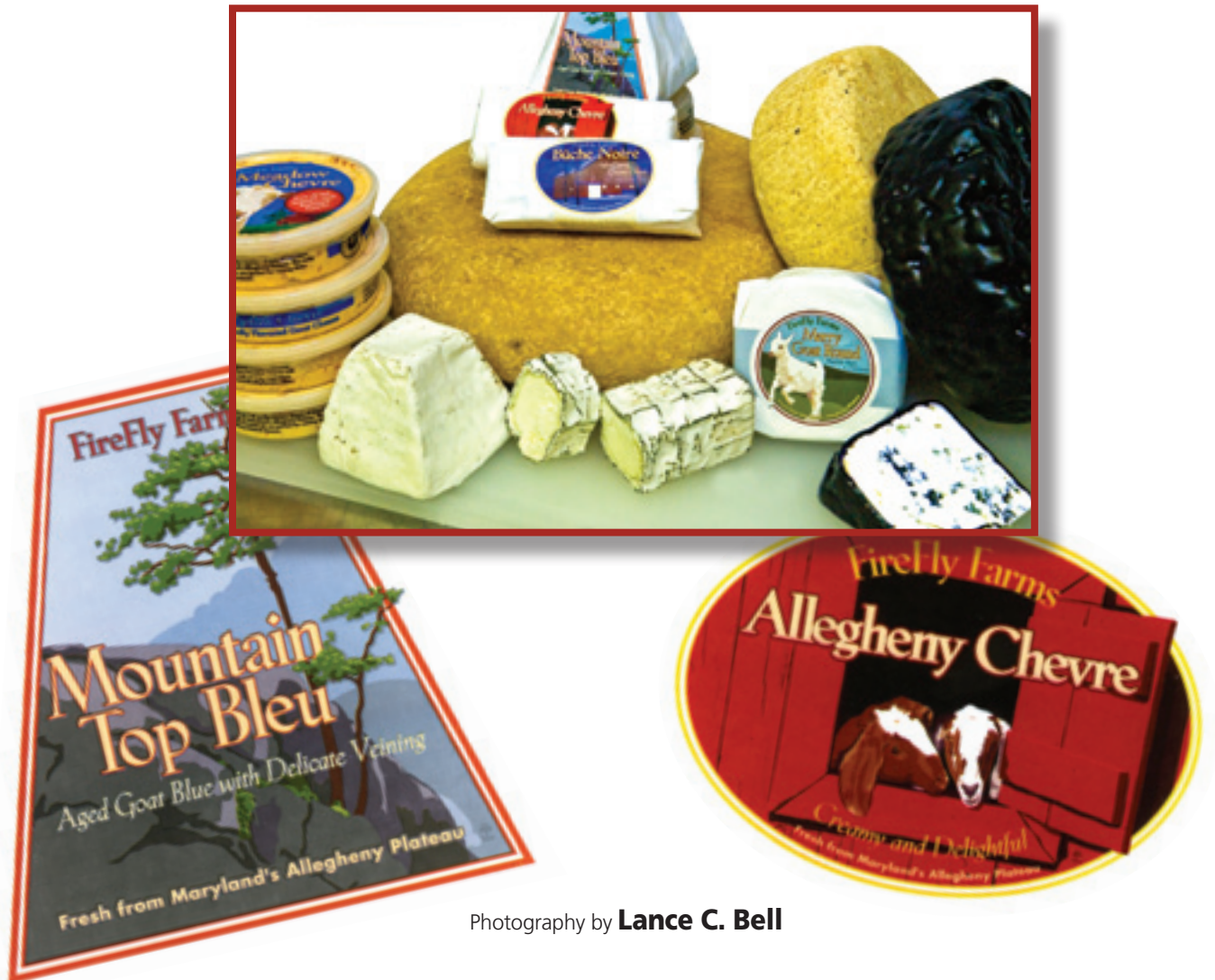


FireFly Farms

Garrett County's Award Winning Goat Cheese Creamery

Goat's milk cheese, goats' cheese, goat cheese or chèvre (French for goat) is cheese made from goat's milk.



Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

When Mike Koch and his partner Pablo Solanet purchased their 130 acre farm in the town of Bittinger in 1997, they had intended to use the farmhouse as a quiet place to escape the city. As renovations to the farmhouse came to a close the pair began to look for their next project. With Pablo's passion for fine food and Mike's family history in dairy the two settled on their next adventure: cheesemaking.

