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The art of making curds



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The art of making curds

What do a fourth-generation farmer and an accomplished Island musician have in common?

Other than being neighbours, the answer is Squeak-ies.

While that may sound like a toy for your child or pet, Squeak-ies are delicious cheese curds made right here on the Island at Fromagerie PEI based in Mont-Carmel.

Since 2016, owners Mathieu Gallant and Albert Arsenault, (founding members of the Acadian band Barchois), have been making curds based on techniques Gallant learned in Quebec.



While their sales are targeted to retail stores, Gallant admits the quality and taste of their product have earned them some passionate local customers.

“If people know we are making cheese that day, they will wait at our door,” he says with a laugh.

These days, they have fans across the Maritimes. The addition of new cutting and packaging equipment and additional storage in the plant has allowed them to supply stores throughout the region. The expansion was supported by the Product and Market Development Program under the federal and provincial funded Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

“We are now able to make two batches of cheese in a day, with a batch being between 100 and 200 kilograms, depending on the order,” says Gallant. “It allows us to better plan our week.”

Gallant grew up on a dairy farm just down the road from the building that serves as both the plant and his family home.

“It’s a short commute to work,” he says. “I go downstairs, I close one door, I open another one and I get in my work boots, hairnet and we start making cheese.”

The view from his kitchen window encompasses the stately church that is the community’s signature landmark, with the Northumberland Strait on the horizon. It’s a view he never takes for granted.

Even in high school, Mathieu was sure about two things for his future – he wanted to stay in the community, and he wanted a career connected to agriculture.

“It’s a pretty close connection,” he says of his curd-making career. “My father is one of the three farmers in the area supplying us with milk.”

Gallant says his love of cheese curds was fostered during his university years in Quebec, where he earned a degree in farm business management. He says it was love at first bite.

When he did some research and found there was nobody in the Maritimes making curds on a commercial scale, the dream of the Squeak-ies began to take shape.

"Curds make a squeaking sound when you are biting them," says Gallant. "That's how I chose the name."

Mathieu and his cousin got together and built his first cheese vat to have something to play with, he soon realized that there was potential in this new venture. He began taking courses in cheese-making in 2007.

Two years later, he won a scholarship to study cheese-making in France.

Gallant knew making cheese was more than a one-person job. When he returned home, he reached to his neighbour and long-time friend, Albert Arsenault.

Arsenault was a musician at heart, playing with the duo Chuck and Albert as well as Barachois. But he was open to learning about making cheese.

"I was happy to pass on my technique to Albert," says Gallant. "It allowed me to spend more time growing the business."

Unlike most cheese on the store shelf, there is no aging process for curds. The milk is delivered in the morning and the product is ready for shipment - or sampling, which Mathieu readily admits happens - by the end of the day. The duo usually makes curds a couple of times a week.

Freshness is a priority. "Since there is no aging, curds have a more limited shelf life, although they do contain salt which acts as a preservative."

The milk is first tested for antibiotics and then pumped in a stainless steel vat where it will be pasteurized and cooled. A culture is added to the milk to help separate the curds from the whey. The whey is drained off and the curds are cut and packaged.

"The final product resembles a French fry," says Gallant.

Gallant is hoping to continue to grow his Maritime market but admits it can be challenging.

"The market can be volatile," he says. "Some people buy our product every week and others will buy once a month or for special occasions, so our orders vary."

He adds that he is content to keep his market in the Maritimes, noting that the curd makers in central Canada are already well-established.

"I always feel confident at the end of a production day as I know we have given our best effort to provide our neighbours with a quality and wholesome product".



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