

Orb Weaver Farm: Twenty-six Years of Sustainable Farming

Marjorie Susman and Marian Pollack
Cheese Makers
Orb Weaver Farm
New Haven, VT



Orb Weaver Farm
(<http://www.orbweaverfarm.com>)

Women assume a bigger role in Vermont farming

By Douglas Wilhelm
Special to the Globe

MONKTON, Vt. — Marjorie Susman and Marion Pollack were milking their Jerseys one recent early morning when they heard on the radio that more women own and operate farms in Vermont than in all but five other states. Five hundred and ninety women in Vermont, the radio said.

"That's 588 we don't know," Pollack remembers thinking.

"We're sort of an anomaly here," the 30-year-old Pollack said one afternoon last week, standing in her sweatshirt and rubber boots with the Champlain Valley down behind her. Pollack and Susman, who run a small, 4-year-old diversified farm, gave a workshop for an agriculture organization on women running farms in the summer of '83.

"Nobody came," Susman, 37, said. A couple of women, she said, did "stick their heads in," but

only because their husbands were at workshops down the hall.

"The statistics show that rural women are much more stereotype-bound than urban women," said Dr. Alma Owen, a specialist with the state Extension Service and advisor to the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women.

Added Cornelia Swayze of Tunbridge, past president of the Vermont Sheep Breeders Assn.: "The older women in Vermont, if they were on a dairy farm or a sugar

operation, were already doing half the work," but they were less likely, if asked, to call themselves farmers. "The younger women are quite different," said Rita Edwards of the Governor's Commission.

But observers of the farm scene in Vermont say that inhibition is disappearing, that it is becoming more and more acceptable and common for women to take charge of farms.

"Twenty years ago, that was

just not the thing to do," said Donald McFeeters, agricultural coordinator for the Extension Service.

At least some rural organizations reflect that trend. The long-established Vermont Farm Bureau has always had a Farm Wives Assn., but this year the bureau notified its members that it will consider ways of bringing women into leadership roles in the main group. A federal study recently said that women own and

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■ FARMS

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operate 8.1 percent of the farms in Vermont, compared with a 5.2 percent national average.

"There are a variety of reasons that women are farming here," said McFeeters. Some, he said, have come from out of state, enticed by Vermont's beauty and independent style of life; many others are of farm families, and have moved into leadership roles, prompted by the death of a husband or relative, by divorce or by plain choice.

"The younger women don't even give it a second thought," said Cornelia Swayze.

Marian Pollack and Marjorie Susman are two women who have made the male farmers around them think twice. The two, natives of New Jersey and Connecticut, moved to Vermont from western Massachusetts, where they had met and decided to be farmers and to follow a diversified approach that has, gradually, impressed their neighbors.

In the Champlain Valley, where Pollack and Susman own 18 acres, the nearby farms are large dairy operations, spread out on the gentle glacial valley and devoted mostly to the production of milk. Now that the framers of the 1985 Farm Bill in Washington are talking about phasing out milk price-supports, many of Pollack's and Susman's neighbors are feeling vulnerable and uncertain.

The two women are less so. They milk only 16 Jerseys, whose richer milk has about 19 percent higher value; they have three acres in a garden that is closely planted in produce, which they sell to restaurants, and in flowers, which they dry and arrange and distribute to stores. This winter they began putting much of their milk into an aged cheese, which they are busily marketing.

The name of the cheese, and of the farm, is Orb Weaver, after the familiar spider who spins a beautiful, circular web.

"The idea of doing cheese meant we could set our own price," Pollack said. Diversifying meant they would not be dependent on milk prices, which are changeable even in good times.

"Our approach to farming is somewhat controlled by the fact that we're women," said Pollack, 37, who was a social worker before she decided to farm. "You'd



Marion Pollack (right) and Marjorie Sussman with their Jersey cows.

GLOBE PHOTO BY TOBY TALBOT

rarely find men milking so few cows and seeking to diversify. A man might be so good with tractors that he wouldn't think of not having one." Orb Weaver had a tractor, an old one, but sold it.

Like all young farms, Orb Weaver is heavily in debt, and recently went deeper to equip and start its cheese operation. But several hundred yellow, Gouda-shaped wheels are aging now in the new cheese house; the two farmers have placed their product in food stores in Middlebury, Burlington, Montpelier and New York City, and are planning a mail-or-

der campaign. They are living on their own food and making their payments, and making future plans. They have had trouble, they said, finding credit, and trouble getting taken seriously. But so, they believe, would two young men from Massachusetts.

"When we first came," said Susman, "everybody thought we were rich kids who were just fooling around. When they found out we were serious, their attitude really changed."

In the evening, Susman's and Pollack's neighbor, Earl Bessette, was down with his earthmover,

smoothing out a site for Orb Weaver's new greenhouse.

Bessette's dairy farm, after long struggle, is prosperous. He has about 80 milk cows and 400 acres, and shares it with his two sons. He got down from his tractor to talk.

"When they were getting started, I didn't think they were going to make it," Bessette said of Susman and Pollack. "But now..." He looked around at the little farm. "If I had it to do over again," he said, "I think I'd go the way they have."

by Tory Bilski



MARIAN POLLACK AND Marjorie Susman are often asked about the unusual name they have chosen for the farm they own and operate in Monkton. The orb weaver, they explain, is the name of the only spider to weave a circular web.

"It takes on more and more meaning," Margie says, "the more we farm. A spider's web is its universe. They build their world around them. We want to make our farm, our web—to be one self-contained unit."

These two human orb weavers have, without inheritance and without supplemental income, established a productive, working farm in a matter of a few years. That makes them an exception to the rule in Vermont's agricultural scene.

Though this is an era when many farms across the nation are being sold at auctions, Vermont has actually seen an increase in farms. The rise is due, however, to the increase in part-time farmers, gentlemen farmers, and the remnant of the Woodstock generation who sought to "go back to the land." To be considered a farm, one needs to sell only \$1000 of produce a year. Very few of Vermont's new farmers make their entire living from farming; those who do succeed full-time these days have usually inherited a family farm.

Ten years ago, when Margie and Marian decided they wanted to farm, Marian was in her mid-twenties and working as a family therapist. Margie was 21, and after three years of working as a bank teller, had enrolled in the University of Massachusetts as a classics major.

"We started out with vegetable gardens in those days," Marian explains, "and each year we kept expanding. We liked the idea of growing our own food and working outside and for ourselves. We wanted a real farm."

Margie switched from classics to agriculture, attending the University of Massachusetts to learn about animal husbandry. After she graduated, the two women began managing dairy farms. They moved to Vermont for such a job in September of 1980, managing a dairy farm in Ferrisburg.

Then in 1982, the owner offered to sell them another piece of land he owned—the land in Monkton. Their lucky break was qualifying for a \$20,000 20-year interest-free loan; at ag school they had learned about a trust farm for new farmers set up by Lotta Crabtree, an actress of the 1800s. Using that loan as their down payment, they took out a mortgage on the rest of the farm.

New kids on the block

Originally labeled "the girls on the block," Margie and Marian say they were greeted into the farm world with smirks. They took it in stride. Except for the dairy operation, they have learned how to take care of their property mostly by the book, be it carpentry, plumbing, electrical wiring or organic farming.

"We're not *women* farmers," they say. "We're just farmers. We like to farm."

They point out if there are "girls on the block" they're the twenty-four Jerseys that, even in winter, are ambling in the fields of the Orb Weaver farm.

"We try not to keep them cooped up in the winter," Marian says. "We let them out every day, weather permitting."

The cows are central to one of the farm's major operations. Two years after they bought their farm, the women took out a second loan to build a cheesehouse. With the fresh, raw milk from their small herd of Jerseys, they make a mild farmhouse cheese that is sold locally, as well as in gourmet shops in New York City.

"It's been hard to market our cheese," says Margie. "We make it with our hands and put a lot of energy into it. And we're farmers, not marketing specialists."

"But we've gotten good feedback about it and we have other things going on here," Marian adds. "We're diversified."

Staying alive

They have a three-acre garden that lies on a gently, sloping hill facing southeast behind their house. By the end of January they're already getting their seeds in the mail. Before placing their seed orders, they ask local restaurant chefs what kinds of produce they're interested in buying. Based on what the chefs tell them, they plant.

As a result, the vegetables they harvest run the gamut. They grow the mundane—corn and string beans—along with gourmet foods—radicchio, endive, arugula—all organically.

"We pick them when they're very young and sweet. They look perfect and unblemished or we don't sell them," Margie says. They have several restaurants that buy solely from them.

Another patch of the garden is for flowers. They grow over ten varieties of flowers for drying and packaging in baskets.

"It's creative farming," Marian says. "That's how we've managed to survive."