Using goat milk as their base they began to experiment with fresh and aged varieties. On a whim Mike entered their creations in the annual American Cheese Society competition which was being held in Washington D.C.

The 2002 competition resulted in a huge surprise: two of their cheeses medaled! Mountain Top Bleu earned a gold and Merry Goat Round earned bronze medals. "We were shocked and thrilled" commented Pablo and he quickly decided with Mike to make a full time effort to develop FireFly Farms as one of the first artisan cheese dairies in Maryland.

The location for the creamery was chosen on a neighboring farm. Over the course of several months Mike and Pablo helped to build a 1,000 square foot facility. While Mike maintained his marketing executive position in Washington DC, Pablo devoted his days to cheesemaking



Left: Pablo turns cheese in the early stages before it works its way into the Aging Room.

Below: The first step for the goat's milk is to be placed in this 130 gallon Pasteurizer for two hours (a Maryland law) where it agitates, spins, and is heated to the proper temperature.



in their new facility. The demand for FireFly Farms cheese quickly grew and Pablo and Mike hired their first apprentice in 2003: Matt Cedro. Matt, a culinary school graduate and Pittsburgh chef was looking to move to Garrett County with his wife, Andrea. “We were attracted to Garrett County because of the pace and change from city life” comments Matt. “Our instincts told us to go for it and try this new adventure” echoes Andrea. The pair now both work full time at FireFly, Matt as the plant manager and head cheesemaker and Andrea as the Director of Sales and Marketing.

The last seven years have been a very busy time of growth for the small company. The line of products has grown from four varieties to ten and have earned thirty five national and international awards. “We are proud and inspired by the continued recognition of our cheeses in these competitions” adds Mike. “To medal alongside domestic creameries as well as international cheesemakers is quite remarkable for this small creamery in western Maryland.” Quite notable are FireFly’s blue and longer aged cheeses, “it is unusual to find 100% goats milk blues being made in the United States” states Matt and we produce two versions!” The FireFly cheese line varies from

fresh and flavored chevre, to soft ripened and washed rind cheeses to their longest aged cheese of 9+ months.

In a relatively small plant, FireFly Farms produces approximately four thousand pounds of cheese per month. Sourcing local goat’s milk from four neighboring farms in Springs and Salisbury, Pennsylvania – the team makes cheese daily. Even though the volume has quickly grown, the FireFly cheesemakers remain committed to the time honored tradition and art of cheesemaking. The milk moves through four stages: pasteurization (required by Maryland Dairy laws), cooling and culturing, cutting and draining and molding and aging. “Making cheese by hand takes time, commitment and passion” adds Matt – “it gives us control over our product and allows our craft and product to remain unique and recognizable.”



Andrea and Matt Cedro in the Aging Room with racks of Mountain Top Bleu cheese. The cheeses are very carefully managed in the Aging Room because they all age at different rates — from three weeks to nine months.

purchased property in Accident, Maryland. This will be the future home of the creamery and their first retail store. The design of the new building will encourage tours and interested cheese enthusiasts who can observe cheesemaking throughout the day. “We would like to start making cow’s milk cheese in addition to our award winning goat cheese — just thinking about the possibilities is exciting!” Matt adds.

The new “project” Mike and Pablo started a decade ago in their farmhouse has quickly evolved into an exciting and viable business in Western Maryland. “We hope to attract cheesemakers to the mid-Atlantic region” states Mike. With many types of milks available, goat, cow and sheep, the possibilities are endless!

Right: Youngest cheesemakers, sisters Adrienne (left) and Evangeline, are the daughters of Andrea and Matt.

Aging cheese involves understanding the subtle chemical and biological reactions taking place on the surface and in the body of the cheese. Cheesemakers must manipulate these results to achieve the desired taste, texture, aromas and appearance. FireFly’s carefully constructed aging room requires daily maintenance of temperature and humidity. The cheeses are turned daily for the first week and then every other day. Depending on the type of cheese, the aging process can be as short as fifteen days to as long as nine months.

The FireFly team has grown to seven full time employees and several part time staff. Anxious for the next phase of the business they have recently

