

In the kitchen with ... Cada Dia

By Penny Nakamura / For *The Bulletin*

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Walking up the drive to the Sullivans' Prineville farm home is like walking onto a movie set — everything is as it should be for a family that produces the finest local artisanal cheese, which they call Cada Dia.

Alfie the shepherding dog wags his tail and happily greets you. The Jersey cows are munching grass and clover in the wide-open, 60-acre lush green pasture, with the Three Sisters serving as a dramatic backdrop.

Cher Sullivan, who calls herself the Dairy Queen, welcomes visitors and tourists who want a tour of a real-life family cheese factory, where almost everything is done the old-fashioned way: by hand, not by machines.

"We don't have a McMansion here, but what we have is a hand-built home and a hand-built cheese factory," explained Cher with a proud smile. "I don't have a big gourmet kitchen, but I have a country farm kitchen, and we are foodies."

Pat and Cher Sullivan have poured everything into the farm cows and the cheese factory, so they admit they live simply, but eat like kings.

"We first built the cheese factory, three years ago, because the cows were coming," said Cher, gazing out her kitchen window toward her herd of 20 milk-producing cows. "We actually had to live in that first outbuilding you passed coming in. It was like camping because we had no heat and no indoor water. That first winter, it got down to negative 20 degrees one night."

But even with the memories of that rough first winter, the Sullivans say they have no regrets. They absolutely love the cheesemaking business.

"We call it Cada Dia because in Spanish that means every day. We chose that name for our dairy because that is what we do; we make cheese every day, but only seasonally," said Cher. "We treat our cows very well; they are only milked once



Photos by Rob Kerr / The Bulletin

Cher Sullivan removes a round of cheese from the Cada Dia Cheese company cellar in Prineville. The wheels of cheese are aged for at least 60 days, she says, with the cellar temperature kept at 48 to 50 degrees Fahrenheit, with 80 percent humidity. The Sullivans' living room is directly over the cellar, where 7,000 pounds of cheeses are aging.



Photos by Rob Kerr The Bulletin

Cher Sullivan removes a round of cheese from the Cada Dia Cheese company cellar in Prineville. The wheels of cheese are aged for at least 60 days, she says, with the cellar temperature kept at 48 to 50 degrees Fahrenheit, with 80 percent humidity. The Sullivans' living room is directly over the cellar, where

a day, and they're only milked during the season from April through November."

"We do have to separate them from their calves," she continued, "and that always makes me a little sad, but we bottle-feed the calves."

Cher explained that big factory dairies milk their cows several times a day all year round. She also says that most big factory cheesemakers don't run their own herd of cows, but outsource their milk from big dairies.

For the Sullivans, that would go against everything they believe in, because they want to know exactly what their cows are eating and how they're being treated.

They call this the first step in quality control — knowing what the cows are eating so they can produce the richest and creamiest milk.

"On our pasture, I don't use any of the herbicides or pesticides. Our cows are eating only the best," said Pat Sullivan, 55, who was originally trained as a mining engineer before realizing the farming life allowed him to spend more quality time with his family. "Our cows aren't given any growth hormones or anything that makes them produce more milk, like you would see on big factory farms. Everything is natural and pure."

Living simply

Both Pat and Cher grew up in Virginia in urban settings, "I could never have imagined that I'd be a farmer and cheesemaker when I was a young girl," said Cher, 53, with a laugh.

Pat had been an oil engineer traveling to different assignments all over the world. When their first daughter, Hannah, was 2, they went to Nigeria, where Pat had an oil engineering assignment with a French company. Two years later, they had another daughter, Afton, and by that time, Cher said, Pat had decided he wanted to spend more time with his girls.

They eventually bought a small farm with water rights in New Mexico and started to experiment with cheesemaking.

The Sullivans discovered they were good at cheesemaking, and soon they were at all the big farmers markets throughout the area.

7,000 pounds of cheeses are aging.



The Sullivan kitchen, an adobe-like structure with New Mexican styling, features a wood-burning stove that keeps the home comfortably warm. Next to this area, well-used pots and pans hang from a rack.



The Cada Dia Cheese company uses grass-fed Jersey cows to provide the milk for its products. "Our cows aren't given any growth hormones or anything that makes them produce more milk, like you would see on big factory farms," Pat Sullivan says. "Everything is natural and pure."

If you go

What: Cada Dia cheese farm tours, by appointment

When: 10 a.m., noon and 2 p.m. Tuesdays from April through July

Contact: www.cadadiacheese.com or cadadiacheese@yahoo.com

Their success allowed them to literally sell the farm, and take a step back.

“We sold or gave away everything, except for the dairy and cheesemaking equipment,” said Cher. “We spent a year backpacking through Argentina and Chile with the girls. You really don’t need that many things: You can live very simply and still be very happy.”

After they came back from their travels, Cher said their passion was still cheesemaking, and they wanted to take their artisanal cheesemaking to the next level, so they started to look for another farm.

“I first looked on the Internet at a couple of farms in Washington, but when I got there and saw them, I knew they weren’t right for us,” said Pat, who literally drove throughout the Northwest in search of the right farm. “I was in some small burger-bar joint between Ontario and John Day, and sat down next to some guys who were drinking coffee, and one of them mentioned his sister was a Realtor in Prineville, so I took out my computer and contacted her.”

Pat says he took one look at his current Cada Dia Farm and instantly knew this was the place — a place where, he believed, an American farmer could bring the farm to the local tables.

A cheese lover’s dream

Though they’ve only been selling cheese for a few years, Cada Dia’s popularity is spreading, not only locally, but also all the way up to the San Juan Islands and beyond.

Cher stood in her spotless kitchen that opens into the small living room area and pointed out that she was standing directly over the cheese cellar, where 7,000 pounds of cheeses are aging.