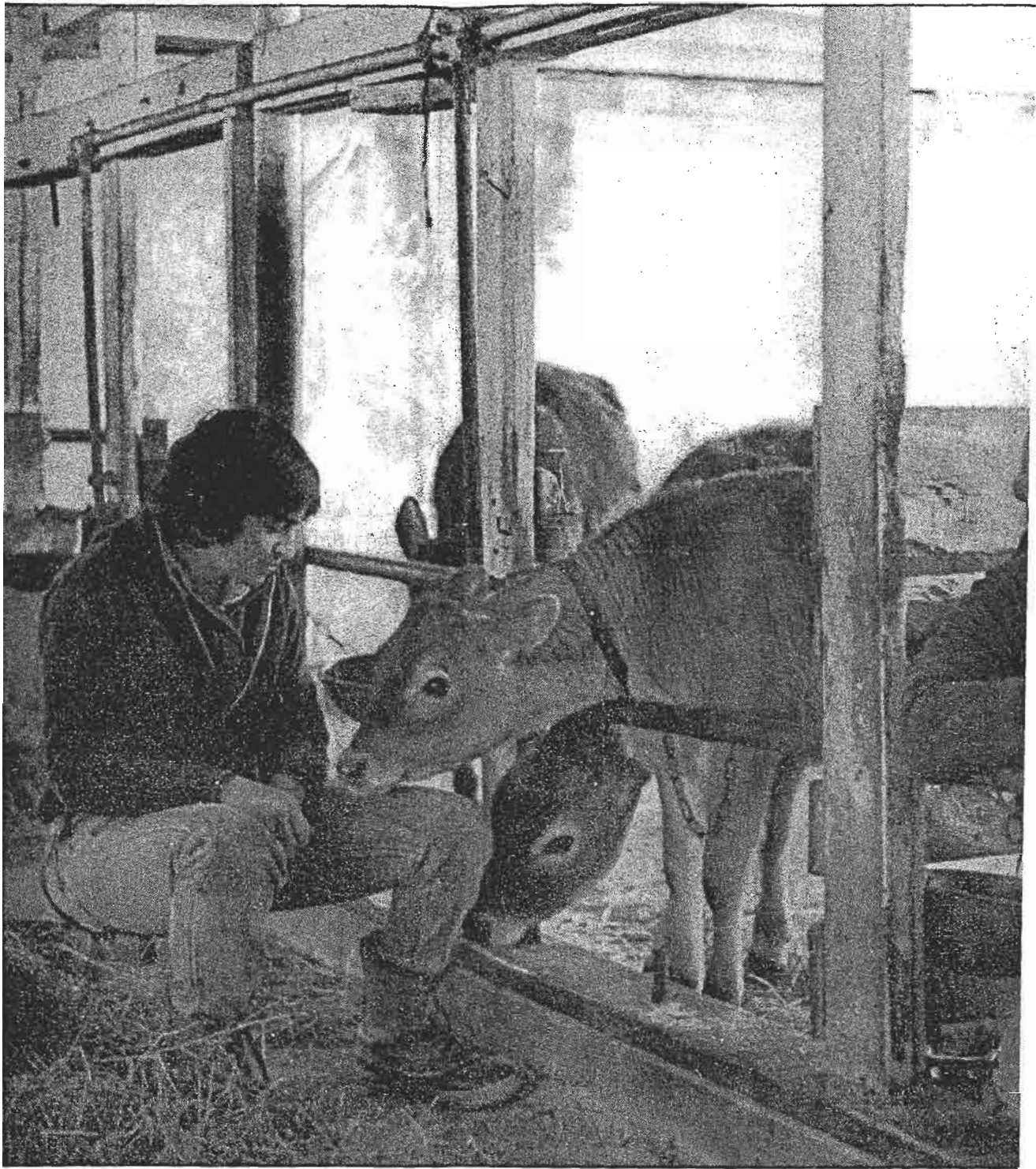
Nature's cycle

"There's this constant reaping and sowing," she says. "The money we make from our garden goes to buy the hay for the cows; the cows' manure fertilizes the garden in the spring. The cows give us milk; we make cheese. Everything is fed back into the farm in this cycle, even down to our vegetable scraps. They go into the compost for next year."

As for any dairy farmer, the most critical cycle of the day is milking. When it gets close to 4:00 p.m., they call in their cows with an old English expression used for cow calling: "Hey, bossy, bossy." The cows begin their march into the barn.

"We like the routine of this life," Marian says. "We like the structure of beginning and ending our day around milking."

Inside, the barn is clean and warm. A dozen barr cats are living temporarily in the birthing pen. Margie and Marian set about hooking the suction machine up to the cows' udders. While the cows



are milked, they also get their coats brushed. Margie and Marian untangle the mud and manure from each of them until their coats are a clean, healthy, rich brown.

"Most people can't believe we name our cows; most cows just have numbers," Marian explains. There are nameplates above each cow's stall. Their first cows were named after trees in honor of the Crabtree loan. Then they began naming them for spices. So it is that Willow is to the left of Nutmeg. "We can't treat our girls like machines," Marian says, rubbing the belly of Cinnamon. "They're more like our children." She explains that their latest baby is named Kukla, after one of the characters of a fifties childrens' show.

An old tradition

Marian and Margie set goals 10 years ago: to have a farm, a herd of Jerseys, a cheese product, and to live off their own land. These goals are realized.

Their future goal is not to become a mega-farm. That would mean they would have to hire help. They want to always be able to work their own farm; the farm is their home and their web.

In the middle of milking, a close friend and farmer, Ed Rotax, comes by to say hello. He doesn't let a minute slide by before he is helping out around the barn, pouring sawdust into the bins, carrying milk pails into the milk room, while passing along



TORY BILSKI

recent news.

He brings up the bad news of the dairy farm that burned just north of them. "Huge farm, over a hundred cows," he says. It appears to have been an electrical fire, and Margie and Marian express relief that they've replaced their barn's wiring.

An old Joan Baez tape is playing on a portable cassette. Kukla, the baby, is getting her mother's milk in a pail and slops it up excitedly. The cows seem sweet and curious; they nudge and lick at the clothing of anyone standing within range.

It takes nearly two hours to milk the cows, and then Marian begins giving them fresh hay and grain, tossing down clean sawdust for their evening bed. Margie and Ed are in the milk room finishing up

room.

He mentions how it was, before the sixties, when you had to bring the milk down to town yourself, instead of having it picked up like today. Now each farmer has a bulk tank, saving that regular trek to town, but it's another big capital expenditure beginning farmers have to make.

After the cows are fully pampered and put to bed, Marian turns all the lights off in the barn. Ed takes his leave. Walking up to their house, Margie observes, "There's a ring around the moon. That means we're going to get precipitation."

Day's end

The homestead at Orb Weaver Farm was built in 1790. Inhabited by several families by the time Margie and Marian got it, the house was in a state of disrepair. They have removed the newer aluminum siding, preferring the grey clapboard underneath, and torn off the modern paneling inside. Here, one forgets these women have not grown up as farmers.

Dried flowers hang from the ceiling everywhere: scabiosas, delphinium, salvia, and nigella; yarrow, starflower and larkspur. Contrasting with the paler hues of flowers are bright red chili peppers also hanging to dry.

The women's kitchen pantry is filled with glistening jars of summer harvests they have canned: tomatoe carrots, beans, corn, pickles, wild strawberry jam.

On their refrigerator hang a dozen postcards from all over the world, with one thing in common. They all feature cows. They are kept up on the door with the large magnets that are routinely put in cows' stomachs to keep any accidentally-eaten metal out of harm's way.

The living room is lined with books on three walls, but Marian and Margie admit they rarely have time to read anymore. By the end of the day they're physically exhausted and just want to turn on the television.

A recent acquisition for them is a video cassette recorder. Rented tapes would cost too much; they buy blank tapes and record old movies that are on late at night when they're already asleep—say, at 9:00 or 10:00 p.m.

The kitchen smells of fresh, baking bread, and a pot of beans is on top of the stove. Margie and Marian have left their mud-encrusted rubber boots at the porch entrance to the room.

"We have hopes of taking down this wall and the garage behind it," Margie gestures, "and putting in windows and a nice porch so we'll have the view of the mountains at sunset."

While the two cook, they turn on the radio to listen to "A Prairie Home Companion" and Garrison Keillor talking about the Lutherans in smalltown Minnesota. It seems a scene out of another era, in that kitchen on a Saturday night, until after dinner and after-dinner talk, when Margie gets up to turn on the VCR.

"We've taped *Camille*," she says. ▼

From: *American
Country Cheese*

by *Laura Chanel and
Linda Siegfried*

1989

Orb Weaver Farm

.....
*New Haven
Vermont*

CHEESE: Orb Weaver
Vermont Farmhouse
Cheese

RETAIL SALES: Yes

TOURS: No

MAIL ORDER: Yes

The industrious orb weaver is a spider known for her particular orb-shape web that is visible on the grass in the early morning dew. The two owners of Orb Weaver Farm, Marjorie Susman and Marian Pollack, begin their days in that early morning dew, milking their forty-five Jersey cows. Continuing through the day, they work their four-acre market garden, build and rebuild the structures on their land, make cheese, deliver their products, and then milk their "girls" again that evening.

The gently rolling hills of the dairy land of western Vermont provide a tranquil setting for the rustic, 1790s farmhouse on Orb Weaver Farm. The small herd of Jerseys is carefully tended. As we watched, each contented bovine claimed her own place on the milking stanchion under her own name. Unlike those at most dairies, each cow on Orb Weaver Farm has a name, not a number. Each milking takes at least two hours. As the pampered beauties left the barn, one stopped and stared at us, refusing to move on until Marjorie gave her a little shove, and explained, "She just loves the color of your skirt."

Most of the milk produced each day goes to the making of the Orb Weaver Farmhouse Cheese. The milk is carried from the milking barn to the little cheese house just up the hill. The clean and tidy processing room holds a small vat and other cheese-making equipment purchased from Holland. Here the milk is heated, a starter added and, later, the rennet is stirred in. When the curd forms, the whey is drained out but the curd is not washed. It is salted, cut, and worked by hand with large paddles to keep the curd pieces separate. The salted curd is then transferred to two- and five-pound Gouda molds in which it is pressed to force out the remaining whey.

The next day, the cheeses are removed from the molds and placed in the curing room for approximately one week to dry and form a rind. After this curing period, the cheeses are waxed. Marjorie and Marian choose to age their cheeses for approximately six months before offering them for sale. Their cheese is available in two- or five-pound wheels, or one-pound wedges cut from the five-pound wheels.

