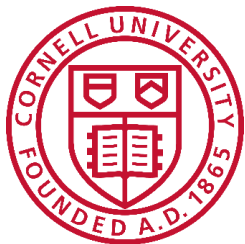


Cornell Cooperative Extension | Erie County

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*This article is the ninth in a series focusing on vendors who are selling their wares at the Western New York Welcome Center's **Taste NY Market**. Thank you to East Hill Creamery owner/operators, Gary & Betty Burley, for meeting with me to share the Creamery's story along with some marketing tips and strategies.*

Spotlight on East Hill Creamery

If you travel Route 20A between Warsaw and Geneseo, you've almost certainly noticed the "cow tunnel" underpass just east of Warsaw. This privately funded and constructed underpass, allows East Hill Farms' cows to safely reach pastures on the north side of Route 20A without having to cross the road, delay traffic or risk car/cow collisions. As the farm expanded from the original 100 acres and 18 cows when it started in 1981, to the current 700 cow grass-fed dairy operation on over 1000 acres, the underpass was one of many changes. The most recent change for the Burley family is the building and operation of the East Hill Creamery on South Main Street in Perry, New York, making the Burley's now part of Wyoming County's long, rich cheese-making tradition.

"Grass-fed" is not a new idea. It's how cows have been seasonally managed for nearly all of their domesticated history. Modern dairy farming brought many changes that included shifting from pasturing animals during the growing season to confinement systems with the farms feeding harvested or purchased forages, grains and supplements year 'round. Those systems can be highly efficient and productive. So much so, that New York State and much of the country continues to have surplus milk supply and marketing problems with associated downward pressures on milk prices.

Pasture-based, grass-fed dairy production models saw a resurgence in interest and innovation with the advance of high-tensile steel fencing systems along with short-duration, paddock and strip grazing strategies that improve pasture yields and forage quality while greatly reducing operating expenses. These systems were becoming popular in other parts of the world including France and New Zealand before catching the interest of farms in North America. The Burley's were among the earliest adopters and adaptors in the region, investing in many miles

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of fencing and shifting to paddock-based, short-duration grazing suitable for the soils and climate of Wyoming County.

All of this led to many herd and land base expansions over the last four decades; always remaining committed to operating the farm as a grass-fed dairy with cows on pasture for as much of the year as conditions permit. The Burleys have also proven that fences don't need to be physical barriers. Most of the fencing on the Burley farm is a single strand of low-impedance charger-electrified smooth steel wire on widely spaced wooden posts. Uncrowded paddocks with abundant, high quality forage and access to water along with content, well-trained cows means that East Hill Farms hasn't felt it was necessary to build and maintain multi-strand fences that are typical of most high density, "New Zealand-style" grazing systems. East Hill Farms is still believed to be the largest grazing herd in the Northeast. Graceland Dairies in Dansville, part of the family operation is run by one son and daughter and milks an additional 600 cows. East Hill Farms is run by another son and provides 100% of the milk for East Hill Creamery.

As Betty and Gary began thinking about transitioning out of their management roles in the dairy cow side of the operation and turning management responsibilities over to their adult children, they decided to act on their lifelong dream and vision of becoming cheesemakers. They knew many farms in the region used to operate or work closely with local farm-based creameries and milk plants. The artisanal, farm-to-table trend had already led to a number of start-up operations, all competing for market share with each other and with existing large, commercial scale cheese manufacturers. Betty and Gary knew they had to do something a little different from what was generally being done. They had heard that early European settlers in western Wyoming County had felt especially comfortable in the landscape in part because it resembled the rolling, alpine regions of their ancestral homelands. Traveling to France and the Alsace-Lorraine regions to visit the dairy and cheese making operations there helped convince Gary and Betty to commit to planning for construction and operation of a grass-fed, raw milk, "Alpine" style creamery.

Alpine cheese is a style of cheese made in the hilly and mountainous European Alps regions of France, Switzerland, Austria, Italy and Bavaria. By centuries-old traditions and methods, the cheeses are made from unpasteurized ("raw") milk and all begin to take shape by pressing curds into cheese "wheels" of various sizes. Cheese connoisseurs will recognize varieties like Asiago, Comté, Gruyère, Emmenthal (aka "Swiss"), bergkäse, fontina, Reblochon, raclette, and taleggio. While the milk is traditionally not pasteurized for these cheeses, production follows strict standards including modern testing to ensure safety and consistent quality and characteristics. Textures range from semi-firm to firm with a dense paste and creamy meltability. Like fine wines, flavor profiles vary, tending to reflect the terroir of the region. Terroir, the flavor influences of the environment, is a term often applied to fine wines. It also applies to artisanal cheeses. Animal species and breed differences, production methods, and

age and storage conditions also greatly influence the cheese flavors and textures. Forage species, microclimates and even the time of the grazing season (early Spring, Summer, or Fall) influence the flavors with a few cheese varieties made exclusive from milk produced in specific seasons.

