

Happy Cows, Wonderful Cheese.

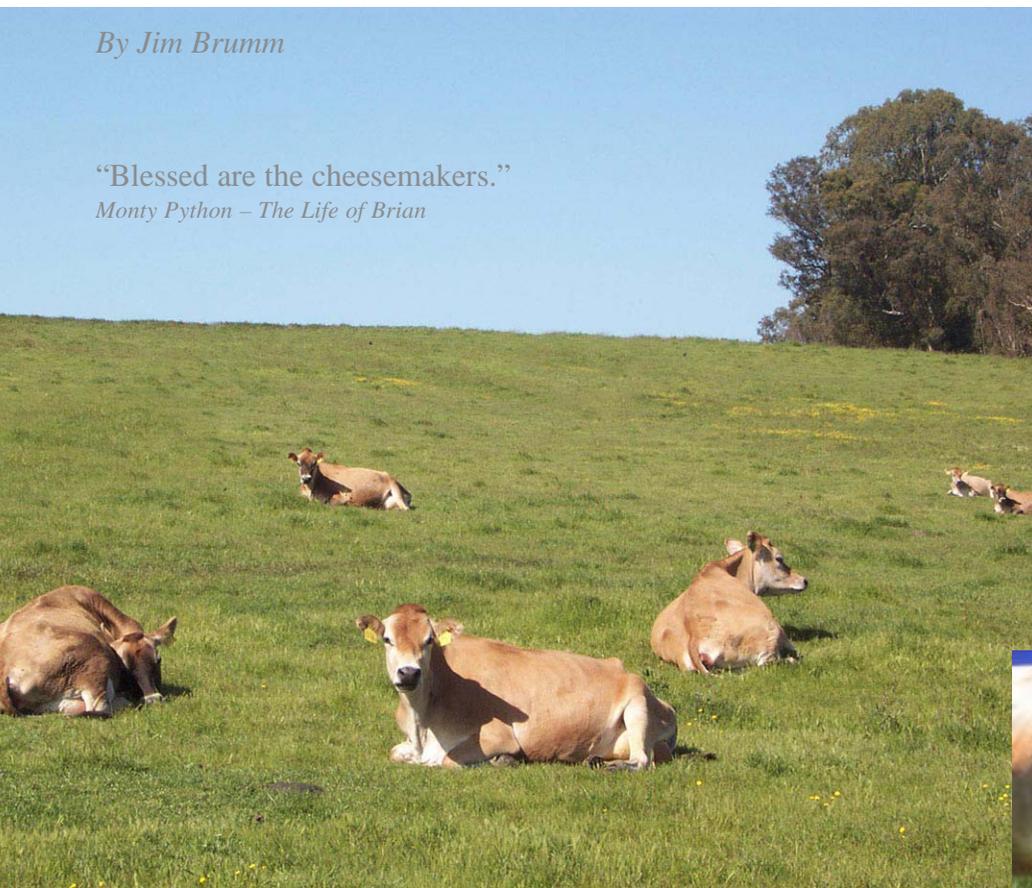


Larry Peter of Spring Hill Cheese Company shares his vision, his dream, and best of all, his wonderful, organic cheese

By Jim Brumm

“Blessed are the cheesemakers.”

Monty Python – *The Life of Brian*



Great cheese comes from happy cows, as the saying goes. And the cows at Spring Hill Cheese Company are some of the happiest anywhere.

Spring Hill Cheese Company sits gently on a rise overlooking the beautiful and bucolic Two Rock Valley in Petaluma, California. Framed by rolling green hills, gentle vistas and clear, crisp California skies, the dairy is home to over three hundred happy Jersey cows and one happy, dedicated and passionate cheesemaker, Larry Peter.

The dairy is the culmination of a dream long-held by Larry, and Larry’s father before him: to own and live on a dairy and manufacture the best cheeses in the world.

“My father always said that he wished he had raised his kids on a dairy farm,” said Larry, “so this is his dream too.”

The road has been a long one for Larry, though he always knew where it led and never lost sight of his goal. As a young man he worked at a local dairy, washing bottles,

feeding calves and doing outside work as he learned the business. Later, he spent ten years driving a forklift, living frugally and saving every penny toward his dream. He rode a bicycle while his peers were buying cars and spending their money as fast as they earned it.

He took those savings and began buying houses, fixing them up and renting them, then buying another. Eventually he was the owner of fifteen homes.