Rows of clean shelves filled with neatly arranged rounds and wedges of cheese line the walls of the Orb Weaver curing room. Rounded tops and bottoms form shapes that are simple, soft, and almost voluptuous. An alluring aroma of fresh sweet milk emanating from this charming room completes

the picture. Marjorie and Marian formulated and then improved upon their cheese over the years. It is unique in that it is not a washed-curd cheese like Colby, nor is the curd "cheddared" as it is for Cheddar. Their cheese is creamy and mild (not unlike Sonoma Jack), and exceptionally low in salt (they add only one cup of salt to ten pounds of cheese). Marjorie and Marian wanted a cheese that represented their cows and their farm. They have done it. Orb Weaver Farmhouse Cheese is a straightforward, country cheese that certainly reflects the women who make it and the place in which it is made.

The owners of Orb Weaver, now so at home on their farm, were actually born and raised in the cities and suburbs of Northeastern America. Several years ago they met in Massachusetts and found that they shared a common dream to move to the land to farm. Marjorie enrolled in a two-year agricultural course specializing in dairy management while Marian continued her social work as a probation officer and family therapist in Harlem.

In pursuit of their dream, Marjorie found a job milking eighty cows and raising replacement heifers on a dilapidated eighteen-acre farm. In 1982 they bought the farm, which they named after that diligent spider they admired. These women are unique in their community, where it is most unusual to have such a small and diversified farm. Nonetheless, the locals stop to admire their garden and their cows and to buy their cheese, vegetables, and flowers. Besides selling directly from the farm, they deliver their vegetables and cheese to local restaurants. Their cheese can be found for sale in local markets and apple orchards in the area. It can be purchased by mail order and bought in such places as Zabar's and Bloomingdale's in New York City.

These women are living their dream. In doing so, they nurture their ancient, ailing house, their garden, their cows and, of course, their cheese. They have earned the friendship and respect of their farming neighbors, no easy feat for two female city slickers. Is this what they imagine doing for the rest of their lives? Marjorie answered for them both, "We have started playing the lottery but have decided that even if we win, we will still keep our cows and keep making cheese."

Orb Weaver Farm

Asparagus Salad

Serves 4

Asparagus is grown at Orb Weaver Farm. We love this salad of two of the farm's products.

$\frac{3}{4}$ pound asparagus, tough ends removed
4 ounces Orb Weaver Farmstead Cheese
1 cup coarsely chopped walnuts
1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
1 tablespoon lime juice
3 tablespoons olive oil
1 teaspoon Creole or Dijon mustard
Salt and pepper to taste
Half a red bell pepper, seeded and diced

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Cut the asparagus into 2-inch pieces and steam until just tender. Cool in ice water.

Cut the cheese to match the asparagus pieces.

Toast the walnuts in the preheated oven until lightly browned, 3 to 5 minutes.

Mix the vinegar, lime juice, oil, mustard, salt, and pepper in a salad bowl. Add the red pepper, asparagus, and cheese. Marinate for approximately 30 minutes.

Mix in the walnuts and serve at room temperature.

Marjorie and Marian eat their cheese every day and avidly seek different ways to serve it. Since they favor Mexican-style flavorings, we dedicate this to them.

- 1 medium potato, cubed (approximately 1/2 cup)
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 1 small green bell pepper or 1 mild green chile, cubed (1/2 cup)
- 1 medium red onion, chopped coarsely (1/2 cup)
- 4 eggs, beaten
- 1/2 pound Orb Weaver Farmstead Cheese, cut in 1/2-inch cubes
- Chile Sauce (recipe follows)
- 4 large burrito-sized flour tortillas
- 4 tablespoons chopped cilantro

Parboil the potato for 5 minutes and drain.

In a medium skillet, melt the butter, add the potatoes, green pepper, and onion and sauté for 4 to 5 minutes until the onion and pepper are softened. Add the eggs and cheese. Scramble until the eggs are just set.

Spread 2 tablespoons of chile sauce in the center of each tortilla. Spoon a quarter of the egg mixture onto the sauce on each tortilla. Roll the tortillas, place on a plate or baking dish, and heat briefly in a microwave or 350°F oven for 5 minutes.

Place on individual plates, spoon half a cup of chile sauce over each burrito, and sprinkle with chopped cilantro.

Chile Sauce

- 2 ounces large dried California or New Mexican chiles
- 2 garlic cloves
- 1 small red onion, sliced
- 1/2 teaspoon oregano
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 3/4 cups water

Preheat the oven to 450°F. Place the chiles on a baking sheet and toast them lightly in the preheated oven for 1 to 2 minutes. Do not let them burn. Remove from the oven and cool slightly. Discard the stems and seeds.

In a medium saucepan, bring all the ingredients to a boil. Simmer until soft, about 20 minutes. Cool slightly.

Purée in a blender or food processor and then force the purée through a sieve. Keep warm.

Orb Weaver Burrito

Serves 4

Orb Weaver Farm

Macaroni and Cheese

Serves 4

Invariably, when we asked cheese makers for recipes, we received yet another for macaroni and cheese. We took it from there. Here is a colorful version that might almost be recognized as the old American favorite.

- 1 bunch Swiss chard, white stems discarded
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 can (16 ounces) Italian-style tomatoes, chopped and drained (2 cups)
- ½ pound spinach pasta, in corkscrew, shell, or macaroni shapes
- ½ pound Orb Weaver Farmstead Cheese, grated (2 cups)
- 3 ounces Blue Cheese, crumbled (¾ cup)

Coarsely chop the Swiss chard and steam until just wilted.

Melt the butter in a sauté pan. Add the onion and cook over low heat until soft. Add the tomatoes and remove from heat.

Cook the pasta al dente, 8 to 10 minutes. Rinse with cold water and drain well.

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Butter a 2-quart baking dish. Place half of the pasta in the dish, layer with half of the tomato mixture, and then with half of the cheeses. Repeat the layers, cover and bake in the preheated oven for 35 minutes.

Farm News

Attaluson County Independent
Nov. 16, 1995

Pair sells herd to make own cheese

Orb Weaver Farm brings back Colby

By PETER CONLON

MONKTON — The award-winning herd of Jersey milkers is mostly gone, but the cheese is back at the Orb Weaver Farm in Monkton.

Orb Weaver owners Marjorie Susman and Marian Pollack recently sold 20 of their Jersey herd, which had placed third in the nation this past year for herd size in national Jersey competition based on protein, butterfat and production.

The change, the two women said, was to get back to their vision — hand-making raw milk Colby cheese in their tiny cheesehouse.

"We always wanted to make cheese, and it was time to do what we always wanted," Susman said.

Orb Weaver cheese used to be found in local stores and some catalogs until about two years ago when Susman and Pollack turned their attention to the cows.

"We were interested in getting a really good herd of cows," Pollack said.

Soon, their herd grew to more than 40, with about half of them as milkers. Still, they missed the cheesemaking and decided it was time to find a suitable home for all but one of the milkers. Before doing any footwork, they dreamed the cows would end up in an operation where they would be valued for their quality breeding and treated well.

Word spread and soon Tom Pyle,



ORB WEAVER FARM owners Marian Pollack, left, and Marjorie Susman recently sold most of their prize-winning herd of Jerseys in order to focus on cheese production at their Monkton farm.

Independent photo/ray Hellman

operator of the Comfort Hill Jersey Farm in Vergennes called. Their dream came true. Comfort Hill specializes in breeding top quality Jerseys and their cows would be treated well.

This week, the pair put a coat of paint on their dormant cheesehouse in preparation for production starting in a couple of weeks.

In the coming months, several more of the herd will calve and milk will begin to flow with growing volume into the cheesehouse.

The cheesemaking is all done by hand. Susman and Pollack carry the

milk from a bulk tank across the barnyard to the cheese vat, where it is stirred and cut by hand before being packed into round molds. The cheese ages for two months.

They expect to produce 5,000 to 6,000 pounds of Orb Weaver Vermont Farmhouse Colby per year — considerably less than the 50 million pounds expected from the Cabot cheese plant in Middlebury.

The first wheels of cheese are expected out of storage in time for Valentine's Day.

Cheese production will stop in the summers, as the cows dry off and Pollack and Susman work their organic garden, which supplies

many area restaurants.

Though production has been non-existent for two years, interest in Orb Weaver cheese lingers.

"Not a day goes by that people don't ask 'when are you going to be making cheese again,'" Susman said.



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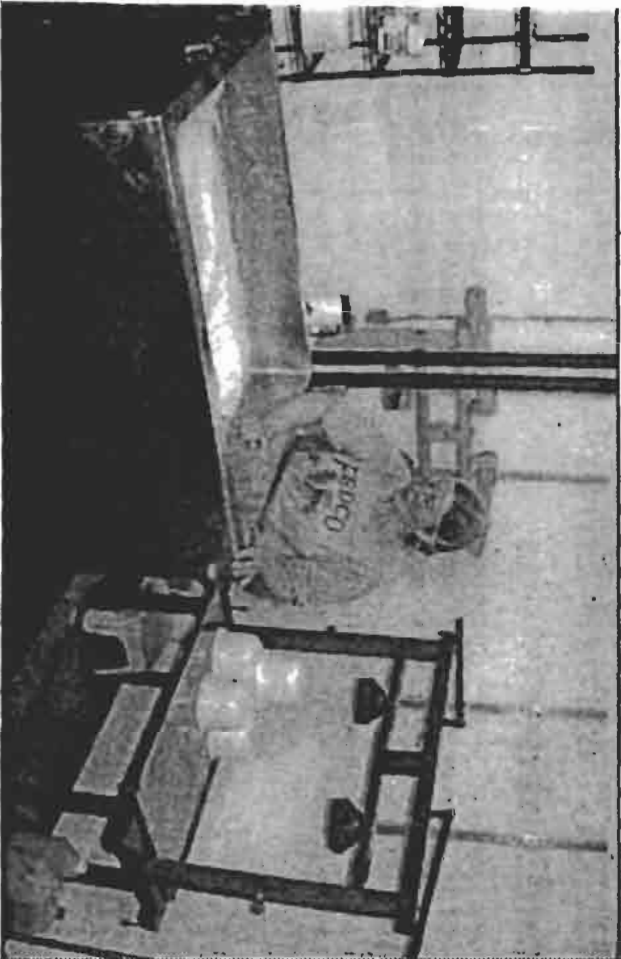


photo by Bob Chatfield
The Orb Weaver Farm produces 250 pounds of Colby Farm House Cheese in a week and 6,000 pounds in a year. They were making cheese when the Valley Voice visited and Marjorie Susman was stirring the product in the cheese making process.

