



SUGAR HOUSE

CREAMERY

*Two young farmers
are living a dream and
making delicious cheese
in Upper Jay*

BY ANNIE STOLTIE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA J. GODFREY

I

MAGINE TWO KIDS, about to graduate from college, who fall in love. They design a shared, seemingly impossible dream and then, just a handful of years later, actually make it happen. They do it with a combination of elbow grease, creativity and drive. And today, on an early May morning, after the cows have been milked, the manure shoveled, the hay spread—and just before the cheese is ready to be ladled—Margot Brooks and Alex Eaton can see that it's all coming together, that their Sugar House Creamery is working. Outside the barn on their Upper Jay farm, they take a moment to sit in the sunshine and play with their dogs Wendy and Stella.

Though the couple, both 30, officially launched their creamery in 2013, "It feels like the plane just left the runway," says Brooks. Any startup needs time to gain traction, but Sugar House is in the business of cave-aged artisanal cheese. And aging cheese takes, well, time.

That pace, and being a farmstead creamery—using the milk from their animals to craft cheese—on this tiny scale, with just 11 cows, might make this operation seem pretty simple. There are, after all, other Adirondack farms that offer dairy and meat and vegetables and honey and whatever else can be cultivated. But just cheese? And only three varieties? "People ask, 'What else are you going to do?'" says Eaton. "We want to do one thing and do it well."

"Our goal has always been to dial this in," adds Brooks, "to focus on depth of the product, not width. It's hard to explain to people that in a system this small there are so many variables. Everything matters"—grass, weather and the lactation curve of the cows. "And that's just the milk."

The providers of that raw product—the real superstars, if you follow Sugar House Creamery

Margot Brooks and Alex Eaton (right), at their Upper Jay farm, use the milk from their small herd of Brown Swiss cows to make artisanal cheese. Dutch Knuckle (below), an aged alpine Swiss, is Sugar House Creamery's flagship cheese.



Clockwise from below: **Wendy, Sugar House branding.** Brooks in the creamery. "I'm very critical of our process and product and focused on quality," she says. Facing page: "Alex has an endless positivity about things," says Brooks. "He has a creative mind and is a hard worker. You have to be in this business." Sugar House's farm store.



on Instagram—are Brooks and Eaton's Brown Swiss cows, tawny creatures with floppy ears and big, sweet eyes. Native to the eastern Swiss Alps, these animals that weigh more than half a ton are hardy, cold tolerant and known for thriving even on poor forage. Sugar House's herd produces 70 gallons of milk each day. That's enough to supply milk for 75 area families—sold through the on-site farm store—plus raw material for the creamery to make some 12,000 pounds of cheese a year.

Right now the cows are contentedly chewing hay in the barn, but in a week, when the Ausable River Valley turns spring lush, with Technicolor greens and bursts of lavender lilacs, the animals will be released for the season to graze on the farm's pasture, kicking off Sugar House's second Green Grass Getdown. Brooks and Eaton are inviting the community to their place—including other Adirondack farmers and their bounty—to celebrate spring and witness the cows' leaping, galloping and all around joyful first romp, their bells clanking as they go into the hills on Sugar House's 22-acre spread. (Adirondack winters are hard for cows, too.)

FARMING IS NOT FOR EVERYONE. But as a sixth-generation farmer, raised on a dairy in South New Berlin, New York, Brooks knows what the vocation takes, not to mention the skill set that's required for cheesemaking. Her father,

Dan, is her "ultimate role model," she says. She describes his rounded "milking" shoulders as ones he's earned, that reflect the satisfying life he's chosen.

Eaton, who's from Middlebury, Vermont, had his first farm experience after he and Brooks graduated from St. Lawrence University, when he took a job at her family farm. They both went on to live and work at Consider Bardwell Farm, in West Pawlet, Vermont—Brooks as an apprentice to a master cheesemaker ("Baptism by fire!" she says), Eaton as a herdsman. They learned by doing. They learned that they loved dairy, confirming the path they were on. In 2012 it was time to find a place of their own.

