

MAKERS AND MONGERS

Inside the minds (and rinds) of the cheese world's brightest



Andy Hatch embraces stewardship of land, animals and people at Uplands Cheese

By Christina Paschen

DODGEVILLE, Wis. — For Andy Hatch, cheesemaking is closely connected to the land, the animals, the people who work with them and the seasons that shape the farm.

Hatch, co-owner and head cheesemaker at Uplands Cheese in Dodgeville, Wisconsin, says his approach was influenced in part by the farmstead cheesemaking he encountered during apprenticeships in Norway, France, Italy and England.

“In Europe I learned what it looks like to integrate a farm, a cheese business and a family’s owner-operator lifestyle. I didn’t see this farmstead model growing up here, and it’s still rare, but I came to appreciate the synergies that are possible when tying all those things together,” Hatch says.

• **Learning the farmstead model**

Hatch says he first discovered cheesemaking while working on a farm in Norway. At the time, he had been considering agricultural research, but cheesemaking brought together his interests in agriculture, science and making a tangible product.

Hatch studied dairy science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2006-2007, where he focused on grass-based dairy farming. While working with the Center for Dairy Research and Babcock Hall, he apprenticed under Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker Gary Grossen. Prior to these studies, Hatch spent about two years apprenticing with cheesemakers in Western and Northern Europe, including in Norway, France, Italy and England.

Hatch finished his apprenticeship at Uplands Cheese. He earned his Wisconsin cheesemaker’s license in 2007 and joined Uplands that year as an assistant cheesemaker, working with founder Mike Gingrich and cheesemaker

Joe Milinovich.

By 2008, Hatch had taken responsibility for cheese production and aging and subsequently came to manage the creamery’s operations.

“Mike was committed to simplicity, which is harder than it sounds when running a combined farm and cheese business. This allowed him to focus on quality and efficiency, and I try to maintain that focus here,” Hatch says.

At the time Hatch joined Uplands, Pleasant Ridge Reserve was the creamery’s signature cheese. The aged, alpine-style cheese is made only in the summer months while the cows are grazing fresh pasture. The sweetness born from the grass-fed milk combines with savory flavors developed by the cheese’s natural, washed rind, resulting in a rich, salty cheese with a long, fruity finish.

Pleasant Ridge is the most-awarded cheese in American history, having won Best of Show in the American Cheese Society’s (ACS) annual competition three times, in 2001, 2005 and 2010. It also won the U.S. Cheese Championship in 2003. It is the only cheese to have won ACS Best of Show three times and the only cheese to have won both major national cheese competitions.

The 2010 Best of Show award was Hatch’s first ACS win at Uplands.

Hatch and his wife, Caitlin, later became owners of Uplands along with Scott and Liana Mericka. The two families purchased the business from its founding families in 2014, ensuring the continuation of the farmstead operation.

• **Preserving the Uplands tradition**

As an owner, Hatch says preserving Uplands’ approach to the land, animals, people and cheese was important, while improving the experience for employees was another priority.



Photo courtesy of Uplands Cheese

CHEESE MASTER — Andy Hatch completed an apprenticeship at Uplands Cheese before joining as assistant cheesemaker in 2007. He and his wife, Caitlin, purchased Uplands Cheese along with Scott and Liana Mericka in 2014. In 2024, Hatch became a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker, earning his certification in hard surface-ripened cheese. Uplands’ signature Pleasant Ridge Reserve is the most-awarded cheese in America.

“I knew it was important to maintain the integrity with which we handle land, animals, people and cheese. This is our DNA. As a former employee myself, I was looking forward to improving the experience of working here — better equipment and facilities, for example. The first thing I did was cut windows into the make room walls,” Hatch says.

Adam Moskowitz, owner, Cheesemonger Invitational, Maker to Monger and Larkin Cold Storage, describes Hatch as “a true artisan in the most traditional sense shepherding harmony between animal, land and man. He remains focused and purposeful, adding value to milk via terroir. No gimmicks, no tricks. By keeping it simple, with one year-round cheese and one seasonal cheese, he creates consistent and time-honored complexity.”

Mateo Kehler, co-founder of Jasper Hill Farm, also points to Hatch’s simplicity as a defining quality. “Andy

is an inspiration and an uncomplicated man,” Kehler says. “He has built something very elegant and simple. His farmstead cheeses express the hidden genius required to make it look easy. It’s a class act.”

That balance between maintaining the fundamentals of Uplands and looking for ways to improve is reflected in Hatch’s approach to the business. He says Gingrich’s emphasis on simplicity remains something he tries to carry forward, while his own experience as a former employee shaped his interest in improving equipment and facilities.

In 2024, Hatch became a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker, earning his certification in Hard Surface-Ripened Cheese, with Pleasant Ridge Reserve as his cheese. The Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker program requires advanced coursework, plant visits, cheese grading and a comprehensive written

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HATCH

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examination. Hatch said the program gave him an organized opportunity to continue his formal education.

