



# A Campaign for *Real Milk*

## STARTING FROM SCRATCH WITH SMALL-SCALE CHEESE PRODUCTION

by Rose Marie Belforti

After two years of very intense planning, endless paperwork and protracted construction, we finally have a small dairy and are making raw milk cheese--actually kefir cheese. After working extremely closely with our New York State Agriculture and Markets Milk Division on rules and regulations for building a dairy, we received our legal producer status this past November, 2006.

### FUNDING

It has been a long haul, with many ups and downs. For funding to build our cheese processing plant, we applied for a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) producers' grant in 2005. After some difficulty, we finally got approval in July of 2006. The SARE regional office thought our grant proposal was excellent. This put us on cloud nine!

But the proposal was then passed along for final approval to the larger US review team, and we were bumped off that cloud very quickly when the team notified us that the grant was denied because we wanted to make cheese with raw milk. We had an anxious four-month waiting period while the committee gave more consideration to the project. During that time I brought to their attention the fact that they had never mentioned any exclusions of any products

in their proposal instructions. Since there was no mention of raw milk projects being disqualified, they ultimately had to approve the grant. So we did receive the funding, but I noticed that when they publicized the winners, our project was excluded from the publicity.

### BUILDING THE DAIRY

We did not have a previous dairy building on

our property so we had to start from scratch, from designing the ditching and waste control, to placement of the milk parlor, milk cool room, holding area for the cows and the cheese making room. There is a very big learning curve to starting a dairy for those of us with no previous experience. Each step of the way we consulted with the state inspectors concerning our building plans. It is better to get it right the first time than to have to go back and do it again.

The plan was to up-scale a home recipe to a

commercial process for an aged, raw milk kefir cheese using authentic living Kefir grains. In cooperation with the Cornell University Food Processing and Development Laboratory, we set out to establish a standard for the new kefir cheese. We are very fortunate to have the expertise at Cornell to help put our new recipe together. Actually, I received very little resistance to either



*Aged kefir cheese from  
Finger Lakes Dexter Creamery*

A Campaign for *Real Milk* is a project of the Weston A.

Price Foundation.

To obtain some of our informative *Real Milk* brochures, contact the Foundation at (202)

363-4394.

Check out our website, [www.](http://www.RealMilk.com)

[RealMilk.com](http://www.RealMilk.com) for additional information and sources of *Real Milk* products.

## THE DEXTER DAIRY COW

My husband and I have a great interest in the promotion and conservation of the Dexter breed and hope to bring awareness to the importance of raising and farming with Dexter cattle. Our small cattle can do important work for sustainable agriculture. There has been an amazing surge over the years in goat ownership, and there are numerous goat cheeses on the market now. The Dexter can have the same acclaim. A "contented cow" is a joyful thing to behold!

Although there are a few Dexter dairies in the British Isles, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, we are not aware of any at this time in the United States. Our hope is that Dexter cattle will become more popular as we begin the trend back to local family-run operations and away from large corporate factory farming. Our small cattle have a lot of work power, and we think it is time for them to show off a bit. Our dairy has grown out of a passion for "the little mountain cow," and love for their rich, high butterfat milk.

Dexter cows measure 34-42 inches at the withers. They do wonderfully on pasture and do not need any other supplements, although if one wants to feed a little grain or alfalfa, that is fine to boost the milk production a little, or give them extra energy after calving. But they will do just fine on quality grass hay and pasture. Their milk supply is somewhere between two and three gallons a day at the height of lactation, and the butterfat is high, like that of a Jersey. The advantages of Dexters are that they eat less, take up less space and are easier to manage than a full size cow. Moreover, they have not been bred to the hilt for one trait, such as milk or beef, so their genetics are stronger, giving them an advantage over the overbred breeds like Holsteins. They are "easy to finish, which means they are ideal for grass-fed beef projects.

Dexters calve very well and do not require vaccinations in most areas because they are so hardy. They are clever, intelligent and interested--with spicely personalities! They make good friends too!

We grass feed and pasture our cattle, and we use no drugs or other additives in their feed or care. The milk is as clean and fresh as can be!

is a friend and very unique. Their well-being comes fore production concerns. they mother their calves for we wean the calves. Our to pasture, and are never small operation, we can dairying. Caring for for the as milking them for cheese. world where dairying seems animal--the cow!

With great apprecia- have helped us get started, greatest Beryl Rutherford, England for so many years hope of having a chondro- she is retired now, she has, been instrumental in rescu-

moments when training our cows, tending to their ailments, and all aspects of hand milking and dairying. Without her advice and good humor, we would certainly have given up!

We love the closeness we have with our herd. I think they like it too! Having quality time with them twice a day, training them to become docile milkers and teaching them polite manners in the milk parlor has been very rewarding. Don't let anyone ever tell you a Dexter cannot be milked! We can tell you, after an entire summer of training one of the most stubborn gals ever--it can be done! Stick with it. Routine is the key to the heart and mind of a Dexter. Do the same thing every day--that is what they like best. After a while, this routene becomes what you like best too. It has been a very rewarding experience for us, and we look forward to many years of enjoyment making our new product and being with our family of milking Dexters.

