

To add value, dairy farmers say, 'Cheese'

By SUZANNE FRARY
For the Capital Press

CHEHALIS, Wash. — Southwest Washington dairy farmer Sharon McCool makes cheeses that are sought out by Seattle chefs.

Her husband, Gary McCool, attributes her success to stubbornness.

She made her first batch about 10 years ago. It wasn't a hit. She produced a small wheel without much flavor.

The McCools bought their cheesemaking equipment from a Helvetia, Ore., cheesemaker. Another cheesemaker, Don Gerber, from Switzerland, offered advice and a family

recipe for Swiss cheese.

They set up the equipment at Rosecrest Farm, their 125-acre organic dairy. Sharon McCool tried again with the new equipment and her husband's encouragement.

"I always thought we needed additional income from our dairy," Gary said.

Cheese now accounts for just 5 percent of the McCools' business, but it distinguishes their dairy from others, he said.

Trying something different has been a theme in the McCools' adventurous lives.

Gary McCool grew up on a farm in Oregon. He struck out on his own and bought one acre and one cow. It was

the first of four farms he has owned over the years.

Sharon McCool took a very different path. She was a 22-year-old Eugene, Ore., hairdresser when a client asked if she'd like to train to perform on a flying trapeze. A few weeks later, she debuted in Sweden and performed in circuses for 15 years.

The McCools had 40 milking cows in Sheridan, Ore., before buying Rosecrest Farm in 2000. The farm has been around since 1903.

They moved to find a business climate more friendly to small dairies. They found that in Washington state, Gary said.

"There's more support for

dairies in Lewis County," he said.

The McCools needed another change after a few years of farming in Washington.

"In 2006, I was getting paid the same for milk as in 1985," Gary said.

Looking for a higher price for their milk, the McCools switched to organic farming.

"It was a matter of survival," Sharon said.

They had always pastured their cows and had not used chemicals in their fields, so transitioning to organic production was easy, Gary said. Rosecrest Farm belongs to the Organic Valley co-op.

The cheese room is feet from the milking parlor, where shorthorn cows line up in the farm's 1914 barn. Milk is piped to a 40-gallon vat.

Sharon uses Gerber's Swiss recipe to make Rosecrest Farm Mountain Swiss cheese. Building on the basic recipe, she has created flavors such as Country Herb and Garlic Swiss and Spicy-Pepperoni Swiss.

Finished cheese ages for about two months.

She sells cheese online, in her farm store and at farmers' markets in Chehalis and Taco-



Suzanne Frary/For the Capital Press

Sharon and Gary McCool stand outside their store on Rosecrest Farm, an organic dairy in Chehalis, Wash. Sharon McCool uses milk from the couple's shorthorn cows to make several flavors of Swiss cheese.

ma, Wash., and Astoria, Ore.

Rosecrest Farm cheeses are also served in Seattle's Space Needle restaurant, Portage Bay Cafe and Fairmont Olympic Hotel.

When the McCools retire, their son, Keith McCool, will take over the business.

Whatever the future holds

for the farm, it might not include expansion. The dairy has 165 milking cows. Dairies with more than 200 milking cows are subject to new manure-handling rules written by the state Department of Ecology.

"That limits future growth," Keith McCool said.

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