Spinning and Weaving It's how you look at it..

by Bob Chatfield

The back of the pamphlet detailing the Orb Weaver Farm operation defines an orb weaver as a "spider that makes delicate, symmetrical webs." An appropriate name for something that would seem to defy modern day logic.

Just when it would seem that the small time agricultural operation has come and gone, here comes proof that it hasn't.

It's not easy, no question about it. And it's not a life style that a lot of people in todays world would readily adapt to. But just as the orb weaver is diligent in spinning it's web, Marjorie Susman and Marian Pollack have shown it's still possible. It's taken a little love for what their doing, and a lot of hard work, but they have turned this small time operation of six milking cows, a small cheese making plant and an organic garden, into a profit making proposition.

One can't help but be struck by the irony of this operation. Neither had any farming background. Both came from growing up in city environments in Connecticut and New Jersey. Yet they came to Vermont looking to get into farming in 1981.

"I don't know why, but it (farming) was something I always wanted to do," said Susman. "I guess part of it is that I love everything about food. I love to grow it, I love to prepare it, I love to cook it and I love to eat it. We just enjoy what we do," said Susman.

Susman and Pollack bought this farm from Jim and Margaret Morris in 1981 and put in their small cheese plant in 1982. Originally they were milking up to 30 jersey cows, but have since reduced that number to just six.

They make cheese every Monday and Thursday and produce 250 pounds per week and 6,000 pounds in a year. Because they use raw milk they are required to age their cheese 60 days, but Susman said they age it six months to enhance the flavor of the Colby Farm House cheese. To keep cost down everything is done by hand.

Spinning and Weaving It's how you look at it..

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hand, including stirring, forming, waxing and date stamping the cheese.

Although they do some mail order business (mostly around the holidays), they do most of their marketing through stores and restaurants around the state. They are, however, coming up with a line of Cave Aged Cheese that will be sold in some of the finer stores in New York City.

Susman and Pollack, who also breed and sell first calf heifers in the spring, milk and make cheese from November through June. In June they drive off their cows and put them to pasture and turn their attention to their organic gardening which they tend to from June until late fall.

Through that garden they grow produce that they sell mostly to natural food stores and restaurants around the state.

"It hasn't been easy and we've made some mistakes, but I think we've gotten it to where we're pretty happy with what we're doing," says Pollack.

Susman says she wishes that more people would get into the cheese making business. "We've shown a lot of people our operation, but for one reason or another they haven't gotten into it," said Susman. "It's taken us a long time to figure out the intricacies of it, but it's been well worth the time and effort."

Blessed are the cheese makers

Two dairy farmers struggled for years selling milk. But their tangy raw-milk cheese turned their fortunes.

The last straw came one day in 1995. Marjorie Susman and Marian Pollack had both been up milking cows since 4:30 a.m. They had been doing this — milking 30 cows and shipping the milk to bottlers near their New Haven, Vermont, farm — for 15 years. They were so poor, says Susman, “that we couldn’t afford tuna fish.”

Milking one morning, she turned to Pollack and asked, “How much longer can we do this?”

Pollack, 47 at the time, answered, “Let’s do it until I turn 50.”

“We won’t last that long,” said Susman, then 40.

So the two farmers sold off most of their cows, keeping seven to produce their Orb Weaver Vermont Farmhouse Cheese. The round, firm, raw-milk cheese has a tangy yet buttery quality.

“We make more money selling cheese from seven cows than we ever imagined making with the herd,” says Susman.

Their cheese is made twice a week in round plastic molds that are embossed with a cow and a number. All of the cheeses are aged; some are dipped into wax and stored in a cool

room, others are stored in a cave the farmers had built for them last year.

The earth-covered cave was blasted out of a hill and looks as if it has been in the spot for centuries. The door is fastened with wrought-iron decorations that look like shepherd’s staffs set horizontally. Giant boulders from neighboring Panton, Vermont, flank the door.

Inside, there is nothing but cheese aging on racks, benefiting from the 85 percent humidity, building up mold that is wiped or washed off regularly.

The difference between their cave-aged cheese and their regular cheese is that the cave-aged version is drier in texture and nuttier in taste, giving it a French farmhouse quality. The regular cheese is more like a Colby, a mild kin to cheddar. Both cheeses are sold to local restaurants and stores. They have a beautiful melting quality, especially on the pizza that Susman and Pollack make at home. Before the pizza goes into the oven, they add a hand-



Marian Pollack (left) and Marjorie Susman, in front of their ripening cave, with their farmhouse cheeses.

ful of their own curds, which settle, rather than melt, into their grated cheese, adding extraordinary richness.

During the summer, Susman and Pollack turn their attention to a 3-acre market garden. From June until fall, they sell their organic produce to restaurants.

As much as they can, Susman and Pollack live off the land. Every year at the end of the growing season, they make big pots of vegetable stock from the garden leftovers and freeze the stock. They also blanch and freeze peas and corn. Carrots are buried in bins filled with leaves in the basement. Enough onions and potatoes are stored to last until the following harvest. Pantry shelves are lined with peppery homemade salsa, crisp bread-and-butter pickles, tomato sauce, and extra-sweet dried plum tomatoes.

Susman attended agriculture school at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Pollack had been a probation officer in New York City, then a family therapist in Greenfield. Once they decided to farm, they chose Vermont, says Pollack, "because we saw every dairy farmer in Massachusetts go out of business. We answered an ad in *New England Farmer* and went to work for a land developer who owned a dairy farm."

They moved to what is now Orb Weaver Farm to look after the herd in 1981. A year later, the then-owner asked if they wanted to buy the 103-acre property. Susman and Pollack managed to put a financial package together for 30 of the acres, thanks to an interest-free loan from the Crabtree Trust (Lotta Crabtree was a popular Gold Rush performer who left money for first-time farmers). Recently, the same foundation loaned them funds to add the remaining 73 acres to their holdings.

They work seven days and hardly ever rest. "But we get up at 5:30 a.m.," says Susman.

She makes it sound like something of a vacation.

**PIZZA WITH ONIONS,
ROASTED PEPPERS,
AND CHEESE**

DOUGH

- 1 tablespoon dry yeast
(1 envelope plus ½ teaspoon)
- ½ cup warm water (for the yeast)
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1¼ cups additional water
- 3 cups flour
- ¾ cup semolina
- 2 teaspoons sea salt
- Extra flour (for kneading)
- Oil (for the bowl)

In a large bowl, sprinkle the yeast over the ½ cup of water and let it sit for 10 minutes. Add the olive oil, then the 1¼ cups water.

Add the flour, semolina, and salt. Stir to form a dough. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured counter and knead the mixture thoroughly.

Clean out the bowl, add a drop of oil, and return the dough to it. Cover with plastic wrap and let the dough rise in a warm place for 2 hours or until it has doubled in bulk.

Punch it down and let it rise again for 1 hour.

TOPPING

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 large onion, sliced
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- Olive oil (for sprinkling)
- ½ cup sun-dried tomatoes,
torn into 1-inch pieces
- 1 roasted red pepper, cut
into slices
- ¾ cup firm, grated Colby-
style cheese

Set the oven at 500 degrees. Put a pizza stone into the oven to heat.

In a skillet, heat the oil and add the onion, salt, and pepper. Cook the onion over low heat for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally, until it is very soft.

When the dough has risen, halve it and knead each half

thoroughly. Put one ball of dough into a zipper bag and freeze for another meal.

On a lightly floured board, roll out the other ball to a 12-inch round. Set it on a pizza paddle sprinkled with flour.

Drizzle the dough with oil. Add the sun-dried tomatoes, onion, red pepper, and cheese.

Transfer the pizza to the hot oven by sliding it off the paddle and onto the stone. Bake the pizza for 10 minutes or until the cheese melts and the edges of the dough are golden. Cut into wedges and serve at once.

SERVES 4

MACARONI AND CHEESE

CHEESE SAUCE

- 4 tablespoons butter
- 4 tablespoons flour
- 2 cups milk, heated to
scalding
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 cup firm, grated Colby-
style cheese
- Pinch of cayenne pepper

In a saucepan, melt the butter, stir in the flour, and cook, stirring constantly, for 2 minutes. Add the hot milk gradually, stirring all the while, until the sauce thickens. Bring to a boil, lower the heat, add salt and pepper, and simmer the sauce for 2 minutes.

Stir in the cheese and cayenne pepper. When the cheese melts, remove the sauce from the heat.

