

Blessed are the Cheesemakers

Virginia's cheesemaking nuns keep their Gouda in the red (wax)

BY MARTHA MILLER

PHOTOS BY NORM SHAFER



View Photo Gallery — The cheese-making nuns of Crozet: The sisters of Our Lady of the Angels Monastery in Crozet, Va., have been producing Gouda by the same process for more than 20 years. Sales have doubled since the first year of production as the mild, sweet flavored cheese remains in high demand.

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15

It is 10:05 a.m., and Sister Barbara Smickel is shoulder-deep in curds and whey. She is in the cheese barn at Our Lady of the Angels Monastery in Crozet, Va., located about 14 miles west of Charlottesville and down a winding gravel lane. The monastery is a plain yet well-kept brick building perched atop a

grassy hillside. The red-and-white cheese barn sits just down the hill; rolling pastures of farmland visible from its small windows.

Amid the roar of a high-pressure hose, which is in use by another sister to clean a piece of equipment nearby, Sister Barbara's movements are quiet and self-contained. It is a ritualistic habit born from more than two decades of experience and 619 (and counting) batches of Gouda, a cow's-milk cheese made by cooking cultured milk until the whey separates from the curd. After cooking, the curds are "washed" by draining off some of the whey, then cut, pressed into wheels to expel moisture, and floated in a salty water bath overnight. This process is what defines Gouda, with its characteristic creamy texture and mild, sweet flavor.

Sister Barbara, 75, wears a blue hairnet, a smock printed with sunflowers and knee-high rubber boots. Her feet slosh quietly along the wet concrete floor and alongside a large stainless steel vat holding 725 gallons of curds and whey. She runs her hands through the warm and milky cottage cheeselike mixture. This moment, she tells me, when her sinewy arms search by feel alone for large clumps of curd to break apart, has become her favorite part of making cheese.

"It is very prayerful," she says. "Like a communion with the Lord and what is becoming cheese under my fingers."

In 1991, The Post Food section ran a story on the monastery's first wheels of Monastery Country Cheese. As one of six sisters sent by Mount Saint Mary's Abbey in Massachusetts (the "motherhouse") to open Our Lady of Angels Monastery in 1987, Sister Barbara says cheesemaking was part of their plan for self-support from the outset. It was, in fact, the reason they purchased the property, which had already been set up to make Gouda by the previous owner. However, good intentions rarely guarantee success in the often fickle world of food. When The Post last interviewed Sister Barbara, there was no way to know for sure just how they would fare.

Twenty years later, I stand in a darkened walk-in refrigerator with Sister Barbara and nearly five tons of two-pound Gouda wheels that are coated in a brilliant red wax. From now until the end of August, the sisters will produce and stockpile an additional 650 pounds per week in preparation for the Christmas rush. In 1991, the monastery sold about 10,500 pounds, but Sister Barbara expects they will nearly double that amount this year, close to 19,000 pounds. The nuns still eat it three or four times a week, Sister Barbara says, and she expects they will sell out by early December.

Needless to say, word of the Virginia nuns making Gouda cheese has spread. Retail sales have taken off, and self-support in the name of God and Gouda has followed.

"It sells like crazy," says Eric Gertner, owner of Feast, a local market and cheese shop in Charlottesville. "We go out [to the monastery] and buy 30 or 40 wheels at a time." Gertner and his wife, Kate Collier, have sold the monastery's Gouda since 2009 and go through 150 to 200 wheels per year. Gertner describes the cheese as "a nice, young and buttery Gouda that is very similar to a Dutch Gouda."

As for why the cheese is so popular, Gertner says its mild flavor makes it a versatile cheese that will please any palate. “We suggest adding it to omelets or a quiche,” he says. “We also like to pair it with other local ingredients in our baskets, like Edwards Surryano Ham and Virginia peanuts.”

Feast is the monastery’s only wholesale customer, by choice.

“We do not try to get bigger each year,” Sister Barbara says. “We produce only what we need to support ourselves so that we can remain focused on our life of worship.”

The sisters have taken steps to keep demand manageable by focusing mainly on retail and choosing not to set up an online ordering system. Purchases are completed via mail order or with a neighborly knock on the monastery’s front door. Local families and a handful of corporate clients are among their most frequent customers, but Sister Barbara says they ship to cheese lovers across the United States. The price, \$25 for a two-pound wheel, has remained consistent. The sisters don’t plan on raising it anytime soon.

“It’s just too hard out there for people right now,” Sister Barbara says.

Aside from an increase in the number of cheesemaking sisters, now 12 (up from the original six), an expansion to the cheese barn in 2007 and the purchase of a pre-press vat from Finland to reduce some of the heavy lifting, Sister Barbara says little about the process has changed over the years. “We have the equipment to make cheddar,” she said. “But if it’s not broke, don’t fix it.”

