

# HOPE'S DREAMS CHEESEMAKING

on Maryland's Eastern Shore

**BY LORRIE BAUMANN**

Jarred and Trisha Boyce fell in love and got married six years ago with the idea that they'd be dairy farmers together. There was just one problem – and it had a dollar sign in front of it.

Neither they nor anyone they knew could figure out how to make a living by raising cows and selling the milk. It wasn't that they didn't know what they were doing in a dairy – Trisha is a third-generation dairy farmer who's lived on a farm and worked with cows her whole life; Jarred's been working with cows ever since he was 15 years old. "We'd been milking cows our whole lives," Jarred said.

The problem was – and is – the American dairy market. Americans just aren't buying milk the way they used to – dairy consumption has been falling steadily for decades, and there's no sign of a turnaround any time soon. "There's really no future in the dairy industry – it's kind of bleak," Trisha said.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the average American consumed about 28.7 gallons of milk in 1975. By 2018, the average American consumed just under 17 gallons of fluid milk. That declining demand combined with dairy farmers' increasing efficiency has created a glut of milk on the American market, and the law of supply and demand has taken over – many dairy farmers today are selling their milk for less than it costs them to care for the cows that make it, which means that they're losing money every time the milk truck from the co-op

stops at their farm. "Farmers used to be able to make a living selling to a co-op and getting a fair price," Jarred said. "These past few years have just wiped dairy farmers out."

Farmers with small herds, like the Boyces, who are trying to remain dairy farmers and keep their herds small enough that their

family can manage the farm work with minimal outside help have found only one way to avoid the crushing economics of this situation – if Americans won't buy their milk in a form that can be poured over cold cereal or into a glass, the farmers will sell it to them in a form that consumers are willing to pay more for. For some dairy farmers, that means making butter or ice cream; the Boyces bought Chapel's Country Creamery in 2017 and are learning how to make cheese.

Making that plan work over the long term means that they have to make good cheese – cheese for which Americans will pay a premium price. To help them do that, the Boyces have enlisted veteran cheesemaker Kelly Harding, who was working at Chapel's Country Creamery when the Boyces bought it, advice from the other cheesemakers and cheese

experts who are members of the American Cheese Society and a little consumer expertise from their son Trace, who, at two years old, is already a bit of a cheese connoisseur – his favorites are the brie and blue cheeses that his parents make. "He's our cheese expert. He knows what's good," Jarred said. "He'll tell you if you





nailed it.”

Jarred manages the pastures and does most of the work in the barn and milking parlor, with a little help from Trace, who has his own little wheelbarrow. Jarred is also the operation’s mechanic, and he’s learning to make cheese as well. Trisha handles most of the business end of the operation, including the sales and marketing, when she’s not needed in the barn. They work 14- to 15-hour days, up at 4 a.m. and done for the day around 7 p.m., when it’s time for dinner, baths and bed.

When they bought the creamery in 2017, the couple launched their business by selling product that the previous owners had made. An existing arrangement with a cheesemaker in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, took care of the production on Chapel’s Cheddar.

After that transition period, the Boyces have settled into making cheese five days a week. “We haven’t really needed to go to evening shifts,”

Jarred said. Recipes for the cheeses have been altered to suit the Boyces’ tastes, and last year’s purchase of a cheddar press has enabled them to bring their cheddar production under their own roof. They’re now making nine cheeses, although recipes are still being tweaked, and they’re planning to settle on five flagship cheeses once they have their recipes dialed in and their customers are able to express clear preferences.

They have dropped the previous owner’s sales strategy that had emphasized local farmers markets and started negotiating and renegotiating sales relationships with the local food distributors who are now the main outlets for their cheese. They seized the



opportunity when the American Cheese Society held its annual meeting for 2019 in Richmond, Virginia, about a three- or four-hour drive from their farm in Easton, Maryland, on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay, to enter their cheese for judging in the society’s annual judging and competition and to go to the meeting and meet some buyers. That rare trip away from the farm produced the creamery’s first West Coast sale of cheese, to Mollie Stone’s markets, as well as valued instruction on technique as well as friendly advice from veteran cheesemakers from around the country.

In addition to its Chapel Cheddar, Chapel’s also makes Woodbine, an American Original that started out as an Alpine-style cheese and developed its own personality. It’s named after the dairy farm belonging to Trisha’s parents that’s been in the family since the early 1900s.

Cutlass is a semi-soft cheese washed in Heavy Seas Cutlass Lager, a craft beer brewed in Baltimore, for at least 30 days. Chesapeake Brie started out as Rainey’s

Dream under the creamery’s former owner, and the Boyces have tweaked the recipe to make it a little bit sweeter than its original Camembert style. Bay Blue is their blue cheese, a Stilton-style variety, and Talbot Reserve is Chapel Cheddar that’s been aged for 12 months. Amber Cheddar is Chapel Cheddar Cheese that’s been beer-washed with Heavy Seas Cutlass Lager.

All of the cheeses are farmstead – made entirely from the milk that comes from the Boyces’ herd of 50 Holstein and Jersey milking cows. “We do this for the cows and to keep the cows in our family. My heart is with my cows,” Trisha said. “It’s very much a work in progress around here.... We have lots of hopes and dreams.”