

Cheesemaker teaches old-world techniques

By **MARINA RIKER**
For the Capital Press

BEAVERCREEK, Ore.
— Cheesemaking is in Gayle

Starbuck's blood.

In the late 1800s, her great-grandfather trekked thousands of miles from France to Southern Califor-

nia, where he started a farm and raised goats, cattle and sheep.

For the next century, his descendants were raised on

that farm, where they passed down family recipes and techniques for transforming fresh milk into cheese, butter and ice cream, Starbuck said.

"It was passed down to my grandmother — his daughter — and then to my mother, who then taught me how to do it," said Starbuck.

Decades later, Starbuck has moved from the farmstead to a lush two-acre parcel in Beaver Creek, Ore., where she teaches some of same cheesemaking techniques her mother taught her. A couple times a month, she holds cheesemaking classes, which fill up quickly. Six students at a time learn everything from which milk to use to how to clean residue off cheesecloth — a sticky byproduct of straining whey from curds to make soft and semi-firm cheese.

Starbuck's home is surrounded by rolling, green farmland, where she grows fruits and flowers including blueberries, citrus and rhododendrons. Her home's kitchen was approved by the state agriculture department to be used commercially.

During her beginner classes, Starbuck guides students through a handful of recipes ranging from queso fresco to creamy French-style feta that's marinated with oils, olives and raisins.

Starbuck, who wears a yellow, floral-print apron, explained the cheesemaking process starts long before students enter her kitchen. Students must first pick out what kind of milk they want to use, Starbuck said.

Buying milk that's suitable for cheesemaking is easier in Oregon than in many other states, Starbuck said. Oregon's state beverage is milk, and the state is home to more than 200 dairies. Milk that is vat or regular pasteurized and sold in grocery stores works great for cheesemaking, Starbuck said.

However, students must



Marina Riker/For the Capital Press

Gayle Starbuck shows students how to select milk and transform it into a variety of soft and semi-firm cheeses.



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Starbuck uses a ladle to scoop curds into a bucket, which catches the whey that's strained off to eventually produce cheese. During her beginner cheesemaking class, she teaches students to craft both cow- and goat-milk cheeses including chevre, French-style feta and queso fresco.

avoid ultra-pasteurized milk, which is heated above the boiling point and won't form firm curds.

"A lot of people are under the misconception that you have to have raw milk to make cheese, and that's not the case," said Starbuck.

She said the secret to good cheesemaking is controlling the temperature of the milk, which she stirred on the stove top, often using a laser thermometer to check the heat.

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Once the milk is at the ideal temperature, she takes it off the stove and adds ingredients such as cheese cultures, calcium chloride and coagulating enzymes such as rennet. If all goes according to plan, the milk begins to harden into curds.

"You never know what can happen," she said, adding that she's had to rescue some students after heating the milk too much.

Starbuck teaches her students how to strain whey from curds, which she uses to fertilize her blueberries and rhododendrons. Her students practice slicing curds, which are eventually strained into cheeses such as lemon ricotta and sampled by all. Starbuck takes a spoonful of the ricotta while reminiscing about when she used to milk the family's cows twice daily, seven days a week.

"I miss it," said Starbuck. "And everyone says, 'Oh, you were so lucky to be raised this way.'"

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