



Take That, Wisconsin!

BY TERESA HENDRIX

Point Reyes' Original Blue. Bellwether Farms' Crezzenza. Cowgirl Creamery's Mt. Tam. Fiscalini Farms' San Joaquin Gold. Fagundes Old-World Cheese's Hanford Jack and Maria's Queso Panela.

What do they have in common, aside from the fact that they're all artisan or "farmstead" cheeses and have all received rave reviews in gourmet food magazines and newspapers like *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle*?

Cal Poly.

Thanks to the annual "Farmstead Cheesemaker" short course run by the Dairy Products Technology Center, the university is helping to shape California's emerging artisan cheese industry.

"The industry is in about the same

place the California wine industry was about 20 years ago," explains Professor Phillip Tong, lead organizer of Cal Poly's Farmstead Cheesemaker short course.

According to Tong, several factors account for the state's emerging artisan

About 40 students every fall learn the science behind cheese making, which involves the interaction between milk, other ingredients and bacteria to produce flavor and texture. They also get a hands-on lesson in making cheese at the DPTC.

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cheese industry. First, some consumers are demanding more specialty cheese varieties. Secondly, California is the nation's No. 1 milk-producing state. "By 2005 or 2006, California is expected to be the largest cheese producer in the United States," Tong says. Take that, Wisconsin.

With all the available high-quality milk, there's plenty for diversion to cheese production. "California dairies use about 40 percent of their milk production for making cheese. That's a lot of cheese," Tong says.

Many dairy farmers have done just that. "Some farmers were not satisfied with the prices they were getting for their milk, so they decided to add value to their product by making cheese," he says. And plenty of family farms have sons or daughters now interested in starting and running an artisan-cheese operation "back on the ranch."

Now in its sixth year, Cal Poly's Farmstead Cheesemaker short course has helped all kinds of budding artisan cheese makers.

"Almost every farmstead cheese maker in the state has been through our class," Tong says. "We were the first university to offer a farmstead cheese-maker short course."

Then they spend time learning about California regulations covering farmstead cheese operations, as well as business and financial planning.

The courses are in demand. "We've had about 200 people go through the short course; it's always full," Tong says.

That's not likely to change any time soon. "The American palate is becoming more educated. More Americans are also traveling around the world, tasting artisan cheeses in other countries."

The Internet is helping too – by bringing together the consumer and the farmstead cheese maker, Tong adds.

And in the past decade, America's gourmet restaurants have added a cheese course to their menu. Instead of dessert after a meal, they offer a tasting of a variety of artisan cheeses.

Says Tong, "It's all about educating the consumer that there are other cheeses beyond mozzarella and cheddar."

The Cal Poly Dairy Products Technology Center offers a full series of continuing education classes for entrepreneurs and industry professionals. For more information, visit <http://www.calpoly.edu/~dptc/>. ■



Students at a recent 'Farmstead Cheesemakers' short course
(Photo courtesy of Dairy Products Technology Center)