In 1986 Larry bought an old dairy on 320 acres and rebuilt the buildings and transformed the landscape to, as he put it, “fulfill my father’s dream.”

Starting with 182 Jersey cows, he began the long process of learning everything there is to know about making cheese.

“I learned through on-the-job-training,” he said. My goal was to produce good milk so I could make good cheese.”



In 1998 he made around 450 pounds of cheese. “My first was Cheddar and I sold it at farmers’ markets. Then I started experimenting with herbs and flavors. I began making Jack cheese. My goal was to make the best cheese available.”

From the beginning, his system of cheese making was all natural. But recently Spring Hill Cheese Company achieved another goal: an organic certification from the California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), a much coveted and difficult certification to earn.

“Being certified organic means that from birth, each calf is given no antibiotics and fed only organic hay and grain,” said Larry. “Everything it touches during its life is natural and organic. Every one of my cows and all my cheeses are certified organic.”

Since Larry’s initial batch of cheddar cheese, he has expanded Spring Hill Cheese Company’s offerings considerably. He and his dedicated staff of 20 now offer over 30 varieties of cheese including Quark, Ricotta, and a range of Cheddars and Jacks, which are offered, in addition to their traditional forms, in a variety of natural herb and spice flavors including garlic, pepper and sage. Spring Hill’s White Cheddar and its Sage Cheddar each won an award at the 2000 American Cheese Society.

The most popular? Portuguese and White Cheddar, said Larry. “Actually, it usually ends up that the last cheese somebody tastes is their favorite,” he said, laughing. He popped a piece of raw white cheddar in his mouth and smiled. “My favorite is raw white cheddar.”

On the hills surrounding the dairy, hundreds of Jersey cows gather placidly under oak trees or lay together on the soft



Cheesemaker Larry Peter with his happy Jersey cows

Jersey cows, unlike their counterpart, the well-known and much larger Holstein, produce a milk with a higher butter fat, which makes all the difference in producing the flavorful, rich cheeses for which Spring Hill Cheese Company is known.

Visitors to Spring Hill Cheese Company can enjoy cheese tastings at the on-site retail room, which also offers gourmet coffees, homemade ice cream, curds and other snacks as well as displays explaining the cheese-making process and descriptions of the different cheeses they make. Visitors can also picnic on the grounds and take in the scenery and even pet the cows. Tours of the dairy are available by appointment. It’s the perfect stop on the way to the coast.

Recently Larry, already living his dream, expanded his vision even further by purchasing the Petaluma Creamery in downtown Petaluma which had been closed since 2004. Encompassing three city blocks, the Petaluma Creamery will soon offer organic milk and raw cheese to the public. With a huge capacity and an impressive retail room offering sales and tastings of a wide variety of products, the Petaluma Creamery is the latest step in Larry’s long-term goal.

“I’m trying to educate the local farmers about organic farming,” said Larry. “I’m trying to keep agriculture alive in this area.

We need to go organic, we need to go raw. It’s healthy for everyone concerned and it’s what the public wants. When we work together to keep our farming and agriculture local and sustainable, we all win.”

Though Larry has accomplished so much, when he sees his work, he thinks it’s not enough. He spoke of his hope for the future.

“Five years from now I want to have an education center for future generations. We need to keep dairy farming and agriculture alive for the future and make people aware of the benefits of going all-natural and organic.”

With his boots planted in the rich soil, Larry gazed out over the acres and acres of fields stretching out from his restored farmhouse to the small highway in the distance. The buzz of insects could be heard in the still air and dozens of red-winged blackbirds chattered and scurried from spot to spot. On the hill behind us his beloved Jerseys lazed and chewed, contentedly awaiting milking time. He turned to me and said, “I love what I do. I plan to live here with my cows until the day I die.”

Spring Hill Cheese Company is located at 4235 Spring Hill Rd. Petaluma, CA 94952. Call 707-762-3446. Petaluma Creamery is located at 621 Western Ave. Petaluma, CA 94952. Call 707-762-3446.

Visit www.springhillcheese.com for more information, including stores where Springhill cheeses can be found.



Spring Hill Cheese Company sits overlooking Two Rock Valley in Petaluma

grass under the sun to chew and gossip in their bovine paradise. They come back to the barn twice a day to be milked and pampered. These are spoiled, well-tended cows.

“We talk to them and pet them, but you can’t do that too much,” said Larry. “If you scratch their heads too often they don’t want to go back out to pasture to eat, they want to stay in the barn and get petted.”