

## Support Your Local Cows

### Cheesemaking Boosts Dwindling Dairies

Sue Shields is up to her elbows in curds and whey. Rhythmically reaching deep into the yellow liquid, she's stirring up curds that have settled in a large stainless steel vat.

"I'm trying to make it heat evenly," she said, rustling up the curds with her bare hands.

These precious curds - once cooked, drained, shredded, salted, packed and pressed by hand - will become dill-garlic medium cheddar, one of Golden Glen Creamery's most popular varieties.

"That's sun-dried tomato basil," Shields said, still stirring, nodding at a cart heavy with wheels of cheddar.

Perfectly round, studded with green and red flecks of flavor, each colorful turn smells wonderful.

It's enough to transport you to a grassy field with a loaf of French bread, a bottle of wine and, of course, rich, creamy cheese with local character.

Such is the art, science and old-school magic of handmade, all-natural cheese at Golden Glen.

Vic and Judy Jensen and their extended family milk their herd of 63 Guernsey and Holstein cows twice daily in the heart of Skagit County.

They do it not just for cheese, but also for cream, half-and-half, butter and pasteurized, nonhomogenized milk, bottled on site. They do it without preservatives, colorings and added hormones.

The Jensens and family friends such as Shields are farmstead cheesemakers, which means they produce market-ready dairy products from animals on their farm.

The Jensens' cheesemaking, however, isn't a romantic hobby. It is a matter of survival.

"It's our attempt to salvage the farm," said Shields, who volunteers at the farm, one of many dairies trying to succeed in tough times.

When people at grocery stores are faced with the dauntingly large cheese selections, Shields hopes they'll focus on local cheeses such as Golden Glen, now producing Gouda, fresh mozzarella, curds and 11 types of medium cheddar with herbs and spices.

The Jensens have made cheese for almost three years in what has become a decidedly fast-growing industry: There are 28 licensed cheesemakers in Washington, up from nine before 2000.

That includes 22 farmstead cheesemakers such as Golden Glen, part of a strong dairy region near Bow, also home to Samish Bay Cheese, which makes cheese from organic cow's milk, and Gothberg Farms, which makes goat cheese.

In Snohomish, dairy farmer Jason Bartelheimer plans to start making his own farmstead cheese this year.

Bartelheimer hopes cheesemaking will help keep his family's historic farm, Bartelheimer Brothers, in the black in the years to come.

"It's going to be tough to transition the farm into the next generation if we don't find ways to increase productivity and income," said Bartelheimer, 35, whose family owns about 600 acres and more than 700 milking cows.

He's been taking cheesemaking classes and buying equipment on eBay with plans to make blue cheeses and aged cheddars under the name Snohomish Creamery.

"I'd like to have three main varieties, maybe something special rotating," he said. "I'm pretty excited about it."

The farm will still sell more than 7,000 gallons of milk a day to Darigold, a Washington-based farmer-owned cooperative. But Bartelheimer plans to use about 200 gallons for small batches of gourmet cheese. He's imagining an operation similar to Beecher's Handmade Cheese of Seattle.

Beecher's is, of course, the state's biggest local-cheese success story in recent years.

Owner and founder Kurt Dammeier, a Seattle entrepreneur, hired a cheesemaker who started crafting cheese in 2003. Since then, the Beecher's enterprise has blossomed and now produces a variety of bold, creamy cheeses made primarily at Pike Place Market and sold in five states.

"Seattle is one of the biggest cheese towns in the nation, so it was really a hole," Dammeier said. "There wasn't any local cheese."

His business started off with a sharp cheddar-Gruyere-style cheese called Flagship, aged for a minimum of 1 year and first sold in November 2004.

“We really lucked out,” Dammeier said. “It’s been an award-winning cheese.”

Beecher’s products are made with milk from Green Acres Dairy in Duvall, where Beecher’s now owns about half the milking cows, a mix of Holsteins and Jerseys.

Though Beecher’s isn’t a farmstead cheesemaker now, it may become one.

Dammeier has been touring Snohomish County in search of a 200- to 500-acre farm where he can take his all-natural, no-additives food philosophy to the next level.