PASTA AND TOPPING

- Butter (for the baking
dish)
- 1 cup bread crumbs
- 1 teaspoon olive oil
- 1 pound penne pasta
- ¾ cup firm, grated Colby-
style cheese

Set the oven at 300 degrees. Have on hand a 3-quart baking dish. Butter it.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Toss the bread crumbs and the oil together.

Spread them on a baking sheet and toast them in the oven for 30 minutes, turning several times.

Turn the oven temperature up to 375 degrees.

Add the penne to the boiling water. Cook the pasta, stirring once or twice, for 5 minutes or until it is tender but still has some bite.

Drain the pasta and transfer it to the baking dish. Add the cheese sauce and mix gently. Sprinkle the grated cheese and then the bread crumbs on top.

Bake the pasta for 30 minutes or until the top is golden and the sauce is bubbling at the edges. Serve at once.

SERVES 6

**GRILLED CHEESE
SANDWICHES**

- 4 slices whole-wheat or
rye bread
- 4 tablespoons Dijon
mustard
- 4 tablespoons mayonnaise
- About ¼ pound firm Colby-
style cheese, cut into
thin slices
- 8 slices sun-dried
tomatoes (not in oil)
- 4 large leaves arugula,
stems removed
- 1 tablespoon butter
(optional)

Spread the bread with mustard and mayonnaise. On two of the slices, layer half the cheese, then the tomatoes and arugula. Add the remaining cheese and top with the remaining bread, mustard side down.

Heat a cast-iron skillet or griddle (if the pan seems too dry, add the butter). Cook the sandwiches until golden brown on both sides. Serve at once.

SERVES 2

A 2-pound waxed wheel of Orb Weaver cheese is available by mail for \$20 plus \$7 postage and handling from Orb Weaver Farm, 3406 Lime Kiln Road, New Haven, VT 05472.

Orb Weaver Farm

-Charlie McMeekin

I arrived at Marjorie and Marian's place to be greeted by two friendly dogs and a beautiful view east toward the Green Mountains, but the ladies were on vacation. No, not the owners, they were extremely busy. But the five beautiful Jerseys, who are the source of all Orb Weaver cheese, get the summer off to graze and enjoy the views. Marjorie was out making morning deliveries, and Marian was up in the garden. That night, their farm was to be featured at a popular local restaurant's "Farmstead Night", and vegetables had to be picked.

Marjorie and Marian were worth the wait. These two women have been partners since 1976, beginning in Massachusetts. But they saw what was happening to agriculture in our neighbor to the south, as family farms steadily gave way to agribusiness or suburban development. It was not the lifestyle they wanted, so in 1981 they answered an ad for a herdsman in Vermont, and have been here ever since.

Their product, Orb Weaver Farmhouse Cheese, is a mild and creamy Colby-style cheese, dipped in wax, and sold in two and six pound

wheels which are aged for a minimum of seven months. It is available year-round, but made only during the winter months, leaving the time necessary to raise and harvest their three acre garden of organic vegetables. And although the cheesemaking output of three tons a year does not make Orb Weaver a big producer, that says nothing about the quality and taste of their cheese. We all know that good things often come in small packages, an adage proven in August of 1998 when the American Cheese Society judges gave Orb Weaver's Farmhouse Cheese second place in the American Original/ Cow category.

In 1997, it was the editors of *Country Home* magazine who featured the Orb Weaver Farm in their June issue with some beautiful photography and recipes. They have also won an award for the best-tasting milk in Vermont. They avoid BST and hormones.

The key to the cheese is the quality of the milk, according to Marjorie and Marian. They really concentrate on breeding a top line of Jerseys, cows already known for their quality milk. At one point, theirs was one of the top ten herds in the country. This quality pedigree is the admission ticket to a dream life for a cow, for it is clear that Orb Weaver's herd is subjected to nothing but love and kindness.

Travels with Charlie

Welcome to "Cheese Travels with Charlie", sponsored by the members of the Vermont Cheese Council. I'm Charlie McMeekin, an English teacher who spent the summer of 1998 visiting many of the cheesemakers in our beautiful state, and can hardly wait to share my adventures. As an English teacher, I have spent 25 fortunate years living in Vermont and working with her children. So much of what I enjoy about the rural quality of Vermont I owe to her farmers. This trip, then, is my tribute to Vermont and the people who keep it special.



Marjorie Susman and Marian Pollack share the spotlight with "one of the girls."



Orb Weaver's Marian Pollack monitors quality control.

It comes across in the way that Marian and Marjorie talk about their lives and their work, in their concern for enriching the clay soil of their New Haven farm through natural composting, in their insistence on only feeding their animals the sweetest-smelling hay, in the cleanliness of their barn and the order of their garden.

An orb weaver is a spider known for its beautiful web, a creation achieved through its hard work. The web consists of many strands all working toward a common purpose. The end result becomes a thing of beauty which has resilient strength. It has a purpose, a function, but it is also art. That's how I felt after talking with Marjorie and Marian. It's clear that farming is hard work, even here, but it can also be an art. You can make time to love your animals, to enjoy the evening breeze on your porch, to watch the deer feeding on your back hill. You can choose to make a cheese which remains affordable to your neighbors. And when all of your strands serve a common purpose,

you too may find that you have built a life of beauty and purpose, of function and art. As Marjorie said at the close of her Country Home interview, "there's nothing else I'd rather do. We get to be outside all day doing something that we believe in. Every day I realize how lucky we are."

Something feels right about being able to say that after more than twenty years of work. It is possible to visit the Orb Weaver Farm by calling ahead, and cheese may be purchased on the farm or at stores and co-ops throughout Vermont. It can also be found at fine restaurants around the state. If you're fortunate enough to get to the farm, make sure you sneak a peek into the kitchen of the farmhouse. First of all, it gives you a chance to admire the new porch, and secondly, beautiful dried flowers hang from every wooden beam, giving the place a most attractive look and aroma. And, you must know that Marian and Marjorie both believe in giving free samples. It's an act of typical generosity, but it also belies their belief in their own cheese. "Sampling is the most important component in marketing" said Marian "Once they taste it. . . they'll buy it." And yes, I did go home with a two-pound wheel that I bought. Equally important, Marjorie confessed that, aside from occasionally enjoying some Camembert, she's partial to her own product. "It makes a great grilled cheese sandwich".

Orb Weaver's e-mail is orbweavr@together.net, and they welcome mail-order customers. Their phone number is (802) 877-3755, and their farm is located at 3406 Lime Kiln Road in New Haven, Vermont, USA, not far off of scenic Route 7 in the Champlain Valley region.



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Country Corvies
October 27, 2002

◆ FEATURE



Cheese dreams

Pioneering cheesemakers recognize the virtues of scaling back

By Lili LeGardeur

CORRESPONDENT

The owners of Orb Weaver Farm in Monkton are so confident about the future that they increased the size of their dairy herd by 50 percent last year.

"That's right," says Marian Pollack, and runs the 100-acre dairy and vegetable farm. "We added two cows last year. Now we have six."

Orb Weaver Farm has won fans throughout New England and around the country for its mild, sweet Colby as well as the smokier, cave-aged Colby, which Pollack and Marjorie Susman introduced two years ago.

The fact is, however, that making the cheese doesn't require many animals. A few healthy cows can produce enough milk to generate three tons of farmstead cheese a year — the amount that Pollack and Susman figured they could comfortably make on the farm without sacrificing quality or setting up a factory.

The women always knew that. Even

so, they ran themselves ragged for years trying to keep up with something that seemed to them to be an essential part of succeeding as real farmers:

"We met a woman who was milking goats and making cheese, and we said, 'We could do that.'"

Marjorie Susman

maintaining a dairy farm and shipping milk.

From the day they purchased their Monkton farm in 1981, traditional dairying — i.e. milking cows and shipping it to wholesalers via a big truck that pulled into the farmyard several times a week — simply seemed like the thing to do. They started with 15 Jersey and gradually increased the herd.

By 1995, they had reached a high of 30 milking cows and 20 young stock.

That was when they decided to pare back, says Pollack, who looks back on the decision to sell most of the farm's

consumed by more than two dozen cows that needed to be milked morning and evening jostled with cheesemaking and the organic vegetable business, which was the farm's summer-time mainstay. For one year during the early '90s, things got so hectic that Susman and Pollack simply put aside making cheese.

That was a big deal, says Susman, who said making farmstead cheese was the vision she and Pollack had when they first decided to leave western Massachusetts in 1980 and become self-sufficient, sustainable

cows as "a great relief."

"The milk check was enough to pay for the animals' grain, but not for their hay," she recalled.

The time and care consumed by more than two dozen cows that needed to be milked morning and evening jostled with cheesemaking and the organic vegetable business, which was the farm's summer-time mainstay. For one year during the early '90s, things got so hectic that Susman and Pollack simply put aside making cheese.

That was a big deal, says Susman, who said making farmstead cheese was the vision she and Pollack had when they first decided to leave western Massachusetts in 1980 and become self-sufficient, sustainable

farmers.

Back then, Pollack was a family counselor and Susman was a farmer-in-training, both in the Greenfield, Mass., area. Shortly after the women met in 1976, they decided that they could make a better life for themselves as small farmers.

Susman enrolled at the Stockbridge School of Agriculture, then took a series of agricultural jobs on farms in the Greenfield area to gain experience. It was then that they started putting together their vision of how to support themselves in farming while staying small and ecologically friendly.

"We met a woman who was milking goats and making cheese, and we said, 'We could do that,'" Susman recalls. "Then we met a farmer who was growing parsley and selling it to the local Howard Johnson's and we said, 'We could do that.'"

Farmstead cheese and organic vegetable production for local restaurants and co-ops quickly emerged as the

(See *Cheese*, Page 5)

Cheese

(Continued from Page 3)
twin pillars of their business plan. Pollack and Susman didn't want to start a farm in western Massachusetts, however.

