavors offered in the artisan cheese market, the dairy centers will continue to provide cutting edge technical insight and knowledge to help increase artisan/specialty cheese growth for the industry.

To learn more about these short courses, visit www.usdairy.com/DairyResearchInstitute/Pages/UpcomingEvents.aspx.

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