Valley Ford Cheese carves a niche on the Bianchi family dairy

Contributed by Tim Tesconi

A lot of start-up companies hire high-priced marketing agencies to develop a compelling story about their business, paying professionals to script a narrative that can generate well-placed stories in magazines and newspapers.

Sonoma County dairywoman Karen Bianchi-Moreda had a great story — she just needed the business to go with it. In fact, she said, it was her family’s story of survival, hard work and perseverance that compelled her to start a farm business that showcases her ancestors’ rich history of life on the land in the Sonoma-Marin dairy belt.

Three years ago Bianchi-Moreda founded the Valley Ford Cheese Co. and began making a farmstead Italian-style cheese that’s similar to the flavorful cheeses still crafted by her family dairy to be financially viable for nostalgic reasons, I wanted to replicate the Italian-style cheese that was always under the glass dome on my grandparents’ kitchen table. I wanted to capture the flavor that I remembered as a child in my grandparents’ kitchen,” said Bianchi-Moreda.

She took a cheesemaking short course at Cal Poly and talked to

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anyone and everyone who knew about cheesemaking including the Callahan family, owners of neighboring Bellwether Farms, a sheep dairy in Petaluma. In addition to sheep milk cheese, Bellwether Farms produces a cows’ milk cheese using milk purchased from the Bianchi family’s Mountain View Jersey Dairy.

Bianchi-Moreda transformed an old dairy building into the cheesemaking room, which looks like a hospital operating room with its white walls, tiled floors and stainless steel equipment. Sanitation is crucial in cheesemaking. A massive, century-old barn, where Bianchi-Moreda’s ancestors once milked cows by hand, houses the storage rooms where the cheese ages for months and years, depending on the variety and the customer. In addition to the Estero Gold, Valley Ford Cheese Co. also makes a cheese called Highway One. It’s a version of an old-style Fontina, with a silky, creamy texture. Both cheeses won double gold awards at the 2010 Harvest Fair.

Bianchi-Moreda’s cheesemaking business really took off when son Joe returned to the family dairy after graduating from Cal Poly last December. During his years at Cal Poly, Joe had completed internships at cheesemaking plants around the country including Leprino Cheese in Michigan.

Since I started we’ve tripled production, doubled inventory space and added three new distributors,” said Joe, noting that production has increased from 400 pounds of milk a week to 1,200 pounds a week. He said additional storage space for aging cheese is needed before he can further increase production.

“The only thing holding us back is space,” said Joe, who makes cheese three to four days a week.

For Joe, it’s a dream come true to be back on the ranch producing a high-quality cheese from the farm’s Jersey cows. He feels a special connection to a ranch where his great-great-grandfather once milked cows by hand and the generations before experienced the joys and challenges of dairy farming.

“It all fell into place. This is where I want to be,” said Joe. “To make it in the dairy industry today, dairies in Sonoma and Marin counties have to produce a value-added product like cheese. We can’t compete on the commodity milk market with the big dairies in the Central Valley.”

Being young, eager and ambitious, Joe has ideas for developing new cheeses and cultivating new market territories, including the Central Coast. He said a fresh cheese product is certainly in the plans for the near future.

Curds are scooped so they can be packed into molds to make Italian-style cheese.

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Strong demand is driving the increased production, which keeps Bianchi-Moreda traveling to accounts around Sonoma County and the Bay Area. She handles 54 accounts, ranging from G & G Market to the Palace Market in Point Reyes Station, and sells her cheese at up to six farmers’ markets. In addition, she works with three distributors in the San Francisco Bay area and one in San Diego.

She is proud that the Jersey cows on her family’s dairy are under the Certified Humane program, which assures consumers that the cattle are treated humanely. Bianchi-Moreda said it’s a third-party verification of the way her family has always treated the Jersey cows in their care.

“These cows are our babies,” she said.

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