Even in 1981, they saw farming was on the run in that state, with speculation and encroaching development driving up the price of land and sending farmers and the businesses that supported them packing. When word reached them of a farm job in Morrisville, they jumped at the opportunity.

"We talked ourselves into that job knowing practically nothing," says Pollack, laughing. When that job didn't work out, they relocated to a dairy farm in Monkton. Replacement heaters and hired hands — in this case, Pollack and Susman — were housed on an auxiliary farm down the road. The Monkton farmers decided to sell the property where Susman and Pollack were staying only months after they arrived, and the two women didn't hesitate.

They applied to the Lotta Crabtree Trust at the Stockbridge School of Agriculture, a flexible-payback loan program for beginning

farmers, and were soon the owners of a 30-acre spread with a dilapidated 1790 farmhouse more suitable to cows than people.

"It was a mess," says Pollack, looking around the open floor plan of kitchen, dining area and parlor in the home that she and Susman have been renovating ever since.

Things have settled into steady pattern at Orb Weaver. The cows are milked seasonally beginning in November, with virtually all of their milk being turned into golden rounds of Colby until the milking season ends — usually early June, when the cows are bred again.

From June through October, the animals get a rest as the two women turn to fields of organic vegetables, which they use to supply restaurants and co-ops throughout central Vermont. The cheese house — the first building Pollack and Susman added when they purchased the farm — remains quiet, until the end of the growing season, when Susman and Pollack make the annual shift from planting, weeding and picking to milking cows and cooking, molding and

waxing rounds of cheese.

The Orb Weaver Farm sign outside the small cheese room is intentionally out of sight of the road. Susman and Pollack agree that they're flattered when people seek them out, but that they really aren't set up for unannounced visitors. With only one part-time employee and the vegetable and cheesemaking businesses to tend, they say, they're simply too busy.

Cutting back on cows and milking has allowed Susman and Pollack to concentrate on their cheesemaking again, with good results.

Two years ago, they experimented with their first cave-aged cheese. In August, that cheese won the coveted "Best Farmhouse Cheese" award from the American Cheese Society, a national organization. That success is causing them to seriously consider digging a cave for aging cheese on their own property. Meanwhile, they've had to turn away new accounts for both their regular Colby and the cave-aged variety, saying that they're already selling everything they can make. They've also managed to grow the farm, acquiring

70 acres adjoining their original land purchase.

Pollack describes the 20 years that she and Susman have spent building and developing Orb Weaver Farm as a gradual maturation process, similar to the slow aging required to ripen a wheel of cheese.

"Steadily, things have come into focus," says Pollack, reflecting on the years of trial and error that brought them to what is today, a clearly defined business. Susman agrees.

"We're totally happy with where we're at right now," she says.

On the cover...

Marjorie Susman, left, and Marian Pollack operate their cheese business in Monkton with six cows.

Photo by Caleb Kenna,
Rutland Herald

Marjorie Susman and Marian Pollack — Vegetable Gardeners and Cheese Makers — ORB WEAVER FARM

2002

From Woman's Farm Women
by Peter Miller

More than half of the farm women in this book are flatlanders — a Vermont term for those who were not born in the state. Doesn't matter if you have lived in Vermont for half a century, like I have: if you were born out of state you are a flatlander. Sometimes it is said in jest, often not. Yet it is the farming flatlanders, women and men, who have helped sustain and increase the small-farm movement in Vermont, which is now spreading to other states. Their philosophy is to grow and sell regionally — local to local. These farmers have moved to Vermont because the land is less expensive, independence is revered, and agriculture is not as threatened by encroaching suburbia as some other places, although that is changing.

1970s they were living in western Massachusetts where Marjorie studied at the Stockbridge School of Agriculture and worked on a farm. Marian was a family therapist and before that a parole officer in New York City. In Massachusetts they gardened, put up their own food and learned to make a good cheddar in their kitchen. But around them nearby farms went out of business and developments usurped the pastures. As time went on they knew they didn't want to work for other people but produce food for them, and do it in a place removed from suburbia.

They answered an ad searching for someone to run a farm in Morrisville, Vermont, and arrived in March 1981. There followed six unhappy months, for neither knew anything about the practical side of farming.

Marian: "Let's go be farmers!"

Marian: "We didn't know how to turn on the manure spreader with the tractor."

Marian: "No trust fund."

Marian: "We didn't know how that water froze."

Marjorie: "Zilch."

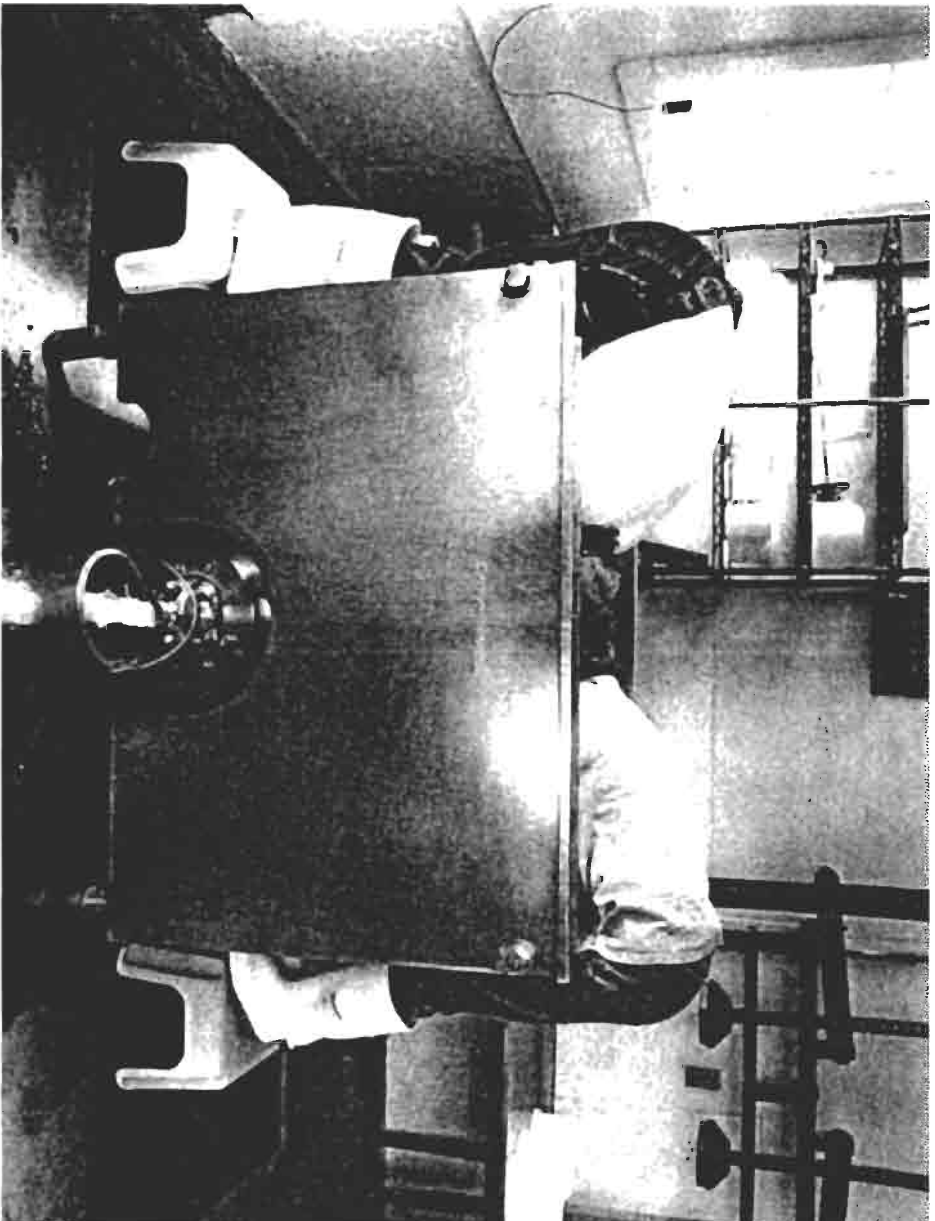
Marjorie: "We didn't know how to turn on the milk pump."

Marjorie: "Neither of us had any money and no family farm either."

Marian: "I think that made us efficient farmers."

Marian: "I think that made us efficient farmers."





no water, no bulk tank, and a gutter cleaner that didn't work. The house hadn't had any love since 1804. The farmer was willing to sell the old farm and take a mortgage, so Marjorie applied for, and won, a grant administered by her old college. (The grant was originally set up by Lotta Crabtree, an actress and dancer who made her fortune in 19th-century saloons in western goldrush towns.)

With the low-interest loan they bought more land and put together a dairy herd of thirty Jersey milkers, including some stock from the Lepines. They fixed up the barn and on a knoll above the house put in a garden with a 180-degree view. The

following year they built a cheese house. Marjorie and Marian named their farm Orb Weaver, after that industrious field spider that weaves the big webs. The hard work taught them to be efficient. The low return on their milk taught them frugality. For the next fifteen years they shipped milk, grew vegetables, and made cheese when they could.

Marian: "Once in a while we would make some money."

Marjorie: "We couldn't even breathe, we were working so hard."

Marian: "We lost our focus. We had no time to make cheese."

Marjorie: "What we wanted to do when we bought this farm was to make cheese."

Marian: "So in 1995 we sold most of our herd. Kept seven cows to make cheese."

Marjorie: "And we have our garden."