Sister Barbara says she is thankful for the Gouda blessings, including not once producing a bad batch, a perfect record that she says is very rare in the cheese business. She has learned a lot along the way, including how to blend milk from different breeds of cow to yield the most cheese (a mix of Holstein-Friesian, Swedish Red and Brown Swiss from Green Hills Farm in nearby Rockingham County) and how to improve efficiency through technology while preserving a hands-on approach, an aspect of the monastery’s cheesemaking she is most proud of.

With 20 years of experience and well into that time of life when most people retire, Sister Barbara still oversees the production process. But she also is focused on training the next generation of Gouda cooks. “I’m 75 – but a very vigorous 75, thanks be to God,” she says. “We don’t retire in the sense of going off to Florida or sitting around knitting all day.”

She will cook and cut by hand as long as she’s able. In monastic life, she says, there is always something that you can contribute, something that you can bring to the table.

“Some of us will die and go off to Heaven some day, and that’s not a bad prospect at all,” she says. “But as long as people are eating our cheese, we will make it.”

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By The Grace Of Gouda; The Sisters at Our Lady of the Angels Are Devoted to Making Cheese

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Even with God on your side, it's hard to start a business, especially a food business. Just ask the six nuns at Our Lady of the Angels Monastery who are striving to become a self-sustaining community through sales of their Gouda cheese.

The Trappist sisters arrived at the foot of the Blue Ridge mountains on May 1, 1987, determined to build a monastery and launch a cheese business. But it wasn't until five months ago -- after considerable and unexpected delays -- that the first handmade rounds of Monastery Country Cheese were produced.

"I thought we'd get a few lessons and then could do it," says Sister Barbara Smickel, who has become the monastery's chief cheese maker. "We thought we could just wash the walls, check out the equipment, get the milk and then make cheese. If we knew before what was involved, we wouldn't have had the courage" to proceed, she adds.

The lessons, as it turned out, were the easiest part. Several cheese makers, including the Trappists monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, Ky., willingly taught Sister Barbara the tricks of the trade. The monks even let her participate in the making of their Port du Salut-style cheese.

It was the unanticipated, however, that tried even their most patient souls.

First, there were the county officials who ruled that the convent needed a special zoning permit before the cheese making could begin. The nuns had expected quick county approval. After all, they planned to make Gouda in the very same cheese barn used by the farm's previous owner -- and she didn't need a special permit. It took the nuns more than a month to convince Albemarle county officials to give them the go-ahead without a special zoning hearing.

Even more problematic, however, was the secondhand pasteurizer that the nuns purchased. While the previous owner used raw milk from cows she raised on the farm, the nuns did not want to be bothered with cows. Instead, they planned to buy milk from a local dairy, a decision that necessitated pasteurization to guarantee quality.

But the pasteurizer "got to be the bane of our existence," says Sister Barbara, who thought a reconditioned unit would save money. First, the lid never fit tightly enough to pasteurize milk. Then the pasteurizer developed a leak and had to be sent back to the Wisconsin company that sold it. When it was finally returned, the nuns found a piece incorrectly welded at the bottom of the tank. Even worse, the repair job changed the configuration of the pipe connections, necessitating new plumbing to reconnect the pipes correctly. Then another minor leak developed.

"It got to be extremely unpleasant," recalls Sister Barbara with a bit of a shudder. "I would never buy a large and crucial piece of equipment secondhand again," she says.

Finally, on last Nov. 8, the six nuns made their first batch of cheese. "It was a wonderful day; we had a pizza to celebrate," says Sister Barbara.

But they made only six batches before calling the process to a halt. The problem this time: sediment in the water. A filter was purchased to remove the sediment. But then the nuns discovered that iron and manganese still remained suspended in the water.

"Although they [the minerals] weren't health threatening, we didn't want to put them in the cheese," says Sister Barbara. So the convent purchased a special water treatment system to remove the minerals.

On Feb. 19, the nuns were able to start up again. Now, every other Tuesday, they turn 727 gallons of milk into 600 pounds of mellow cheese.

The process begins at 3:20 a.m., just after brief prayer vigils, and ends at 7:30 p.m. In between, the milk is pasteurized and then transformed into curds and whey through the addition of a special Gouda culture and rennet. The curds are cooked and then scooped into hoops -- round plastic sieves -- and left to drain. Finally the cheese is pressed for at least 90 minutes until the curds form a solid ball and the moisture is almost entirely removed. By day's end, some 200 two-pound balls and 40 five-pound balls of Gouda have been placed in brine tubs where they will soak for 24 hours.

Most of the action takes place in the "cheese room," a rather cramped space that contains both the cheese press and the large stainless-steel cheese-making vat. Even when no cheese is being made, it is hard for as few as two people to navigate around the vat. Even so, the nuns have brought their own special touches to the colorless room, hanging posters here and there. "Be ye kind," says one, featuring a boy kissing a rabbit. "With God all things are possible," says another.

