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The cheesiest success story

Israeli company flourishes after initial setback in the Okanagan.
PAT JOHNSON

Less than four years ago, when Israelis Ofri and Ofer Barmor visited Kelowna to ski, they fell in love with the place and decided to move their artisanal goat cheese farm from the Middle East to the Okanagan.

"We travelled all over the place and we fell in love," said Ofri Barmor. "We figured out there are so many wineries, but nobody makes specialty cheeses and that's what we know how to do. So we decided it's a perfect match – wine and cheese, nothing goes better than this."

Buying land, constructing the buildings and assembling a herd of goats would have been a major undertaking in any circumstance. But nature determined the course would be even more challenging.

"We moved here in March 2003, we started to build this place in May 2003," Barmor explained. "By August, it was almost done, it was 85 per cent done."

As they were preparing to open the doors to the public, the biggest natural disaster in recent local history destroyed everything.

"It all burned down in the Okanagan mountain fire," she said. Such a monumental setback might have caused lesser businesspeople to give up, but the Barmors were of stronger stock.

"We didn't even think to give up," said Barmor. "We come from Israel and we don't give in that easy."

Though the neighboring forests still bear the charred remnants of that unforgettable summer, Carmel's Goat Cheese Artisan bears no noticeable scars. The well-maintained free-range goat pens and the pristine milking, cheesemaking and curing areas show no signs of hasty reconstruction. The main building, which doubles as a cheese shop and an elegant tasting room, with spectacular vistas overlooking Okanagan Lake and its valley, is a wooden masterpiece that suits its location on the hills, adjacent to several of the region's top wineries.

The couple, who have two daughters, were cheesemakers in Israel who entered the goat business when one of the children was found to be lactose intolerant.

Now the children, Carmel and Lior, whose names combine to form the business

name, help around the farm and have fit in easily to their new school and country.

The farm is home to 110 goats – a sizeable decrease from the 600 goats the family had in Israel – of the Toggenburg, LaMancha and French Alpine breeds, whose milk is less strong than some of the familiar goat products.

"They're good producers," said Barmor. "The milk has a nice amount of butterfat and doesn't taste too much of goat milk. The typical breed of goat has a very strong taste."

We have around 6,000 to 7,000 litres of milk a month, she added. To give an idea of what that means in end-product cheese, Barmor explained the volume of milk that is needed to produce a block of cheese.

"For the soft cheeses, you need five litres to make one kilo," she said. "For the soft, ripened cheeses, we need six to seven litres to make one kilo and for the hard cheeses we need 10 to 11 litres to make one kilo."

The cheeses each have unique names, including two named after the Barmor daughters. Carmel is like an Asiago, which also comes in a smoked variation, and Lior is an Italian-style hard cheese with a sweet, nutty aftertaste.

Carmel's has a range of cheeses, made with unique recipes. Moonlight is a mild Brie-type cheese, Blue Velvet has a light blue cheese aftertaste, Piccolo is a log-shaped cheese rolled in vegetable ash that smooths its flavor while maintaining its sharpness and Horizon has a vein of vegetable ash that gives a peppery, spicy bite. Fresh soft goat cheeses are available infused with Provençale herbs, truffles, dried dill and onion or sundried tomatoes.

Some of the 20 varieties are distributed locally and across the province, including in Vancouver and Victoria, where they are available at Thrifty Foods, Whole Foods Market in West Vancouver and Oyama Sausage on Granville Island.

They also do a remarkable business among tourists from all over the world who make the trek to their location, filling their tasting room on a recent weekend and running the small staff almost off their feet with purchases. In addition to their own cheeses, Carmel's sells local chutneys, antipasto and other bottled products.

"I love to support local producers," said Barmor. "It's the right way to do things."

In return, local businesses are supporting Carmel's. Their products are on the menu and in the kitchens of chefs all over the Okanagan.

"The wineries that have restaurants serve our cheeses," said Barmor. "All the good restaurants in town serve our cheeses."

Despite the challenging start, Barmor, who was born on a kibbutz and grew up primarily on Kfar Yehezkel, a moshav east of Haifa, has no regrets.

"We're very happy about our business here," she said. "No complaints at all."

Pat Johnson is editor of MVOX Multicultural Digest, www.mvox.ca.

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