

Division of Marketing
Agricultural Development and Diversification (ADD) Program
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FARMSTEAD CREAMERIES BUILDING STRENGTH IN RURAL COMMUNITIES PHASE I

FINAL REPORT

Name: Janet and Bill Butler

A. Project Summary

This project is designed to test the hypothesis that farmstead creameries benefit both small dairy farmers and the surrounding community to the extent that they:

- Provide consumers with wholesome products that are locally produced
- Build economic strength through the addition of value added products
- Assist the local community by adding to its unique rural charm, through the addition of tourism dollars and possible job growth.

Despite efforts by both state and federal programs, the small farm continues to show alarming declines in this country. Butler Farms, as the first Grade A sheep dairy in the United States, is in a unique position to offer a model on how a farmstead creamery can provide both its owners and the surrounding community with economic benefits. This project will focus on the expansion of our farmstead creamery to include aged cheeses, as well as providing educational opportunities to others wishing to pursue similar ventures. The plan of work will be threefold: 1. Increase our creamery capacity through the addition of aged cheeses, 2. Continue marketing efforts of Wisconsin farmstead creamery cheeses through national exposure, 3. Provide educational materials on the creation of farmstead creameries.

B. Economic Benefits

As evidenced by the astounding growth of Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), segments of the population are demanding wholesome local products, which utilize sustainable agriculture practices. Our direct experience at farmer's markets has shown us over and over again that there is a need to provide a link between consumers and their food source. Phase I of this project enabled us to expand our product base available to consumers by the addition of an aged cheese to our product line. With ADD funding we were able to convert our farm's original stone milk house into an aging room. We were then able to develop an aged cheese that was test marketed at two farmer's markets. This in turn helps to expand the agricultural industry, particularly the emerging field of sheep dairying, by providing consumers with more opportunity to try these new products. ADD funds are also assisting in the promotion of small farmstead operations thereby making small family farms more viable in the global marketplace.

Butler Farms was recently certified organic by the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA). Our operation has continued to expand utilizing efficient use of farmland with sustainable farming practices. Without the support we have received from ADD funds, it is doubtful whether we could have continued to explore this new avenue of agriculture.

C. Evaluation

With the support of the ADD program Butler Farms has been able to expand our product line, thereby making us a more viable commercial operation. This has in turn assisted our community, as we have continued to participate in Trempealeau County tourism activities, as we are one of their scheduled bus tour stops.

In Phase II of this project, we will further explore the possibilities of providing other producers with an opportunity to create a value added product. Phase II will also further the goals of this project by developing marketing tools to emphasize the benefits of local production as well as small sized farmstead operations.

D. Description of materials

Further materials with the emphasis on providing information on this project will be developed during Phase II. This will hopefully be able to provide others with learning opportunities for those interested in establishing farmstead operations as well as building on past marketing efforts of other specialty cheese and dairy producers.

D. Addendum to Final Report (Inserted 1-10-00)

ADD funds have enabled Butler Farms to develop an aged cheese. This has been a request of many of our customers at farmer's markets over the past few years. Many had requested a cheese that has a strong piquant flavor and can be used for grating, such as a Pecorino Romano. We began experimenting with a number of different types of hard cheeses, one which was brined in a salt water and then aged, and another that was washed with a locally brewed beer as it was aging. We then began test marketing these cheeses at farmer's markets in Madison, Minneapolis, and Chicago. The beer washed cheese received the most favorable responses. Our final product therefore consists of a sheep milk cheese that has been brined in salt water, allowed to dry, and then washed with beer as it ages for approximately 3 months. It has a rind which is red in color, and a strong piquant flavor.

Customers have often offered us suggestions of what additions they would like us to make to our product line, or changes they would like to see. For example, initially the saltiness of our aged cheese was a problem, and this was then adjusted. From these experiences we learned that it is helpful to offer free samples of your product for people to try prior to purchase. It is also helpful to ask for their ideas. Not only does this give you many new suggestions, it also helps develop a personal relationship with your customers. We are finding that this translates to sales outside of the farmer's markets, including mail order and supermarket sales. Many consumers feel disconnected from their food source, and by having the opportunity to meet the people that are producing their food, they often become very loyal customers.