It was the Upper Jay "property that brought it all together for us," says Brooks. The farm had been for sale for years, used as an unofficial local dog park. The 1920s-era farmhouse, barn, converted sugarhouse and other outbuildings were all in good condition and well above the Ausable River floodplain—a bonus in the wake of Tropical Storm Irene that flooded many Adirondack farms. It was also "well located for direct marketing" to North Country communi-

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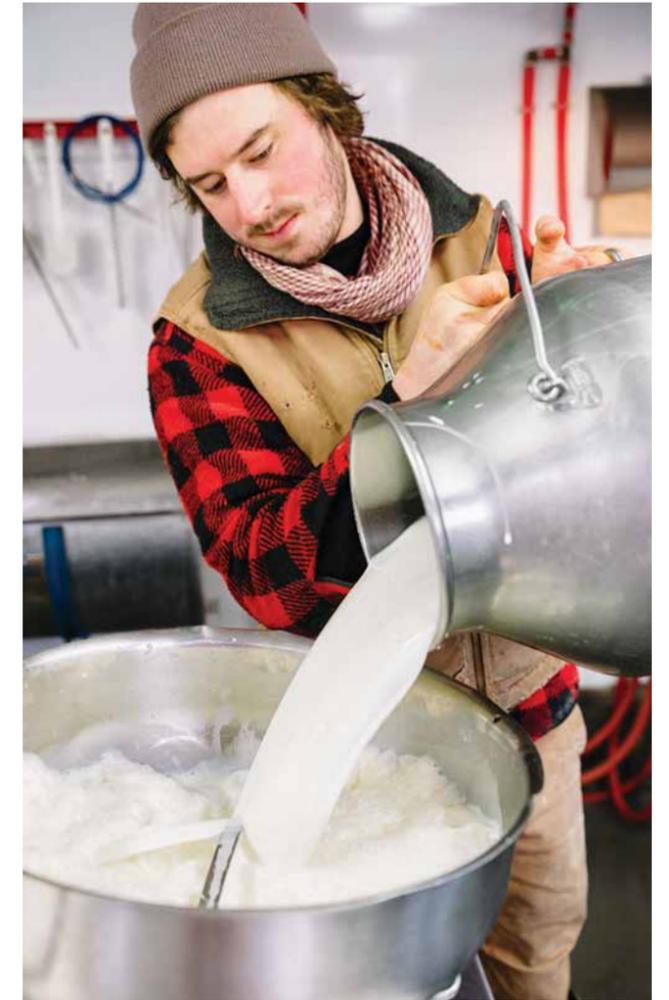
ties, says Brooks, since driving product to New York City wasn't part of the plan. "We wanted to sell cheese where we were making it."

That fall, with a sound business plan and a Farm Service Agency loan, the couple bought the farm. They began working the land, expanding the herd, milking cows, making cheese, developing their brand and telling everyone who would listen about their cheese, sharing samples everywhere they went. (It was only recently that they could quit the jobs that helped them pay their bills—Eaton worked at Dartbrook Rustic Goods, in Keene; Brooks waited tables at Liquids and Solids at the Handlebar, in Lake Placid.) Nowadays, with Sugar House at full tilt, there are no vacations; trips off the farm usually involve promoting the business or delivering product—in Lake Placid, to Mirror Lake Inn, Lake Placid Lodge, The Interlaken, Lake Placid Pub & Brewery, and Liquids and Solids at the Handlebar, among others. (Sugar House ships to several select cheesemongers in Boston, Brooklyn and Pittsburgh.)

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And there's even more of a payoff: The cheese cave beneath the barn is packed with farmstead creamery gold. On wooden cantilever shelves are 25-pound steering wheel-size rounds of Dutch Knuckle alpine Swiss cheese, several wheels deep; wrapped buttons of Little Dickens, some as small as hockey pucks; and wheels of Pound Cake. "This is all our work," says Brooks. "This is it!"