They learned how to keep their organic garden healthy with a mix of green manure, field peas, oats, and other garden waste that they till in. Their garden is on 4 acres, 2 of which remain fallow. They never bought a piece of machinery unless they could pay for it; they still use a push seeder and regard their one helper as much more useful (and pleasant) than a new tractor. They learned not to grow produce that wouldn't sell — a lesson they found out the hard way. One year they planted too many rows of string beans and couldn't sell them at the farmers' market. They came home and nipped out the beans, as it was not worth their while picking them.

Now they concentrate on what sells — ten varieties of lettuce, kale, tomatoes, Swiss chard, red and green peppers, broccoli, leeks, summer squash, zucchini, and onions. They sell to restaurants and a health food store and stopped going to farmers' markets because they had to produce too many varieties of vegetables. They do, however, plant on-order for a few local restaurant chefs.

Their vegetables are certified organic, their cows not.

Marjorie: "The health food store that buys our produce wanted us to be organically certified. Otherwise we wouldn't."

Marian: "People feel the word has been stolen by the government. Trucks now come up here from New Jersey to the store, and their organic produce doesn't always look good. We are looking for another word. I came up with *Verganic*."

They both fret about the ignorance most people have about where food comes from. "Terrorized" is the word they used to describe people's fear of food

and why grocery store produce is encased in plastic or pasteurized. One chef who came to their farm was amazed to see lettuce growing.

Marian: "I thought it came off the back of a truck," he said."

Marjorie: "It's important to bring good food to the people, so they know what it is. Agritourism will have a future here. They could come to this farm and see a speck of mold on cheese, take it off, and find it is just as good to eat."

Marjorie and Marian work only in the vegetable garden from early summer to fall. Then they make cheese.

Marjorie: "Our cows calve in November, and then we start making cheese. Making cheese in the summer is the most oppressive thing I can think of."

Marian: "When we make cheese we raise the milk to 100°F. Lean over a vat full of hot milk in 95°F weather and you are suffering. The air conditioner doesn't work and waxing cheese is almost physically impossible to do in summer heat."

Marjorie: "Milking in the summer is hot and uncomfortable, for us and the cows. There are flies and bugs."

Marian: "We want to be outside in the summer."

The Orb Weaver dairy herd is pampered with premium hay and are rotationally grazed. They do not feed their cows silage as they believe it makes the cheese bitter. They produce farmhouse cheese they call Colby; some of it is waxed in 2-pound balls. The rest is cured for six months in their new cheese cellar built into a side of a hill and fronted with huge boulders encrusted with fossils. This cheese is dry, with a nutty flavor and very smooth texture, somewhat like Beaufort. It recently won top awards as a farmhouse cheese from the National Cheese Society. They mail order some and sell all they make, mostly to their local customers.

The two Orb Weaver endeavors nicely offset the



precariousness of the weather. During one summer they were hit by a vicious hail storm; it looked like someone went through their garden, shooting holes in their vegetables. Leaves were rattered into confetti. Other times drought turns the soil dry as a two-year-old cow pie. Cheese sales pull them through weather vagaries. A good year and they take the equity and put it into their house, or, as they did recently, buy land. They now have 103 acres.

When Marjorie was diagnosed with breast cancer (she bear it soundly), they took a month off from cheese time and visited Italy. A good garden year recouped their lost income.

Since then, the two farmers have had scheduled leisure time. Every Wednesday afternoon in the summer is free time to read, canoe, or hike. They

both are vegetarians and love to cook in their thoughtfully restored farmhouse. They grind their own flour for bread, fire roast chilies to make salsa, and their pizzas are revered.

But they do wonder about the future. The traffic is increasing on their road, and eventually it will be paved. Development may follow.

Marjorie: "Maybe we will sell the farm. . . . we can't see the sunset from our farm, and I miss that."

Marian: "I think I would rather not live here while someone else is running the farm. I think the name Orb Weaver will die with us."

Marjorie: "In the meantime it is pretty nice."



Marjorie Susman and Marian Pollack's 15-cow farm is toylike compared to the Hurtubises's. And their attitude toward their cows, who live in comfort stalls and have a production goal of 1,000 pounds of milk twice a week, would please a child.

"We keep them until they die," says Susman the morning I find her in the cheese room, raking curds in a stainless steel vat of warm milk destined to become Orb Weaver farmhouse cheese. "For them to give us everything and end up in an auction isn't a good tribute to their lives. Still, I understand that all farmers can't be warm and fuzzy like us." Nor as green.

From the end of May to November, the women stop making cheese ("being over this vat in summer is like being condemned to hell," confesses Susman) to tend their four-acre garden. Lettuce, tomatoes, artichokes, eggplant, melons and other produce are grown, harvested and delivered to restaurants and food cops around Middlebury. The women still have to hay, but their herd is dried off and stays outdoors. Come fall, a



cover crop — oats, buckwheat and rapeseed are popular — is planted to enrich the soil and curb erosion before the farmers return to milking cows and making cheese.

In contrast to the Wrights and the Hurtubises, neither woman was raised on a farm. Marian, who joins us in the milkhouse wearing a T-shirt, jeans and barn boots, grew up in New Jersey and did a stint as a probation officer in Harlem. Marjorie, who could be farmstead cheese's poster girl with her bright red cheeks and graying hair held back by a ball cap, does have an agricultural degree from the University of Massachu-

setts. But they knew next to nothing about farming when they moved to Monkton in 1981 to milk cows. "And my father," Marjorie exclaims, raising both hands to her cap, "he couldn't understand what his daughter was doing." She bursts out laughing. "He had such high hopes for me!"

The women invested 15 years milking their own cows (they bought this 30-acre place and 12 milking Jerseys in 1982 with a no-interest loan from the Lotta Crabtree Trust, an idiosyncratic fund that gave money to destitute actors, ex-convicts and small farmers) before they diversified into high-end specialty products. That happened in 1995 when, as Susman puts it, "We realized we had lost our focus." Years of long hours, no sunsets, machinery problems and slaving away as a cog in the milk supply system had worn them down. They decided to sell their prize-winning herd of 30 milkers and change directions.

Today, customers buy all of Orb Weaver Farm's produce and its cheese, 7,000 pounds a year, aged in a newly built cheese cave. Marjorie and Marian find they have time to hike, canoe, even take a vacation.

The timing was excellent. The organic food revolution was in full swing, with nationwide sales increasing 20 percent annually. Specialty farm products, especially in Vermont, were hot. But suddenly no milk handler set their cheese prices, no distributor peddled their vegetables to markets. As many small growers were forced to do, Susman and Pollack fell back on their own devices. They knocked on customers' doors, pitched their goods, serviced accounts.

Marian, older, more intense, with freckles, frowns over a memory: "We thought people would call us back when they sold out our stuff, they didn't."

"Marketing our own products was the hardest thing we have ever done," adds Marjorie.

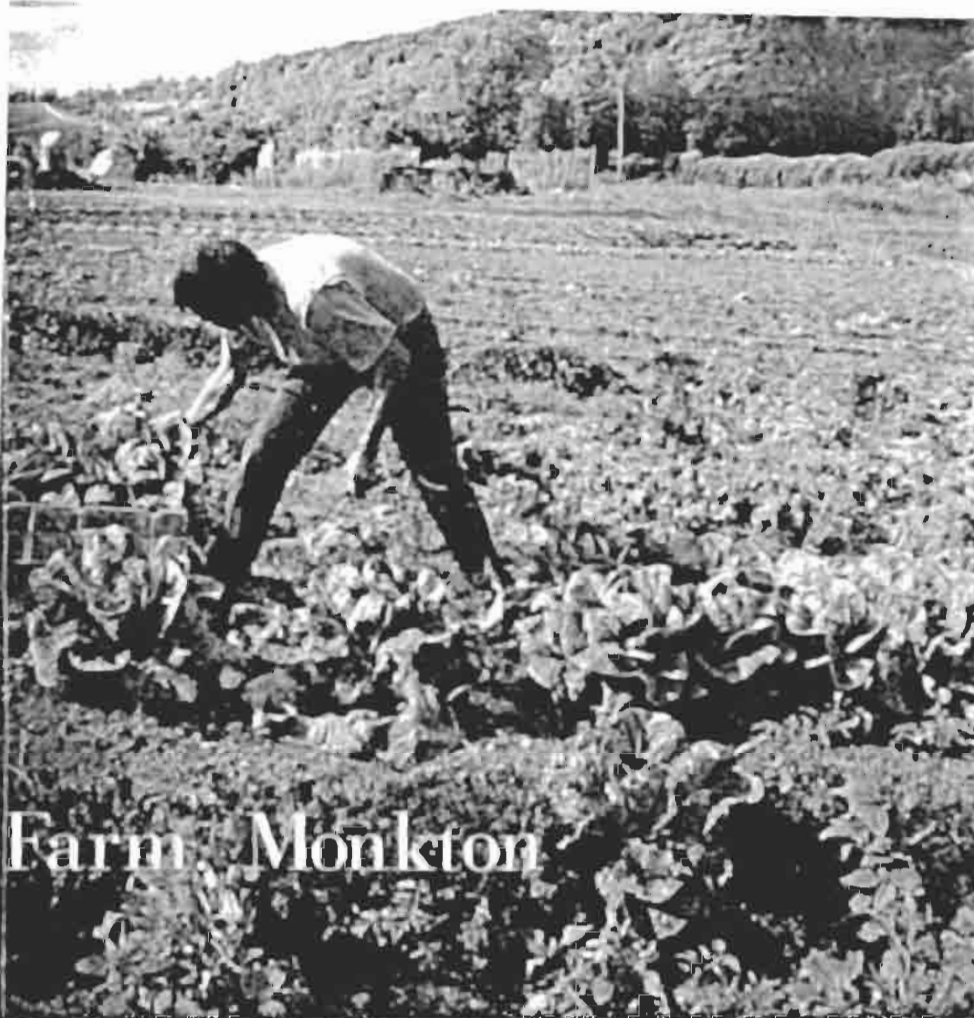
But they learned, adapted, rode the organic food wave. Although their cheeses aren't certified organic, their



vegetables are, but the women have found the organic label to be less important to their success than "locally grown." And their sales grew as they reinvented the farm into an artful congregation of purposes that complemented their values.

