

TECUMSEH: A BIG WHEEL IN WORLD-CLASS CHEESE

By Tom Bloomer



Move over, Pinconning. Michigan has a second cheese capital in Tecumseh, the home of the fledgling Four Corners Creamery. In only two years, the creamery's owners, John and Erika Aylward, have made a huge commitment to producing world-class cheeses, to which their growing legion of local and national enthusiasts will attest.

While John—the cheesemeister—clearly enjoys kicking back and talking about cheese, even in relaxed conversation his passion is evident and notably intense. How else to explain how this modest, pristine facility tucked in the back of the Boulevard Market—a gourmet boutique in the middle of town—is turning out some of the most locally lauded products in Southeastern Michigan, especially considering that they started making cheese for sale a scant two years ago?

Take one taste, and the story begins to fall deliciously into place. “In opening the store, we worked hard to source the best cheeses from small, family farms throughout Michigan and the rest of the world,” John recalls. “That meant visiting a lot of creameries and watching how things were done. It piqued our curiosity. We wanted to create something of our own. So we started making cheese because it was interesting and challenging.”

The Aylwards are not the type of folks to shy away from a good challenge. From the start, they resolved to make their cheese with some pretty demanding priorities in mind.

“I wanted to do it all, which is sort of unheard of,” John explains. “I wanted to be the milk hauler, the milk sampler, the dairy production facility. My whole goal was to avoid mixed milk. I want my cheeses to be farm-specific.”

Erika elaborates: “John decided that he didn’t want a milk truck to drive up and drop off a conglomeration of milks from different farms. He wanted it to be from one farm, where he knew how they raised their animals, what their farming practices were.”

The Aylwards have a deep appreciation for the farmers they deal with, no doubt due in part to Erika’s roots. Her family has owned and operated nearby Prochaska Farms for three generations.

“It’s important for us to give credit every way we can to the farmers who actually produce the milk,” John says. “So I

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pay them above commodity prices. These guys work hard. What I do is the easy part.” Noting my look of skepticism, he concedes. “OK, I work pretty hard, too.”

Every week finds him carting eight milk cans out to the farm, filling them to their 100-pound capacity, hauling them back to the creamery and hoisting their contents into his vat pasteurizer. John insists on doing his own low-temp pasteurization at the legal-minimum 145 degrees for 30 minutes—“Just to keep as much integrity in the milk as I can,” he explains.

Then, with occasional assistance from Erika or his part-time helpers, he turns out around 350 pounds of cheeses weekly, including cow’s milk and goat’s milk, fresh and cured, Tomme, cream cheese, Mozzarella and Gouda. The cheeses share one common thread: Each is, quite simply, a revelation.

I have never tasted fresh Chevre like Four Corners Creamery’s. Even with this particular sample’s coat of herbs and peppercorns, I felt like I was eating dessert. Their new local version of Spanish Drunken Goat—a pressed goat cheese soaked in wine from neighboring Pentamere Winery—is amazing.

The Northern Lights, a Boursin-like cow’s-milk offering flavored with fresh garlic and pepper, was their first cheese and is still a neighborhood favorite. It is magnificent. I was wowed with their version of a French Triple Cream. “I add a lot of cream in there,” John says with a smile. You bet he does.

“I get up in the morning [and] go to the farm as they’re getting the morning milk. I pick it up in my cans, bring it here and pasteurize it. So it’s within an hour or two at most from that cow to when I’m turning its milk into the cheese.”

Fresh makes a difference, and so do the farms. Four Corners Creamery sources its milk from Korte Farm in Clinton. The farm was a great find for the Aylwards. The Kortes keep their herd on pasture for as long as Michigan weather permits; they believe in the Four Corners Creamery mission and understand the benefits of working with such a relatively small and feisty endeavor.

The creamery’s goat’s milk comes from nearby H & K New Era near Jackson, and their cream comes from the Dairy Farmers of America coop in Adrian. All farms are fully licensed suppliers, just as Four Cor-

ners is licensed through the Michigan Department of Agriculture. The creamery also offers raw milk cheeses that, by law, must be aged 60 days before sale. Many of their fresh milk cheeses are ready for purchase three to five days after the milk leaves the farm.

Four Corners Creamery products are currently sold on site at Boulevard Market and online at www.boulevardmarket.com, at the Produce Station in Ann Arbor and at farmers’ markets in Saline, Adrian and Tecumseh. Their cheese is served locally at Blissfield’s Hathaway House, where Manager Aimee Weeber says, “Their Chevre is so creamy and mild. We’ve been using it for summer salads and on fresh bruschetta, and getting great reviews.”

The Vinology wine bar in Ann Arbor carries Four Corners products, as does Tecumseh’s Evans Street Station, located right next door to the Boulevard Market. “The cheese John is producing blows us away,” says Station Co-owner/Manager Elizabeth Kennedy.

You can also find Four Corners Creamery on the menu at New York City’s heralded Guastavino’s. The connection there? Chef John Stevenson once worked at Evans Street Station, “and we knew his family—they’re in the grain elevator business here in Michigan,” adds Erika, the proud farmer’s daughter, ever mindful of where she—and the best of this great state’s food supply—comes from. 🍷

*Four Corners Creamery, 102 E. Chicago Blvd., Tecumseh
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