When time permits -- usually while the cheese is being pressed -- there are breaks for prayer, including a late afternoon mass whose start is signaled by a small bell kept in the corner of the cheese barn.

"It's really lovely," says Sister Barbara. "The Lord comes to the place of work." The nuns gather in their wet work clothes -- usually jeans, T-shirts, sweaters (whatever clothes have been donated by well wishers) and a modified veil to cover the head.

"It's quite a conglomeration of outfits," notes Sister Barbara, who has been designated by the convent's mother superior to speak for the monastery's cheese business. (Although the nuns don't have strict periods of silence, they try to keep conversation to a minimum to provide an atmosphere where prayer is possible all the time.)

With just six sisters making 600 pounds of cheese, it takes a few days to recover from "cheese day." In fact, says Sister Barbara, "Wednesday is crash day. We just rest and try not to do any other work unless we have to." Still, one of the sisters must go to the barn to remove the cheese from the brine. Then every day after that for the next 2 1/2 weeks, each and every cheese ball must be turned to ensure even drying.

The entire process, says Sister Barbara, "is somewhat formidable." But to date, she notes, there have been no bad batches. "Thank God."

Despite their newness to the cheese business, the sisters at Our Lady of the Angels had every intention of making Gouda right from the start. In fact, it was the very existence of the cheese barn and its equipment -- even more than the bucolic countryside -- that attracted the Trappists to their 507-acre retreat here.

The convent is an offshoot of Mt. St. Mary's Abbey in Wrentham, Mass., which having grown to 60 nuns, decided it was time to send some sisters south to set up a new monastery.

The Crozet land seemed perfect. For one thing, the setting was clearly heavenly -- perfect for a cloistered life of prayer. Some 12 miles west of Charlottesville, past country roads lined with crisp white fences to signify the boundaries of well established estates, the monastery rests just beyond a one-lane bridge in a quiet valley next to the lively Moorman's River. Silence prevails; the only sounds of music are the periodic soft chimes of the monastery's bells, rung to mark the end of work and the beginning of prayer.

"It is a beautiful setting and if we are going to live by ourselves all our life, it might as well be here," says Sister Barbara.

But the selling point was the cheese barn that had been used by the previous owner, Owie Bloemers Samuels, who developed a loyal following for her farmstead Gouda cheese sold under the Landsdale Farm label. When Samuels (then Bloemers) and her Dutch husband divorced, the farm, including the cheese operation, was put up for sale. Because Trappists strive to support themselves, typically through agricultural ventures, the cheese barn made the land "ideal," Sister Barbara says.

So six nuns, including Sister Barbara, from Mt. St. Mary's were designated to move here. The Massachusetts convent is funding the new monastery and will continue to support it financially until the Crozet facility earns enough from the cheese business to become self sufficient.

Despite their eagerness to start making cheese, the nuns first had to help build the two-story brick monastery. They stayed in the restored log cabin that was the previous owners' home while the building was taking place and did some of the work themselves: tiling the bathrooms, laying the linoleum floors and painting the entire interior.

In March 1989, when the nuns moved into the monastery, they could finally turn their attention to what they hope will become their livelihood. Yet even now, they devote only a small amount of their time to the business.

"We don't want cheese to be running us," says Sister Barbara. "Our monastic life comes first so we'll have to fit it in in a balanced way." That's why the sisters -- who on noncheese days spend about seven hours in prayer or meditation -- have decided to make cheese only once every other week.

"We hope we can make cheese more often when we get more sisters. Then, I figure we can make a batch once a week. When that happens, we can be self-sustaining, with a little left over," calculates Sister Barbara. But now, with only six sisters, "we're spread too thin" to step up production.

Sister Barbara also hopes that in time the convent will be able to diversify into cheddar and havarti as well; it already has the equipment on hand. But first, she says, "we want to be sure of the Gouda routine before we branch out."

Even though the sisters lead a sheltered life, they are clearly wise to the ways of business. For one thing, Sister Barbara stresses, they plan to sell their cheese strictly through mail order (for information, write Monastery Country Cheese; Our Lady of the Angels Monastery; Rte 2; Box 288-A; Crozet, Va. 22932). Not only will that keep visitors, such as delivery men and store buyers to a minimum, but it also will enable the sisters to "make more profit and have more control" over the product.

The cheese also has a professional look to it -- a black and gold label designed by one of the sisters.

And despite the simple life the sisters have vowed to lead, they bought a computer to help keep track of the orders. "With so few people, it isn't a luxury, but a necessity," Sister Barbara explains.

Also a necessity are the repeated tastings of each batch of cheese. "We eat the cheese three to four times a week, usually as a side dish for supper but sometimes in rice, macaroni and cheese or in a cheese strata, which we call Eggs Pamela after the sister who created it," says Sister Barbara, who notes that the convent follows a vegetarian diet. Still, says Sister Barbara, "it's a good thing we're quite fond of it."