

From Farm to Fromage: Cypress Grove Chevre

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[1]This story originally appeared in [the July/August print edition of](#) [2][Food Manufacturing](#) [2].

Growth can be stressful for food manufacturers. Particularly for artisan producers with traditional processes that can be hundreds of years old. But Cypress Grove Chevre in Arcata, Calif., anxiously awaits its upcoming expansion. The footprint of the specialty goat cheesemaker's facility will nearly double, thanks to an investment from its new owner. And the new space? It's connected to their current building. It's an anomaly in the stressful acquisition trend, but Cypress Grove Chevre has absolutely nothing but praises for its parent company.

In the 1970s, Mary Keehn built the foundation of Cypress Grove Chevre with her own two hands. First, they were offering food to a semi-feral goat on her neighbor's land in Humboldt County. The single mother simply wanted fresh milk for her four daughters. But she ended up a goat breeder with an oversupply of milk. A stint in regional cheese sales and a trip to Europe later, and Cypress Grove Chevre was born in 1983. The company's signature cheese, Humboldt Fog, consists of two layers of chevre, each coated in vegetable ash per French custom. Named after a local daily weather occurrence, Humboldt Fog is one of 13 Cypress Grove Chevre cheeses and 13 SKUs distributed in 50 states and Southern Canada. Two aged cheeses, Goudas to be exact, are produced by the new parent company. One is made from goat's milk and the other from sheep's.

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Published on Food Manufacturing (<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com>)

In 2010, after 27 years in the business, Keehn sold to Swiss cheesemaker Emmi. Now, Cypress Grove Chevre's new creamery nears completion. The company also boasts a 32-acre, 550-goat dairy which supplies a portion of Cypress Grove Chevre's primary ingredient.

The market for specialty cheeses like goat cheese has grown noticeably in the last decade. Total U.S. retail sales of natural and specialty cheeses were \$15.7 billion in 2013, according to Packaged Facts. The new facility will help Cypress Grove up their supply in response.

"We have a plant that is currently operating over capacity and have an opportunity to meet market demand," said David Estes, operations director at Cypress Grove Chevre. "Emmi has provided us with the capital and expertise to meet this demand and at the same time up our game in terms of food quality and safety with improved infrastructure and manufacturing systems."

"[Emmi] very much treat[s] us as an autonomous brand and take[s] a hands-off approach to managing the business," said Janne Rasmussen, marketing manager at Cypress Grove Chevre. No staff changes were made among the company's 50 employees when it was bought.

The new addition will bump the facility's footprint from 14,000 feet to 27,000. The Cypress Grove Chevre creamery, nestled in a residential area of the bohemian town Arcata, was built in 2004.

The property contains two barns that were once part of a cow dairy, the only source of milk in the area in the early 1900s. Cypress Grove Chevre restored the surrounding land and got permission from the city to build on the condition that the architecture stayed true to the agricultural setting of the parcel. Before 2004, Cypress Grove Chevre operated in nearby McKinleyville, where the dairy is now located.

The New Digs

From the beginning of the cheese-making process to the final steps, Cypress Grove Chevre's new facility will allow for more precision in production and consistency.

"We did want to ease into the future. It's a 10-year plant," Estes said. "Moving in is going to be half of the challenge."

The new plant has three main sections: a raw milk plant, fresh cheese production and aged cheese production. Multiple hygiene rooms separate areas that hold different types of cheeses to avoid cross-contamination from different cheese making spores associated with each type of cheese. The raw zone is completely separated from the rest of the plant and even has a separate entrance.

Expanded Capacity

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The new facility will accept milk deliveries from conventional 6,000-gallon trucks, an upgrade from the current 3,000-gallon capacity. From the truck, milk will be pumped into the milk silo before pasteurization. The HTST pasteurizer uses less water and energy and offers much more control than the currently used pasteurization method. Preparing goat milk for cheese production is a slow process compared to typical large-scale cheese manufacturing. It takes more than 36 hours to go from pasteurized milk to fresh cheese that is ready to be packaged. For soft ripened cheeses, the process takes an additional 17 days before packaging. The new method and capacity will allow for a 250 percent output increase for both types of cheeses.

Cypress Grove Chevre's dairy is experimenting with out-of-season breeding as goat milk is in limited supply. Goat cheese is a highly seasonal product. Though June is the peak of milk production, the cheese is most heavily consumed from Thanksgiving through Christmas.

Food Safety

Food safety measures are embedded in the infrastructure of Cypress Grove Chevre. The process rooms in the new facility are essentially their own buildings within the exterior building and allow for stringent environmental controls. Utilities are housed in the attic space and routed directly down to the point of use so utilities materials within the production areas are minimized. Corner mount lighting fixtures minimize the potential for cross-contamination from ceiling condensation. A building management system carefully balances the pressure differentials rooms to minimize the potential of airborne contaminants to infiltrate the most sensitive process rooms. The entire plant is built for regular wash down, but will be operated as a "dry" plant during operation.

Quality Control

More precise temperature and humidity controls in production areas will avoid product loss, improve product consistency and extend cheese shelf life. The European-style curd press, which separates the whey from the curd, will allow for much more exact moisture levels in the early stages of the cheesemaking process. For the soft-ripened cheeses, a new drying room and ripening caves will allow for more controlled ripening environments and will translate into a more consistent finished product.

"We will be able to more precisely dial in every step of our cheesemaking process and will ultimately result in a better product to the final consumer," Estes said. "With a little packaging innovation here and there, we may be able to extend shelf life."

The fresh cheese has a shelf life of at least 12 weeks, while aged cheese has a shelf life of 6-8 weeks uncut.

The Mission Remains the Same

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Cypress Grove Chevre's artisan practices will remain unchanged in its new facility. Soft, aged cheeses like Humboldt Fog, are turned, packaged and wrapped by hand. Some varieties are even hand-labeled. In fresh cheese production, herbs, like lavender, dill and chili threads, are hand-sprinkled for flavor, aesthetics and taste.

Estes is allotting a realistic amount of time for production trials before processing is fully converted to the new facility. After all, it takes time to get things just right in a new home. Mid-August is realistic for starting the transition, he said.

"It could be months before we're fully dialed in and satisfied with our trials," he said. "Quality is everything."

With a new owner, Cypress Grove Chevre is getting ready for the future by investing in a new facility. As part of a new family in a stable specialty market, the cheesemaker is upping its game for the longer term with innovative technology in the food-safety savvy facility, securing even more longevity in the specialty cheese market.

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