

Spring Gap Mountain Creamery

Jurgen Schelzig and Penny Sagawa, partners of Spring Gap Mountain Creamery, Paw Paw, W.V., have only been making cheese for two years. Prior to that, they had office jobs in Washington, D.C. and no previous dairy or farm experience. They originally bought the 32-acre farm as a weekend getaway but quickly realized how much they enjoyed being in rural West Virginia. Cheese making became a way for them to make a living on their farm while serving as a ticket out of the “D.C. rat race” and into a lifestyle that focuses on reaping the rewards of their physical labor.

Founded in early 2009, Spring Gap Mountain Creamery has been making cheese since April of 2010. Spring Gap Mountain Creamery products currently sell at several Washington, D.C. area farmers markets; including Silver Spring and Bethesda, Md., on Saturdays, Columbia Pike, Va., on Sundays and the Palisades neighborhood in Northwest Washington, D.C. on Sundays.

They built a small cheese making facility on the property and process about 150 gallons of milk into cheese each week. The facility (a 40' x 40' metal building) was constructed using SIPS panels for maximum insulating capability. There is a large main processing area and a smaller lab area for testing the milk. There are three aging rooms, each kept at different temperature and humidity levels depending on the cheese. Penny and Jurgen began making their first aged raw milk cheese in their cheese house in April 2010. They took a three-day cheese-making course in Vermont and chose to manufacture raw milk cheese, which has to age for 60 days.



They purchase milk from Kitty Hockman-Nicholas at Hedgebrook Farm Winchester, Va., which operates the last glass-tube milking machine in Va., and then make the actual cheese on their own farm. Hedgebrook Farm is recognized with the “Animal Welfare Approved” seal, given on behalf of Animal Welfare Approved, a non-profit animal welfare organization. That same seal is also showcased on the products produced by Spring Gap Mountain Creamery.

Penny and Jurgen currently only sell cheeses at farmer's markets, so they value the interactions directly with customers and consumers.

“It's extremely rewarding to hear how much enjoyment our farmer's market customers get from our cheese,” said Penny. “They share recipe ideas and new ways of using our cheeses, and we look forward to seeing our repeat customers every week.”

They currently produce four types of raw milk cheese: Jersey Gold, a Dutch-style gouda; Shenandoah Sunrise, a southern French-style tomme cheese, which won a Silver medal winner at 2011 North American Jersey Cheese Awards; Sophie's Select, a cloth-wrapped cheddar, and West Virginia Blue. They will also be introducing Farmhouse Feta this summer.

“We named our gouda "Jersey Gold" because we feel it showcases the best qualities of Jersey cow milk, and having the Queen of Quality® label is an excellent conversation starter to draw in new customers,” said Penny. “Kids are especially curious to know more about the Queen of Quality® label and what it represents, and we've found that getting them engaged and informed is a great way to boost repeat sales.”

As Penny and Jurgen continue to develop more products to wear the Queen of Quality® and Spring Gap Mountain Creamery labels, they will continue to learn about not only cheese making, but the quality that the Jersey cow brings to the table.

You can visit them online at www.springgapmtn.com.