“We’d like to have a farm home, but not just for cows. I’m also interested in other products, vegetables, pigs, chickens,” he said, adding, “I could imagine easily a Beecher’s line of milk.”

Dammeier wants a farm-based Beecher’s operation up and running in the next five years, perhaps with an on-farm retail market, featuring local and natural products for families touring the region’s farm country.

“I think that Snohomish County has the opportunity to brand itself, over time,” he said, “in ways that places like Napa Valley and Walla Walla have.”

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### Match up

When indulging in local cheeses, why not pair them with local wines? We asked Ronda Martin, owner of Evergreen Cellars, to match Golden Glen Creamery cheeses with Washington and Oregon wines.

Evergreen Cellars, which specializes in Northwest wines, is at 1101 First St., Snohomish; 360-568-2840.

**Sweet basil, thyme and sage cheddars:** Try Three Rivers Winery’s white meritage, a sauvignon blanc-meritage blend (Walla Walla). To try wines from west of the mountains, look for siegerrebes by San Juan Vineyards (Friday Harbor), and Glacier Peak Winery (Rockport), or Eagle Haven Winery’s Madeline Angevine-siegerrebe blend (Sedro-Woolley).

**Spicy cheddars,** such as cracked pepper or jalapeno: Lemberger, a red grape, features a tangy, fruity character in the leemberger wines by Piety Flats Winery (Wapato), Two Mountain Winery (Zillah) and Kana Winery (Yakima).

**Mozzarella:** Try San Juan Vineyards sangiovese or Elk Cove Vineyards pinot blanc or pinot gris (Gaston, Ore.).

**Gouda pairs well with a variety of wines both red and white:** Riesling from Carpenter Creek Winery (Mount Vernon) or Girardet Wine Cellars (Roseburg, Ore.). Red lovers should try the award-winning Maryhill Winery 2003 Proprietor’s Reserve zinfandel (Goldendale) or James Leigh Cellars’ 2003 Spofford Station merlot (Walla Walla).

### Where to buy

**El Michoacano** of Marysville makes Mexican cheeses for local restaurants and retailers, using fresh Jersey cows’ milk from a local farm. You can find their queso fresco, panela, requeson and crema ranchera (Mexican sour cream) at select small markets and produce stands such as Evergreen Market, 5317 Evergreen Way, Everett, 425-353-5681; and Cost Cutters, 10011 Evergreen Way, Everett, 425-353-4405. **Golden Glen Creamery** 15098 Field Road Bow, 360-766-6455 [www.goldenglencreamery.com](http://www.goldenglencreamery.com)

Products sold at the farm Monday through Saturday and by mail order. Various products are available at grocers such as local Haggen and Top Foods stores, Central Market in Mill Creek, Petosa’s Family Grocery in Edmonds, Food Emporium in Lynnwood, Sno-Isle Natural Food Co-op in Everett, Star Store in Langley and eventually [www.SPUD.com](http://www.SPUD.com), an online grocery delivery service serving parts of Snohomish County.

**Beecher’s Handmade Cheese** of Seattle 1600 Pike Place Seattle, 206-956-1964 [www.beecherscheese.com](http://www.beecherscheese.com). Available at Pike Place Market, by mail order and at many Snohomish County stores, including Haggen and Top Foods, The Resident Cheesemonger in Edmonds and Central Market in Mill Creek.

**Pacific Northwest Cheese Project:** Learn more about other local cheesemakers, including 26 operations from Washington, at [pnwcheese.typepad.com](http://pnwcheese.typepad.com).

### Buzz-worthy blue

If you’re a fan of blue cheese, you might want to try Smokey Blue, an Oregon blue cheese smoked over Northwest-grown hazelnut shells by Rogue Creamery in Central Point, Ore. We did and were blown away.

Rogue first made waves in the cheese world in 1957, when it introduced Oregon Blue, the first blue cheese made on the West Coast. More recently, however, Smokey Blue was named the World’s Best Blue Cheese at the World Cheese Awards in London, a first for a U.S. creamery.

Rogue also makes a Crater Lake Blue Cheese, its most robust blue, and Oregonzola, a Gorgonzola-style cheese. Rogue products are sold in the fine cheese area at many stores, including Central Market in Mill Creek and The Resident Cheesemonger in Edmonds.