What this all meant for the Burleys is they knew they wanted to build a state-of-the-art facility based on Alpine cheese-making traditions but with modern amenities to meet quality criteria and the production efficiencies needed to be profitable in an increasingly competitive artisanal cheese-making market. The plant needed to be scalable for start-up production levels through peak production or even future expansion. The Burleys also wanted to make the plant and shop a destination venue for visitors to the area including campers and day trippers to nearby Letchworth State Park and vacationers at Silver Lake just to the west of Perry. Agri-tourism, agricultural education, and farm-to-table dining experiences were all considerations.

With Gary and Betty's substantial investments in planning, resources and farm equity, and with financial backing through a local bank, East Hill Creamery's plant took shape. The Burleys hired a dairy consultant, Alexandre Pellicier (www.alexandrepellicier.com). Pellicier is also a ranked French national team ski and mountaineering racer. He helped to design the facility and choose the right processing equipment, much of which was imported from Europe, including the large, open copper-lined vats where the cheese making begins after the creamery's own milk truck pulls up to the plant to unload the raw milk through the stainless steel piping system. The \$6.5 million facility open for production and sales in 2016. Currently, the plant uses only a small percentage of East Hill Farms' total production although Burleys hope the percentage will increase significantly as production and sales continue to increase.

The unique ambiance and décor of the East Hill Creamery is a result of both the facility's design and the extensive use of red oak, cherry, hemlock, and white pine lumber and red oak beams from trees cut from the Burleys' own farm woodlots. Dan Wagner did the logging and Amish crews did the milling of the wood for beams, boards, and trim. The building features post and beam construction with mortise and tenon joinery exposed throughout the Amish-built facility. Much of the large, wooden furniture was made by Gary & Betty's son, Ryan. Historic images decorate the walls and help to tell the story of cheese making in the region. Windows allow visitors to view cheese making equipment and operations or to peek into the "cheese caves" used for storing and aging the cheese wheels. Caves? Well, not natural or rock-hewn caves, but high, vaulted ceiling, temperature and humidity controlled, earth and sod insulated concrete chambers designed to provide optimal conditions for storing and aging the East Hill Creamery alpine cheese lines.

The cheese "make room" features two large, stainless steel, copper-lined vats used for the early stages of cheese production. The copper lining is considered an important part of the process of making Alpine style cheese, impacting quality, flavor, aging and the preservation process.

Extensive heating, cooling, processing and sanitation system piping and equipment, including modern plate coolers and humidity control units are all part of the investment in the state-of-the-art plant. Rennet and cultures are added and the milk is heated to the proper temperature for the cheese variety as the coagulation and curd formation is managed and monitored. The curds and whey mixture is pumped to the mold table where the curds are placed in plastic cheese mold wheels and the whey drains off. The mold wheels move to the press table where the vertical presses squeeze additional whey out of the wheels and the curds begin the consolidation process, staying in the presses for the length of time appropriate for the cheese type and wheel size, flipping several times to extract the whey while the curds re-knit. Different cheese varieties get different press treatments with different size wheels, re-cutting, and re-pressing and timing in the presses. “Silver Lake” cheese is pressed into 60 lb. wheels and processed at that size. “Underpass” begins as large wheels but the wheels are cut into five pieces, re-shaped and re-pressed into 12 lb. wheels. The cheese wheels are kept under high humidity at 80 degrees F. to quickly acidify from the milk’s original pH of 6.8 to 5.1 in 24 hours prior to moving the cheese wheels into the next phases of processing and aging which include the brining room and cheese caves. Over the centuries, experimentation, intuition, careful observation, and experience helped humans figure out what is necessary to minimize or kill off harmful bacteria and molds that would cause the cheese to rot or be dangerous to consume while introducing the physical, chemical and biological factors that produce desirable flavors, textures and storage life of the products we call cheese.