It's a big change from last summer, when inventory was low. (Dutch Knuckle ages up to 12 months.) The other big change is the addition of Casey Galligan, who joined Sugar House in January. "Casey is an amazing cheesemaker," says Brooks. She worked at Asgaard Farm,





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CHEESE DESCRIPTIONS FROM WWW.SUGARHOUSECREAMERY.COM

DUTCH KNUCKLE
RAW COW MILK
AGED 8-12 MONTHS

"The layered complexity of a great beef broth ... robust, bold and mouthwateringly meaty."

POUND CAKE
PASTEURIZED COW MILK
AGED 45-60 DAYS

"A beer wash-rind cheese ... flavors are of cultured butter with a mellow nuttiness and a whiff of wild onions."

LITTLE DICKENS
PASTEURIZED COW MILK
AGED 10-14 DAYS

"Rich and silky on the palate, with a bright, lactic tang. Aromas are of rising bread dough with a finishing taste of true sea salt."

in Au Sable Forks; at Consider Bardwell, in Vermont; and creameries in the Sparta region of Greece and the Languedoc region of France. "It's so huge to have another mind on hand. She understands what our goals are."

RECENTLY, A WOMAN came to Sugar House Creamery with a piece of Pound Cake cheese that she had purchased. She demanded her money back because, she told Brooks and Eaton, there was mold on it. (There's supposed to be; mold, yeast and bacteria make up the cheese's edible rind.)

In this country, farmstead cheese is growing in popularity, but it still requires some explaining. Many of Brooks and Eaton's exchanges with customers at farmers' markets or in their farm store involve some type of cheese education: the cheese-making process or how to serve or eat it. The couple says they appreciate the opportunity to meet those who eat the food they make.

Of course, marketing on such an intimate level can also

invite criticism. The idea that some of Sugar House's cows will end up in the freezer is troubling for some who want to believe in a pastoral scene with cows aging and dying on their own time. "Our cows are very valuable employees that we care deeply for, but we can't keep 1,200 pounds around," says Eaton. "It's not us being heartless. It's never an easy thing."

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These days farmers also face what Brooks calls "an increasingly litigious culture." New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets inspectors make *(Continued on page 89)*

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regular visits to Sugar House Creamery, as they do to all such operations. Ever looming, though, are new regulations. (Brooks and Eaton worry over a ban on ripening cheese on wooden boards, an important part of the cheesemaking process.)

It helps that other farmstead creameries are established in the Adirondacks. Brooks doesn't see her dairy colleagues as competition, "because we sell a very different product." She adds, "I love the idea of a cheese plate with cheese from Sugar House Creamery, North Country Creamery and Asgaard Farm."

She says she also "loves farming and its diversity of tasks. And [Alex and I] love working together."

And the idea of "people buying our product, paying us to do exactly what we want to do?" says Eaton, "That's incredible."

For the Love of Cheese

Learn more about Sugar House Creamery at www.sugarhousecreamery.com or on its Facebook page. Follow Sugar House on Instagram to see adorable photographs of its Brown Swiss cows. The creamery's on-site farm store, which also carries products from neighboring farms, is always open. (From October through May, The Snowy Grocery, a small, off-season farmers' market at Sugar House, happens on Sundays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.)

This summer, Sugar House Creamery will be at the Keene farmers' market on Sundays, 9:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.; the Lake Placid farmers' market on Wednesdays, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.; and the Saranac Lake farmers' market on Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

On October 11 Adirondack Harvest (www.adirondackharvest.com) sponsors an Essex County Cheese Tour with demos, samples and farm markets at Sugar House Creamery; North Country Creamery, in Keeseville; and Asgaard Farm, in Au Sable Forks.

Cheese-loving visitors can stay at Sugar House's Upper Jay farm (see www.airbnb.com), in the Carriage Barn or Guest Suite, which includes a French breakfast of freshly baked bread, fruit and Sugar House Creamery cheese. 🍷

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