



CURDS AND WHEY  
STORY AND PHOTOS BY JULIETTE ROGERS

## NARRAGANSETT CREAMERY

*Artisan Cheese Finally Comes of Age in Rhode Island*

Providence Specialty Foods had been making Italian-style cheeses for nearly two decades when fledgling cheesemaker Louella Hill came knocking, looking for a place to start her latest endeavor, Narragansett Creamery. She and owner Mark Federico first met in 2005 when, as director of Farm Fresh Rhode Island, she was searching for locally made cheeses to round out the local-food shopping basket.

At the time, Providence Specialty Foods was tantalizingly close to the missing link but their milk came from across the Northeast, and the main markets for their feta, mozzarella curd and other cheeses were in New York and New Jersey. In fact, Federico's feta won first place in the 2007 World Championship Cheese Contest, and employee Frank Angeloni is a master of ricotta but it's been virtually impossible for locals to find their products in area stores. In short, we Rhode Islanders were missing out on our own bounty.

Hill's particular devotion to dairy, sparked by a year in Italy making pecorino cheese, prompted her to leave Farm Fresh to apprentice a season with a farmstead cheesemaker in Maine. She appreciates the seasonality that led people to make cheeses, "simply the act of turning the green grass of summer into something edible in the winter."

Returning to Rhode Island in fall 2007, she got to work on making a fully legal, Rhode Island-made cheese available to locals—ideally a raw-milk, aged cheese, made in small batches by hand, using local milk in order to close the local-food circle by adding value to the milk of local farms.

When someone at the Rhode Island Department of Health suggested Hill ask Providence Specialty Foods if they'd be interested in joining forces, the partnership seemed a natural. They already have a fully certified and equipped commercial dairy facility and knowledgeable staff.

"I was amazed to find the wealth of cheesemaking knowledge right in my back yard. Mark and Frank have been making cheese most of their lives!" Hill marvels, and she credits them with countless triumphs over the roller-coaster ride of developing new cheeses. They welcomed her local-food sensibilities and spare set of hands in helping to grow the business locally. Narragansett Creamery now operates as an arm of Providence Specialty Foods.

Narragansett Creamery's principles are simple: cheese made by hand in Rhode Island, from local milk, for sale to the community. Twice a week, a truck collects milk from farms within 50 miles of Providence and delivers it to the Creamery, where 40 gallons of it go to Hill.

The choices of cheese reflect the strengths of the whole team. Frank's expertise led to an unsalted, basket-molded whole-milk ricotta, called "Renaissance." Fluffy, creamy and dense, its delicate flavor relies on the freshest of milk seasoned only with the sweetness that comes from cooking the milk. The curds are then skimmed off the whey in a basket, which leaves a rustic pattern on the cheese when it's unmolded.

Mark's feta talents made it another obvious choice for a local milk version. "Salty Sea" feta uses sea salt to brine the tart, crumbly cheese, drawing out moisture and adding a mineral sweetness that underlies the characteristic saltiness.

The third cheese is queso blanco. Sweeter, moister and less salty than feta, it's a favorite crumbled over tacos and holds its shape when fried or baked. Noting both the growth of Providence's Latino community and the widespread popularity of Latin American cuisines, Hill wanted to make a cheese as relevant to these new tastes as ricotta was to the more established. Here again, it didn't hurt that another cheesemaker had the know-how to contribute.

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Divine Providence, an aged Gouda, is Hill's own pet project, the first artisanal raw-milk cheese made in the state in decades. By the highly scientific method of asking everyone she knew, Hill found Gouda the most popular and chose to start with it. Cheeses made from unpasteurized (raw) milk retain a greater depth of flavor, a difference that is accentuated with the intensification of flavors that comes with the longer aging she had in mind for the Gouda. Raw milk also adds more variables into the process of turning raw milk into cheese.

While pasteurized milk is an inert product, raw milk truly has a life of its own, and the art of a cheesemaker is to direct its development toward a consistently delicious result. This need for attention and control makes the small production scale especially appropriate for Divine Providence, and Hill spends her cheesemaking days bent over the vat testing temperature, acidity and texture to track the curd's progress.

Hill decided on a natural rind (as opposed to the vivid red wax used by many Gouda-makers) because it allows the cheese to continue to "breathe" as it matures, getting more buttery and dense as months pass. Narragansett Creamery is selling Divine Providence at three months but they are building an aging room for more mature cheeses in the future.

Narragansett Creamery sells its products at farmers' markets (starting with the Saturday winter market at AS220), as well as through Farmstead cheese shops and Venda Ravioli.

Mark Federico Jr. is especially pleased that their products may gain aficionados among their Rhode Island neighbors, few of them aware of the treasure in their midst.

Ever the idealist, Hill is "looking forward to the day Rhode Island will have dozens of artisan cheese makers—imagine a whole cheese

course of Ocean State cheeses!" With such a good beginning, it's not that hard to imagine at all. *eR*

Narragansett Creamery  
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