• Following the seasons

Seasonality is central to Uplands' cheesemaking. Pleasant Ridge Reserve is made during the summer grazing season, while Rush Creek Reserve is produced only in the fall, as the cows' diet transitions from summer pasture to winter dry hay. The rich seasonal milk is particularly suited to Rush Creek, a soft, decadent cheese often described as savory custard.

Before Rush Creek, Uplands stopped making cheese during this seasonal transition and sold the autumn milk to another cheesemaker. The introduction of Rush Creek in 2010 gave Uplands a way to make cheese with that seasonal milk rather than sell it.

The cheese also drew on European traditions Hatch had encountered during his apprenticeships. In France, he worked with a cheesemaker making Vacherin Mont d'Or, a soft cheese associated with the winter season. Uplands adapted the concept to its own seasonal milk and the requirements of U.S. raw-milk cheese regulations.

Rush Creek is a soft-ripened, washed-rind cheese made from raw milk and wrapped in spruce bark. The bark gives shape to the cheese and imparts a subtle woody flavor. The cheese

is aged for about two months and produced in a 12-ounce format.

The experience reinforced an idea that Hatch continues to apply to cheesemaking: Limitations can create opportunities to try something different.

"Limitations can provoke innovation. A lot of our most-cherished food traditions probably started out as pragmatic solutions to practical problems. How do you make a barrel of beer that keeps for six months while sailing from England to the tropics? Good ideas and successful solutions endure," Hatch says.

For Hatch, seasonality also gives Uplands' cheeses characteristics that cannot be reproduced year-round.

"Seasonality gives our cheese singularity. The flavors that come from pastured milk are unobtainable via stored feeds, and while other producers can replicate the milk our cows produce on stored winter feed, no one can replicate the milk from our pastures," Hatch says.

The seasonal rhythm also shapes the way Uplands' employees work and plan.

"Seasonality also gives our people two important things: First, it helps us work much harder when necessary because we know offseason rest is coming. Second, the offseason pause gives us a chance to review the previous year and make changes for the next. That kind of reflection is hard to achieve when you're milking cows and making cheese seven days a week," Hatch says.

The seasonal approach means Uplands constantly is adapting to



Photo courtesy of Uplands Cheese

FARMSTEAD CHEESEMAKING — Hatch first discovered cheesemaking while working on a farm in Norway, and he came to appreciate the farmstead model — integrating a farm, a cheese business and a family's owner-operator lifestyle — while working and apprenticing in Europe. Uplands Cheese's farmstead model encompasses cow breeding, pasture management, milking, cheesemaking, aging and selling the finished cheese.

conditions from one year to the next. Hatch says that focus on the present also affects how he views the recognition Pleasant Ridge Reserve has received.

"We're flattered by the awards, but it's not something we think about much. Farming and seasonal cheesemaking keep us focused on the present, because no two seasons are the same and we're constantly adapting to changing conditions. This may not be the most relaxing way to operate, but it keeps us in the moment, and I think that's better for the business and probably for us as people, too," Hatch says.

• Protecting Wisconsin's dairy tradition

Hatch's approach to farmstead cheesemaking also informs how he thinks about the future of Wisconsin dairy.

"Wisconsin dairy has a long tradition of collaboration and cooperation, and we need it now more than ever. We're losing about five family dairy farms every week in Wisconsin, and it's transforming our countryside," Hatch says. "We all recognize the benefits of scale and efficiency, but we need to work together to make sure we preserve our dairy DNA and protect the things that have brought us such success. This includes small producers with the ability and incentives to innovate."

Uplands' farmstead model encompasses cow breeding, pasture management, milking, cheesemaking, aging and selling the finished cheese. Hatch

says the integration allows the business to maintain control over quality while connecting the different parts of the operation.

The model also has a connection to the surrounding community. Uplands spends about \$1 million each year in its community through expenses including feed, labor, veterinary care, electricians and plumbers.

• Passing the craft forward

Hatch also sees education and apprenticeship as part of sustaining the cheesemaking tradition. Uplands brings in about five to six apprentices each year, including people with backgrounds as cheesemongers, farm kids and others interested in learning the craft.

Many of those apprentices go on to careers elsewhere in the cheese industry. Hatch says the program reflects the way he learned cheesemaking himself: through hands-on experience and working alongside other cheesemakers.

"We try to show people that making things with your hands can be meaningful and fun and profitable. Many of our apprentices had their first cheese job here and have gone on to long careers elsewhere in the industry," Hatch says.

For Hatch, the farmstead model that first caught his attention in Europe continues to shape the way he approaches Uplands — connecting the work of farming and cheesemaking with the people, animals and land that make the operation possible. **CMN**



Photo courtesy of Uplands Cheese

SEASONAL GRAZING — Uplands Cheese's Pleasant Ridge Reserve is made during the summer grazing season, while its other cheese, Rush Creek Reserve, is produced only in the fall, as the cows' diet transitions from summer pasture to winter dry hay.