In this open area, Cher and Pat have built an adobe-like concrete structure with New Mexican styling, where they keep the wood-burning stove stoked to keep the 800-squarefoot home comfortably warm. Next to this area, Cher has her well-used pots and pans neatly hanging from a rack.

“We built everything, and we were able to find everything we put in here at Habitat for Humanity (thrift store); the cupboards, the counter and even the artwork,” said Cher, who likes the idea of recycling and repurposing. “We share this one concrete wall of this kitchen with the cheese factory next door, which is actually bigger than our home.”

Outside around the wrap-around porch are the milking bays that conveniently front the cheese factory. Here, the Sullivans can milk eight cows at a time.

From the milking bays, Cher showed the inside of the sterile, concrete cheese-factory area, where they hand-pour the milk through a filter and check for quality control before it is put into the 150-gallon stainless steel cheese vat.

Several cheese wheels were lined up on the stainless steel sink, and though there was no cheese in this vat, Cher demonstrated how they would gather the curds and press them into a mold, where they would stay under pressure for the day.

After that time, they would hand roller-brush a golden liquid Holland wax over the wheel of cheese.

“We make cheddar, feta, Parmesan, Camembert and then there’s our herbed cheeses: chive, dill, jalapeño, horseradish, caraway,” said Cher.

Down some stairs is the cheese vault, or cheese cellar, where the delicious aroma of cheese wafts through the air. Rows and rows of 10-pound cheese wheels were neatly lined up on shelves.

“We keep it at 80 percent humidity in here, and keep the temperature between 48 and 50 degrees at all times, and we age the cheddar cheeses at least 60 days,” explains Cher. “When we were first building this cheese cellar, we had no idea there would be so much rock in Central Oregon. We dug and there was only about a foot of dirt and the rest was rock, but having it underground helps keep the temperature cool year round.”

The Sullivans produce 1,000 pounds of cheese each month during the seven-month season. Each gallon of milk produces about a pound of cheese. Though Cher estimates their cellar currently holds about \$70,000 worth of cheeses, she says they won't sell it all in one year, but will let some wheels age longer.

As an example, Cher points to one wheel: her daughter Afton has written on the outside wax that this will be her wedding cheese in 10 years. Afton, before going off to Western Oregon University, did an intensive three-month apprenticeship with her father last summer.

“If it ages that long, that's going to be one hell of a party,” says Cher with laughter. “Cheese is like wine, it gets better with age.”

Though the Sullivans are now empty nesters, with both their daughters in college, they hope their girls will someday return to farming and cheesemaking.

Cher grabbed a big 10-pound wheel of cheese and lugged it up the stairs, eager to test some cheeses.

From the center of the big wheel, Cher expertly took out a thin center core sample and shared a taste of the naturally golden cheese. It's simply delicious.

Cher seemed happiest in her home kitchen, where she can share her bounty of cheese wealth with friends and make a party of it.

She says they also like to experiment with new cheese flavors and have done some custom orders on cheeses.

One California group asked for several wheels of unsalted cheddar. Deschutes Brewery asked the Sullivans to make 70 pounds of cheese with its beer in it.

“It was fun. We got to play around with their hops and barley,” said Cher. “We may do a wine cheddar, too. You don't want it to get boring; sometimes you've got to shake it up.”

Cher took time to answer a few questions.

Q: What are three ingredients you always have in your cupboard or fridge?

A: Real butter, honey and good rice.

Q: Favorite breakfast?

A: Apple crepes and homemade granola with amaranth.

Q: Favorite lunch?

A: Peanut butter and honey.

Q: Favorite dinner?

A: Meat, potatoes and a big salad.

Q: What is your favorite tool or cooking utensil?

A: You can't beat a sharp pair of knives. In the cheese factory, my favorite tool is the Italian cheese corer. We have to sample every wheel that goes out, and the coring tool is so beautiful and ergonomic.

Q: Is there an appliance you disdain having in the kitchen?

A: I have never owned a microwave, and I think a garbage disposal is a big waste of time.

Q: What is your spice of choice?

A: Cinnamon and turmeric. I dump them in everything I cook, from pea soup to curries. I even put it in my plain yogurt.

Q: Favorite meal?

A: I make a mean "he-man-chili" (also called "male chauvinist chili"). I also love real whole milk. If you're not drinking whole milk, you might not as well not be drinking milk at all.

Q: Guilty food pleasure?

A: Any good-quality dark chocolate, any time of the day! Mint chocolate chip ice cream! My daughter, Afton, makes the best ice cream in the summer; ice cream is her specialty, and it's the best.

Q: What is your ideal dream home kitchen?

A: A small kitchen with clutter-less counters.

Q: If you couldn't be in the food industry, what profession would you have chosen?

A: A children's book author. I found the logo for Cada Dia cheese from a children's book. I bought it for a dollar at the library book sale. It was titled "Wholly Cow" and the artist had illustrated a cow's udder and underneath this udder was the backdrop of Mt. Fuji. When we saw this drawing, it showed how we feel some times when we're milking our cows.

So I Googled the artist, Leonard Ragouzeos, and we contacted him, and he gave us permission to use his illustration, which he called "The Great Squirt," for our logo, and he even tweaked it for us by placing the Three Sisters (mountain range) under the udder. He did all of this for us for a couple of wheels of our cheese and a couple hundred dollars.

Q: Favorite food quote or philosophy?

A: Get small and eat slow. I also recently went to hear (food author and former New York Times food critic) Ruth Reichl speak at Bend High, and she said something that really resonated with me, she said: "Respect all foods." I liked that quote so much, I made a bumper sticker out of it and put it on my car.

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