The whey, typically a waste bi-product from cheesemaking, goes to a local dairy farm, Schreiber Dairy Farm, as part of the farm’s livestock feed ration. Shreibers provide a truck and come to haul away the whey every time they get a call. “Whey has no shelf life,” Gary said. He explained, it doesn’t really fit East Hill Farms’ pasture-based feeding model. Historically, cheese plants like those that dotted the landscape of Wyoming County were located near a water source both for cooling and processing water and, in less environmentally sensitive times, for disposal of the whey, sometimes directly into the streams. Feeding it back to cows is an excellent alternative to expensive treatment, wasteful, or environmentally harmful disposal.

East Hill Creamery has its own, on-site laboratory. Betty is certified to do the testing. Every milk load is sampled and tested for antibiotics and harmful pathogens. Combined with an emphasis of high levels of sanitation, temperature and humidity control, the constant testing is critical to East Hill Creamery’s commitment to safe and consistent production of high quality, artisanal, Alpine style cheeses.

To satisfy NYS Ag & Markets regulations, wheels need to be aged a minimum of 60 days before sale. For Alpine cheeses, this aging or ripening process, called affinage, includes the process of creating the white to golden rind on the cheese wheels through the early application of the “morge,” a traditional mixture of salt water, yeast, and cultures. It doesn’t end there, though.

Twice a week, each of the numbered cheese wheels is rubbed with morge and flipped. That's no easy task, especially since some of the wheels weigh more than 60 lbs. each. Aging can continue for 2 years or longer with the wheels moving between different areas of the caves and from the young cheese cave to the aged cheese cave. Gary pointed out that the cheese caves were sized to be able to accommodate robots that may eventually take over some of the work. Two spare caves are currently used for storage and construction project staging. The Burleys look forward to the day when the plant is able to produce and market enough cheese to put them to use.

Some plants store and age their cheese wheels on stainless steel or plastic shelving, which Gary explained may have some advantages but can also contribute to quality or consistency problems. East Hill Creamery, instead uses removable shelves made of basswood, also harvested from the Burley's own farm woodlots. He said the light, absorbent, basswood planks, sanitized between aging cycles by both sun exposure and chlorine bleach baths and drying, are an important component of the East Hill Creamery's production environment. He believes they help maintain better moisture conditions for the wheels resting on the shelves and also provide favorable microenvironments for the good organisms that help form and maintain the rinds and influence flavors as the cheeses age.

What about the cheese? East Hill Creamery is currently producing four cheese lines in two styles:

- **Underpass**, the award-winning raclette-style cheese, made in 10-12 pound wheels is named after the Route 20A underpass;
- **Underpass Reserve**, a longer-aged version of the signature Underpass cheese with a more robust flavor and firmer texture
- **Silver Lake**, is a gruyere-style made in larger, 60 pound wheels and aged for at least 9 to 12 months; and
- **Happy Accident**, a raclette-style cheese aged 3-4 months which, as the name suggests has a unique, tangy flavor profile resulting from a taste influencing "mistake" in the feeding of the cows.

For more details about East Hill Creamery's cheeses including suggested accompaniments and beer or wine pairings, see the Creamery's web page: www.easthillcreamery.com.

East Hill Creamery cheeses are sold in various package sizes from 4 oz., 8 oz. and 16 oz. packs to one-eighth, one-quarter and one-half wheels. Silver Lake Alpine Style cheese is also baked and sold as "cheese crisps" by the Trappist monks at Monks' Specialty Bakery at the Abbey of the Genesee in Piffard, New York. In addition to marketing their products through the Creamery's Cheese Shop and through on-line sales, including monthly subscription boxes, East Hill Creamery products can be found at many area farmers markets, grocery stores and food co-

ops, delis, cafes, restaurants and specialty shops. The growing list of outlets is shown on the Creamery's web page. East Hill Creamery also sells wholesale through a number of regional distributors including, Finger Lakes Artisan Foods, Food Matters Again, and Headwater Food Hub.

A unique recent addition to the East Hill Creamery's marketing mix is the installation of a cheese vending machine, placed just outside the Cheese Shop. The Cheese Shop is open 7 days a week from 10 AM to 4 PM. The refrigerated vending machine is open 24/7 and accepts credit cards or cash. Gary noted that even when the shop is open, customers sometimes prefer to drive up and use the vending machine which contains every variety of cheese they make along with some extra goodies for meal or snacking variety. Visitors from the Johnstown, New York area stopped in the shop during the interview for this spotlight. In addition to sampling some cheese and buying some products from the store, one of the visitors said, "I love this cheese vending machine you have outside. It's the greatest thing ever!"