Let's hope there is new interest in raising Dexters for the work they can do to bring milk to our tables. We hope that our model for a Dexter dairy will inspire others and be an example for others to build their their own dreams. Dexter milk is exquisite, and well worth our efforts.



*Author Rose Marie Belforti spends some quality time with her Dexter cow.*

We love our cows--each one They are part of the family. first in our thoughts be- Therefore, we make sure as long as they can before cattle always have access confined. Since we are a have a humane approach to cows is as important to us That is very important in a to forget to value that sacred

tion, we thank all those who and especially we thank the who kept Dexter cows in and introduced us all to the dysplasia-free herd. Although through correspondence, ing us at our most chaotic

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An important point to keep in mind is that only a few of the humans or animals with any form of tuberculosis appear ill, and most of those infected are not contagious.

the raw milk or the use of kefir grains. I was pleasantly surprised at the support we got from Cornell. Although there is not a lot of support in general for raw milk products, folks in the business seem to be coming into a new awareness that small scale, unique, niche-market dairy ideas may eventually become part of mainstream agriculture, which fuels the economy of many dairy states.

Since we were on a budget, we had to scavage to build the dairy and processing plant. Our ten thousand dollar--SARE grant covered everything I set out to do with the processing plant but not any operational or facility upgrade projects. We purchased a 1940s surge milking machine and assembled the entire unit from new and used parts we acquired from retired dairies in the area. The equipment we needed for the milk cooling room and the cheese room took an entire year to assemble because many of the things needed were just not readily available. With the help of some small dairy equipment dealers and eBay, we managed to put it all together under close scrutiny of the inspectors.

State inspectors can be difficult. At first I had a really tough one, but now have a reasonable

inspector. It is the rules and regs they enforce that are so difficult to deal with. They are not written for small farmers with very small facilities, or doing hand-milking, but for large dairies. This makes it very difficult for us small farmers because the cost of doing business becomes almost prohibitive.

Nevertheless, we were determined to go forward, even on our very small scale. We often



*Cheese processing plant, thanks to a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) producers' grant.*

had to improvise. For example, we use a refrigerator for a bulk tank--with such a small amount of milk it works just fine. In order to get our milk cooled down to 45 degrees within two hours, we put it in the freezer and then move it down to the fridge when it achieves the 45 degrees. How quaint!

In the cheese room we are using two refrigerators to age the cheese, and will have to plan for a bigger aging space this coming summer. We have two very old jacketed steam kettles that we use for warming the milk to start the kefir culture. The kettles have been converted to hot water. We were very blessed to have ingenious plumbers, who designed a system even though they had no clue about it when they started. But they were inspired to plumb a tiny cheese factory,

## KEFIR GRAINS

Kefir grains are a mixture of living microbial lactic bacterium and yeasts. They have been used by traditional peoples for centuries to make a cultured milk that promotes good health and longevity. Kefir grains propagate naturally when immersed in milk, making them an ideal sustainable natural resource. They have been nurtured and passed down for generations and recently have become available in the US. Although there are many kefir products on the market, most are not made with kefir grains and do not include the unique array of beneficial probiotic bacteria inherent in the grains.

If you are interested in using kefir grains for home use, please visit our website at [www.kefircheese.com](http://www.kefircheese.com) and go to our links page. There you will find "Dom's kefir site" and you can learn all you ever wanted to know and then some from Dom--the website is wonderfully informative and fun.

something they had never done before.

Once built, getting to know the correct sanitation procedures has been the biggest challenge. Clean has a new meaning! We call it “the art of cleaning.” We have manuals to follow which means we end up sanitizing everything all the time! Most of my time is spent cleaning, not making cheese.

#### FROM FARM TO CREAMERY

Once we were ready for production, we changed our name from Finger Lakes Dexter Cattle to Finger Lakes Dexter Creamery. Our farm consists of twelve acres, with about seven acres for pasture, in the Finger Lakes region of New York on the east side of Cayuga Lake. We are one mile off the Scenic Route 90 Wine Trail and hope that our location will attract tourists that are here for the culinary delights the area has to offer.



The Chill Tank!

The other very exciting aspect of our new venture is our brand new cheese, something never before produced commercially. We use full cream milk for our cheese and age it for 60 days or more. With Dexter milk that means a lot of luscious, rich cream. Our new cheese is called Wild Man kefir cheese. It will be for sale beginning this spring of 2007.

We originally started hand-milking one cow. Now there are three. We are still milking by hand and love the relationship with our cows, but will have to begin using the milking machine this spring when we add one more cow to the operation. We plan to milk a maximum of six cows.

We plan to sell the cheese for eighteen dollars a pound through our website and at local retail stores. Check out our website at [www.kefircheese.com/microdairy.html](http://www.kefircheese.com/microdairy.html) for retail outlets that carry it.

So the whole process will take over two years, from grant proposal to cheese ready for sale. We hope to inspire other small producers to get into cheese making. If we can do it, so can many others! ☺☺