

U.S. Championship Cheese From Michigan's Leelanau Peninsula

Nestled in the corner of one of northern Michigan's finest wineries, Black Star Farms, is a small cheese plant turning out internationally acclaimed cheese. Leelanau Cheese Co. owned by cheese makers John and Anne Hoyt, is gaining international recognition for their Raclette Cheese. Leelanau Cheese was named First Runner-Up in the 2005 U.S. Championship Cheese Contest for their signature aged-Raclette cheese.

The Hoyts brought the techniques and traditions of the Raclette cheese to Michigan directly from the Swiss Alps. John was first introduced to traditional Swiss cheese while traveling through Europe on a post-college trip. He was so intrigued with the cheese and the cheese making traditions in Europe that he began studying cheese making at the Chateaneuf School of Agriculture in the Valais region of southern Switzerland. After his schooling he worked as a cheese maker for several co-ops in the Swiss Alps. Four years of training and hands-on experience led John and his wife Anne, whom he met at the Eision co-op in Switzerland, to Michigan.

"I found myself, a city boy, milking cows by hand in the Swiss Alps and I loved it," John says.

A Michigan native, John spent his summers around the Leelanau Peninsula. When the couple came back to Michigan in 1989, they knew they wanted to settle in that area. Although they were well-trained and confident their traditional Swiss and French cheeses would be successful, they had a difficult time securing investors to help them launch their cheese company. Their luck began to turn in 1995 with the purchase of a 1957 Damrow vat pasteurizer for \$100.



Cheese maker John Hoyt uses his European training to make championship Raclette cheese in northern Michigan.

"We had to get creative if we were ever going to start our cheese plant," John says. "So we converted an old pasteurizer used to brew beer to start making cheese. As the popularity of the cheese grew, the bank became more interested in investing in us."

The Hoyts made their first batch of cheese in a rented store-room in March 1995 in Omena, Michigan six years after moving to the state. They sold their first cheese in the summer after it had properly aged. The Hoyts also began making a French Style Fromage Blanc/Leelanau Cheese Spread that could be sold in a shorter time frame.

"It takes so long to age the Raclette that we needed another variety we could move more quickly. The cheese spread has been very popular," John says.

Attempting to replicate the traditional cheese making found in the Swiss Alps required the Hoyts to locate a milk supply from a pasture-based farm. In Switzerland the cheese co-ops are

on the farm with the cows. While the Hoyts were not interested in running a dairy farm along with the cheese plant, they did want a direct-link to their milk supply.

John worked with Carl Rasch, MMPA Director of Milk Sales and Preston Cole, member representative, to secure a local milk supply. Every other day John, a licensed bulk milk hauler, picks up 2,400 pounds of milk from Garvin Farms in Cedar, Michigan. MMPA contract hauler, LaLone Transport picks up the balance of Garvin's supply.

John chose Garvin Farms because the cows spend most of their time on pasture except for the winter months. A relatively small farm with 38 cows, the Garvins can keep a close eye on each cow.

"Spring milk, when the cows first go out on pasture, makes the best cheese," John says. "The first step in learning cheese making is understanding milk quality."

Having a close relationship with Denis and Joan Garvin helps them regulate the cheese produc-

tion. Any change in feed or the cow health will affect the quality of the cheese.

Once it reaches the creamery, the milk is pasteurized and cooled to begin cheese making. The Hoyts use a small vat to make the curd. The curds are then pressed in micro-perforated molds with heavy weights to release the whey. The cheese is aged in a cave-type cellar located a few hundred yards from the creamery. Each day, the wheels are turned and brushed with salt water. The environment in the cellar is closely monitored to ensure proper aging. Sitting on wood boards, it will take at least 3 months for the mild Raclette to ripen, 8 to 10 months for the sharp and two years for the extra sharp variety.

The long-aging process of the cheese makes for a tight supply. Nearly all the cheese in the cellar is committed before it finishes aging. Leelanau Cheese can be found in groceries and restaurants around Michigan. The majority of its sales are through its retail outlet including shipments nationwide. The Raclette is available in full wheels, half-wheels and by the pound. Leelanau Cheese spread comes in plain, dill, garlic and peppercorn flavors.

Today, Leelanau Cheese leases its 1,200 square foot facility from Black Star Farms in Suttons Bay, Michigan. The farm attracts thousands of visitors each year as they wind their way along the Leelanau Peninsula Vintners Trail.

"There is a natural link between cheese and wine which makes this a perfect location for us," John says.

Visitors to the wine tasting room can watch the cheese being made through tall windows. Displays in front of the creamery explain the traditions of Raclette cheese and showcase the many awards won by Leelanau Cheese Co.



Leelanau homemade cheese starts with fresh milk from Garvin Farms in Cedar, Mich.

Leelanau's Raclette's numerous awards include a Gold Medal in the 2005 World Cheese Awards, a Silver Medal in the 2004 World Cheese Awards, a Silver Medal in the 2004 American Cheese Society Cheese Contest and a Bronze Medal in the 2003 ACS Contest and earned Gold and Silver medals in the 2001 and 2005 U.S. Championship Cheese Contests.

It has also been named Grand Champion Cheese of the Michigan

State Fair in 1998, 1999, 2002, 2003 and 2004.

The overwhelming success of Leelanau Cheese causes the Hoyts to consider expansion, however, they are careful not to cut corners or stray from the traditions they were taught. "Because this process is so labor intensive it would be difficult to do it on a much larger scale and still keep the quality," John comments.

The Cheese Reporter contributed to this article.

Raclette Cheese

It is believed that Raclette began on the hillsides of the Valais region in Switzerland as the wine harvest was coming to an end. Grape gatherers took from their sacks a small loaf of bread, some cheese and a bottle of wine.

Legend has it that one of the men stabbed a piece of cheese with a large buck knife and approached a crackling fire, it started to melt and run with a crisp, golden texture. As he slowly scraped the melting cheese, the others tasted this novelty. It was indeed excellent, and there begins, "Raclette" meaning "to scrape."

A traditional Swiss meal includes melted Raclette scraped off and spread over small potatoes, chunks of meat, and gherkins accompanied with a dry white wine.

Raclette meals are gaining popularity in America. Special Raclette grills with small serving dishes are used to prepare and serve the meal.

