

NEW FARMERS

Finger Lakes Dexter Creamery

A SARE Farmer Grant helped beginning farmer Rose Marie Belforti launch a unique cheese-making venture

By Chanda Lindsay

Rose Marie Belforti and her husband, Tim Wallbridge, dreamed about having a small farm in the country. In 1999, this dream became a reality when they purchased a farm house and 12 acres in Ledyard, NY. Their original thoughts were to have a large garden and possibly a few animals. Never did they think that they would soon be undertaking a cheese making venture!

After building a barn and laying out a pasture, they purchased a very small herd of Irish Dexter cattle and started milking them. Today,

resource". Rose discovered kefir when researching alternative foods because of long term food allergies. Prior to the Finger Lakes Dexter Creamery, kefir grains had never been used in commercial cheese production.

Rose and Tim applied for a producer grant from the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program in 2005 and received funding for the project in July of 2006. They worked with Cornell Small Farms Program, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Cayuga County and NY FarmNet to develop their proposal.



Dexters produce rich, creamy milk excellent for cheese, and their small size makes them suitable for limited acreage.

the farm is producing and marketing a unique, semi-soft raw milk cheese cultured with kefir grains. How did they get there? The Cayuga County Local Foods/Local Markets Discussion Group paid a visit to the farm in June to get some insight and ideas.

The family developed a vision of what kind of farm they wanted. They researched various breeds of cattle and finally settled on Dexters. Originally from Ireland, Dexter Cattle were popular on small diversified farms of the 19th and early 20th centuries for their multi-purpose attributes as milk, meat and draft animals. Dexters were appealing to Rose and Tim because they produce rich, creamy milk excellent for cheese, and their small size makes them suitable for limited acreage. Rose believes very strongly in wholesome, healthy milk produced with a minimum of inputs and a low environmental impact.



The new creamery building.

Kefir grains are a type of living, beneficial, microbial bacteria. They have been used for centuries by traditional peoples to culture milk and are renowned for contributing to health and longevity. According to Rose, "Kefir grains propagate naturally when immersed in milk, making them an ideal, sustainable natural

Their plan was to scale up a home recipe to a commercial process for Kefir cheese using authentic living Kefir grains. In cooperation with the Cornell University Food Processing and Development Laboratory, they set out to establish a standard for the new Kefir cheese. The result was an authentic kefir cheese made with raw milk, containing full cream and aged for 60 days or more.

The process of transforming a home cheese recipe into a certified commercial product proved time and energy consuming. It had all begun when Rose started producing too much cheese for her family's consumption and started looking into other possible outlets. She began talking with NY State milk inspectors about the rules and regulations for setting up a cheese making operation.

As Rose and Tim started designing the dairy and researching the cheese-making process, it was clear that they needed help getting started. Upon reading the instructions for the SARE grant, Rose discovered the requirements fit with their desire to produce something that would both promote sustainable farming and provide a model for other farmers.

According to Rose, the most important element to consider when seeking a grant is how closely it matches your objectives. "Each grant has very specific ideas on what kind of projects it wants to fund, and if your project does not fit, it may be a waste of time to apply," she says. Another tip is to make sure that you read all the instructions carefully and provide complete and concise responses.

Developing a business plan was critical to helping Rose and Tim prepare for writing the grant. Defining their goals and projected costs for the proposal helped them to provide realistic and sensible plans that they felt confident living up to.

Setting up a dairy was a challenge for someone who was not raised in the dairy life. Rose and Tim worked extremely closely with the NYS Ag and Market inspectors to adhere to regulations at every step. As Rose says, "It is better to get it right the first time than to have to go back and do it again!" Along the way, there were all kinds of set backs, delays, and failures in cheese production. Because the process is so new and different, there was no template to follow and no recipe to consult.

One relatively unique management practice is that Rose and Tim keep the calves with their moms for as long as they can. That means less milk and less cheese. However, they feel the sacrifice is important, not only for the welfare of the animals, but because they want to promote a new model for harvesting milk. According to Rose, "Cows are the ones who make the milk, and we want to respect them, and give them a quality life for as long as they have been genetically designed to calve and produce milk."

Since Dexter cattle are still rare but in growing demand on small niche farms seeking a versatile animal, the calves are typically sold to people who are starting their own Dexter herds. Rose prefers to sell to people who are committed to keeping the breed in existence.

As far as the future goes, it takes a long time to become a cheese maker. "The more I learn, the less I feel I know", says Rose.



Finger Lakes Dexter Creamery developed their unique kefir cheese with help from a SARE grant.

Skilled cheese production not only demands expertise in the science of culturing, acidification, coagulation and ripening, but also requires dedication to technique. Although Rose is just getting started, she looks forward to many years of hand-crafting kefir cheese, perfecting her recipe and raising quality Dexter cattle.

To see a step by step documentation of the creation of Rose's Kefir cheese, visit the SARE final report at: 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

Chanda Lindsay is an Extension Resource Educator with Cayuga County Cooperative Extension in Auburn, NY. She can be reached at 315-255-1183 or cl43@cornell.edu.



Tim with Dexter baby and mom.

Photos by Rose Marie Belforti

Resource Spotlight NESARE Farmer Grants

For over thirty years, USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program has been a critical resource for agricultural innovators across the nation. The Northeast SARE program, or NESARE, has several grant programs designed for farmers, researchers and educators.

The goal of NESARE's Farmer Grant Program is to develop, refine, and demonstrate new sustainable techniques and to explore innovative ideas developed by farmers across the region. To apply, you must be a farmer in the Northeast SARE region, which includes Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C.

To be eligible for a farmer grant you need not be farming full time, but your operation should have an established crop or animal product that you sell on a regular basis. Nonprofit farms may apply, but the primary activity of the farm must be to produce and sell food under the kinds of economic constraints that affect commercial growers. Many community-supported farms qualify, but farms where the primary mission is educational normally do not.

The deadline for 2008 Farmer Grant applications is past, but it is not too late to begin planning for a 2009 application. A useful guide to developing a Farmer Grant application, with examples and explanations of what makes a strong proposal, is NESARE's 44-page booklet: *How to Write a SARE Farmer Grant Application*. It can be ordered by contacting the NESARE office at 802-656-0471 or nesare@uvm.edu. It is also available online at www.uvm.edu/~nesare/07Farmerguide.pdf.

To learn more about past Farmer projects, you may view the national project database. This database allows you to sort by grant type, region, interest area, and a variety of other criteria. The national database and much more is available at www.uvm.edu/~nesare.