

Finger Lakes Dexter Creamery

Rose Marie Belforti scaled up a home recipe for raw milk kefir cheese to a documented commercial process.

SARE GRANT [FNE06-595](#)

THE FARM

Finger Lakes Dexter Creamery begins its story when two town dwellers with a passion for farming, a lot of patience, a thirst for knowledge and an empty nest find their way back to the country. In 1999 Rose Marie Belforti and her husband purchased a 12 acre farm in Ledyard, NY and acquired a little dun heifer from a distant neighbor. Their one cow grew into a small herd and Rose's small farm dream evolved into a business plan for a small-scale cheese company. When her farmstead cheese



plant became certified in 2006, she started producing the first known commercially available kefir cheese cultured with authentic living kefir grains. This unique cheese is made even more novel by its main ingredient: the rich, creamy milk from her small herd of rare heritage Dexter cattle. To her knowledge, Rose operates the only commercial Dexter creamery in the United States.

THE SARE GRANT

Rose received a SARE grant in July of 2006 to fund the transformation of her home recipe for an aged raw milk kefir cheese to a commercial standard. According to Rose, "Kefir grains have been used for centuries to culture milk by traditional peoples, promoting good health and longevity". Although there are kefir products available on the market, they are not made with kefir grains and therefore lack the beneficial probiotic organisms. She worked with the Cornell University Food Processing and Development Laboratory to create, record and document the kefir cheese recipe as it materialized.



Rose stressed the importance of carefully reviewing a grant's requirements when considering applying. She felt that her project – scaling up a healthy home recipe for a new micro-dairy – was a good match for SARE with its emphasis on innovation and sustainability. She also attributed her success to thorough attention to detail in explaining her project. "As you plan your outline for meeting the requirements of the grant, make lots of notes, make sure you answer questions very specifically, and write very clear and concise sentences" says Rose.



BEYOND THE GRANT

In summer of 2007, Rose and Cornell Food Processing had completed the brand new raw milk kefir cheese which is aged at least 60 days and contains full cream. Her next goal is to grow her small Dexter herd to a maximum of six milking cows. Rose and her husband continue to rely on ingenuity to source the equipment they need as appropriate technology for micro-dairies is not widely available in the United

States. Currently they employ a refrigerator/freezer as a bulk tank and use a couple old jacketed steam kettles to warm the milk and start the kefir culture. The cheese is aged in several refrigerators, but plans are already underway to expand to a bigger space.

STARRING DEXTER CATTLE

Rose has an enthusiastic appreciation for the Dexter Cattle that have come to be the foundation of both her business and way of life. She describes the thick, creamy, butterfat rich milk they produce as “exquisite” and although Dexters are naturally small in size, praises their “work power”. Her cattle mother their calves as long as possible and have plenty of access to pasture. She believes providing the best care for her cows equates to the best quality milk and well-being of everyone involved. She stresses her humane approach as “very important in a world where dairying seems to forget the value of the very one that gives us the treasure she has”.

REVIVING THE ART

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Finger Lakes Dexter Creamery is its perseverance in a business that virtually no one remembers – the small farmstead dairy made up of breeds modern agriculture left behind. With only a few websites and a handful of published resources, Rose was grateful to the few Dexter “experts” she made acquaintance with. Beryl Rutherford, a life-long Dexter breeder in England now in her eighties, provided sanity-saving advice in every facet of training, treating, hand-milking and dairying from across the seas. “She was always getting me out of troubles – I owe her a lot!” says Rose.



Despite the steep learning curve, Rose and her husband are as determined as ever to continue developing the niche dairy they dreamed of. She insists that they have found success working with even the most stubborn of cows; “Don’t let anyone ever tell you a Dexter cannot be milked!” It is her hope that Finger Lakes Dexter Creamery serves as an inspiring example to other artisanal cheese start-up operations looking to incorporate heritage breeds. And if her energetic spirit and reverence for Dexters hasn’t caught your interest yet, taste the cheese – it is most certainly contagious.

To see a step by step documentation of the creation of Rose's Kefir cheese, visit the SARE final report at: http://www.sare.org/reporting/report_viewer.asp?pn=FNE06-595&ry=2006&rf=1

To learn more about Finger Lakes Dexter Creamery, visit their website: www.kefircheese.com