The Creamery currently employs three full-time staff and two part-time workers. Mike Lapiana is the East Hill Creamery's master cheesemaker and is a critical part of the success of the East Hill Creamery. Rebecca Grela, who supports the Creamery's sales and marketing efforts, assists with farmer's market bookings and staffing. Gary also staffs some of the markets where he enjoys talking about the East Hill Creamery and its Alpine style cheeses and cheese making tradition. He and Betty also regularly prepare sample plates to share with chefs and managers of area restaurants as part of their product promotion. This has led to many successful product placements and strategic alliances and to on-going additions to restaurant, bar and deli menus.

The Cheese Shop features both the East Hill Creamery's own cheeses and many other food, snack, beverage and gift items. Visitors can ring the bell if no one is at the counter, often because they are in the cutting room, packing cheese shipments, or prepping for the next farm market or festival event. Part of the Burleys' 80-90 hour work weeks includes staffing the farmers markets that are considered important for helping to build brand recognition and loyalty and creating additional cash-flow.

East Hill Creamery's robust web page is maintained by Josh Wolcott. Josh also manages an associated enterprise in the Creamery building, The Chalet at East Hill. The Chalet was part of Gary & Betty's vision of combining a community and regional event center with the cheese plant. The Chalet is an impressive and attractive example of local craftsmanship combined with Alpine influences. The Chalet is designed as a four-season venue. It is fully handicap accessible with plenty of space to mingle or spread out and enjoy the ambiance and décor, peer into the cheese caves or make room, hang out on the balcony or relax in any of the three rooms included in venue rentals. East Hill Creamery doesn't hold a standing liquor license but secures event-specific licenses as needed. Rental tables, chairs, china, glassware, cutlery and linens are available. The facility also features a full kitchen. Of course, as with so many other events and

activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, this season's booking have all been cancelled or postponed. The Chalet is tentatively and optimistically booking for late 2020 and 2021, building in COVID-19 physical distancing and other safety protocols.

As Gary & Betty work to build brand recognition and customer loyalty, one of their goals is to expand the customer base in the immediate area. While the price point may be a factor, along with the ability to get the product in other local markets, Gary notes that they get very few visitors to the store from Perry or Silver Lake. Maybe they are "sneaking to the vending machine when we're not watching," Rebecca suggested with a chuckle.

Gary especially loves the unique, pneumatically operated door between the shipping room and the loading dock. Unlike conventional, track-mounted overhead doors, the heavy-duty door provides a tight seal and stands up well to weather, wear and tear and the moisture conditions in the facility. It's another example of the Burleys' attention to detail that has helped the business get off to a good start, even with all the challenges.

In addition to the web page, East Hill Creamery has an active Facebook page, often featuring shots or videos of visits to regional farmer's markets along with product promotion and some of the backstory of the construction of the facility and milk production. East Hill Creamery's Facebook page includes the statement: *"We care for the land our cows graze on and sharing its bounty with people across the region. It's that love for our pastures, forests and cows that drives us to aim for sustainability in everything we do. We want to see this land and this business live on for generations...."*

"We're about three years into our five-year transitional plan," Gary explained. "As our children continue taking over the farming parts of the business, we'll be looking at shifting our land ownership to them as well." Eventually, the Burley's hope to sell the Creamery as a turnkey operation to someone who will carry on the making of Alpine style cheeses for the local and regional markets and beyond.

Thank you to Gary & Betty Burley for taking the time to discuss the East Hill Creamery and associated operations along with their continually evolving production and marketing strategies. I hope you'll have an opportunity to shop at the East Hill Creamery Store in Perry, New York, select some treats from the Creamery's vending machine outside the Creamery Store, sample and purchase cheese and cheese crisps at area farmers markets, or pick up products at any of the many regional grocery and specialty stores carrying East Hill Creamery cheeses. That includes the Taste NY Market at the Western New York Welcome Center. The Burleys are an example of how New York State farm families are continually adjusting to production and marketing challenges and meeting consumer needs and expectations. The East Hill Creamery is one of the many businesses working to make fresh, tasty and nutritious, locally grown and raised agricultural products available to consumers in the region.



Taste NY at the Western New York
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