Eight years later customers buy all their produce and their cheese, 7,000 pounds a year, aged in a newly built cheese cave. Marjorie and Marian find they have time to hike, canoe, even take a vacation. They also have time to marvel at what's happened to the organic food community, of which they were a part in spirit if not in the letter of the law laid down by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Attracted by a market that topped \$8 billion in 2000 — almost 2 percent of America's \$460 billion food tab — many large processors like Pillsbury have started organic brands. Wild



Farm Monkton



Cheese and produce on Orb Weaver Farm: top, Marian Pollack in the produce garden; left and above, Pollack and Marjorie Susman in their cheese cave and with two of their Jersey cows.

Oats, a Boulder-based organic food chain, owns nearly 100 outlets, including several accused of putting neighborhood co-ops out of business. Recently, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in a move that probably made J.I. Rodale, the farming futurist who coined the term "organic" in the early 1940s, roll over in his grave, instituted labeling standards for organic foods, insisting, however, that the labels are only "a marketing tool," and "not a seal of safety."

"It's getting weird," Marjorie says about the co-opting of the organic mantle by the food industry. "The gut feeling you get when you're really an organic producer has gone out of a lot of operations."

"In Vermont, organic people are looking for a new word to distinguish themselves," says Marian. And the producers' customers are now more concerned that foods are grown locally than labeled organic.

Pollack and Susman have found a niche, one that may appeal to more Vermont farmers as time goes by.

On a return visit, I find Marjorie rushing by flower beds in front of the farmhouse toward Marian, who is cutting string to tie up cherry tomato plants on trellises. "We're running, running, running," Marjorie gushes. "We're going away this Friday for a week, something we never do."

We tour the gardens in hot sunlight. Asparagus, strawberries and raspberries in one plot, a variety of lettuces, including frilly-edged, deep-red lolla rossa, in another. Rows of spinach, leeks, broccoli, peppers, Swiss chard. The plots, heavily mulched and with raised beds, look artfully laid out. A recent woodchuck problem was handled with fox urine near the rows of lettuce. "Fox urine works," remarks Marian.

By a meditation labyrinth, I'm handed a pea tendrill to eat. It's tender, sweet. As a red-winged blackbird scolds us, Marjorie says, "In New York's Chinatown you can buy pea tendrills by the pound."

She leads me to the cheese cave. Inside, waxed wheels of their Colby-like brand age in a controlled environment. By the iron door to the cave, past the old barn with its gray boards, I can see a dozen cows lying in the cut green grass below.

"Your herd looks so tiny," I say.

"Yes, we like it like that," says Marjorie.



The operative word on the traditional farm was fortitude; on the big farm it was efficiency; and on the small farm it was kindness. The scale of each farm's operations affected everything, from sounds and smells to methods and philosophies.

Tiny is not the operative word when I try to catch up with Hoyt Hurtubise, who is busy haying, getting 400 acres of grass mowed, raked, chopped, loaded, hauled to bunkers and spread while it's 65 percent moisture, 35 percent dry. The pace, set by the weather, is fast and furious. Seven people are driving equipment to keep up with the harvester. As I watch the trucks pass the number 2 barn, dust rising, and feel the momentum of the Hurtubise farm enterprise, I realize it has a syn-

copation, a fine-tuned gearing of its own, a certain beauty. Wives drive trucks; kids drive tractors. Hoyt heads off to the nearest equipment supplier for a needed part — all in service of the cows, some of whom stare with mild curiosity out of the calving area at all the human activity on their behalf.

It's environmentally correct to bash big farms today, though politically correct to endorse them, especially if they're "family farms." But the Hurtubises symbolize so many of the veri-

ties of agriculture — working with animals, preserving what Vermont was, sustaining family unity, adapting rather than perishing. "They're farmers too," as my small-farm friend, Mark Brouillette, says. Although I'm critical of industrial farms and know that before World War II all farming was organic, except for the use of some pesticides, and most food distributed locally, I doubt that alternative producers are yet ready to feed the multitudes with cave-ripened cheese and organic bok choy.

The old bugaboo is economics, the economics of scale and mass distribution in an urban nation more distant every year from its agrarian roots. When's the last time you were in a barn? So whether we like it or not —

the world farmed like United States farmers, 80 percent of the energy in the world would be used for farming."

In a world of agricultural subsidies, food scares and genetic engineering, alternative producers have had to carve out niches to survive. They have created new markets, raised people's awareness levels and focused attention on the sustainability of the industrial agricultural paradigm. One hopes they keep the food industry honest, though given how greedily the industry swallowed the organic label and chewed it beyond recognition, that's optimistic thinking.


As for future farmers in New England, there are some good signs. Land Link Vermont tries to match undercapitalized seekers of farms with owners who hate the idea of fallow fields, ghostly barns and worse — development all over their land. And the Vermont Land Trust, which since 1977 has bought the development rights to more than 300,000 acres, including a 25-farm deal in Swanton and most of the Hurtubises's land, keeps farmers solvent and, more important, guarantees their land for future agricultural use. As with the world at large, diversity is the theme emerging in farms across New England.

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It's a quintessential Vermont June morning — cloudless, blue, crisp — when I find Rick and Bev Wright chatting with a neighbor by their front door. The man departs, Rick helps Bev guide cows into rotational pastures.

Then, arms crossed and cap back, he delays returning to his John Deere tractor (he's haying alone) and gets a little philosophical.

"I'm glad people don't take farming for granted anymore," he says and adds that Vermonters need to differentiate between small and big farms when evaluating financial aid programs. But the most pressing issue, he suggests, is who will run the farms. "You can protect this farmland for 4,000 years," he says, referring to land trust covenants, "and it's still going to turn to brush if nobody's tied to the land, nobody's working it." Glancing at Beverly, who stands quietly at his side, Rick says, "I'm not as idealistic as I used to be. I don't stay awake thinking about all the issues. But sometimes we feel like strangers in our own native land."

Surely, as Ben Watson, senior editor at Chelsea Green Publishing, says, "It would be much better if people simply valued farmers more."

The hard choices, the time demands, the pressures to be all things to all people — stewards of the land, keepers of the cattle, feeders of the people, icons of hard work — make me wonder why farmers, no matter what scale their operations, keep at it. And grateful that they do. 

Joe Sherman, of Montgomery, wrote about covered bridge preservation in our Spring 2002 issue. Alden Pellett photographed the ice-climbing story in last Winter's issue. He lives in Hinesburg.

and millions do not — industrial agriculture is here to stay unless drastic cultural and economic conditions force massive shifts that will also be massively disruptive. The externalities that agricultural economists ignore — water and soil pollution, the community cohesiveness of a region of small farms, the accumulation of chemicals in human tissues — may gradually overwhelm the efficiency gains measured solely by output per man-hour.

That hasn't happened yet. Across America, big farms continue to swallow small ones because that's the nature of corporate-driven agriculture. Are such operations doomed dinosaurs now feasting on fossil fuel? Charles Rhodes, an independent farm policy analyst, warns that "if every farmer in



Joel Wright, 10, in the family barn in Bethel. Left, Orb Weaver's farmers drive their cows to a new pasture on their land in Monkton.

From: The Vermont-
Cheese Book

by
Eileen Eckler Opler
2007
RUTLAND AND ADDISON COUNTIES



7. ORB WEAVER FARM

MARJORIE SUSMAN AND MARIAN POLLACK

3406 Lime Kiln Road

New Haven, VT 05472

(802) 877-3755

www.orbweaverfarm.com

TYPE OF CHEESE: COW'S MILK

➤ **Vermont Farmhouse Cheese:** Moister than cheddar, this raw-milk cheese has a natural buttery color and smooth, creamy texture. Mildly flavored, it melts easily, for the ultimate grilled-cheese-and-tomato sandwich.

➤ **Cave Aged:** This cheese is made in much the same way as the Vermont Farmhouse Cheese, but is then transferred to the underground cave to age. The rind is left in a natural state to ripen into a smooth, tawny exterior. The result is a firm, buttery, and robust flavor with a complex array of nut and earthy notes, which have been picked up from the natural environment and the affinage process. Each cheese has a cow logo and lot number, which are imprinted into the curd when it is pressed into the molds.

ABOUT THE CHEESE

Since 1982, Orb Weaver Farm has been turning the high-butterfat milk from their small family of seven Jersey cows into a raw-milk cheese with an earthy, rich, and full-bodied flavor. The cows are left to graze on their own all summer, with minimal field rotations, and cheese is made from November to May, when owners organic market gardeners Marjorie Susman and Marian Pollack have more time to devote to cheese-making. The cows are fed a diet of organic hay and sweet-smelling grain during the winter, and the cheese is made in the nearby cheese room, using a process that takes three days to complete.

WHAT MAKES THIS CHEESE SPECIAL?

The creamy texture of the Vermont Farmhouse Cheese is the result of a time-tested recipe. Similar to a Havarti and Colby, the

cheese is fragrant, with a sweet cow's milk flavor. The same recipe is aged in two ways: the younger cheese is waxed, then naturally aged in a temperature-controlled cooler just off the cheese room, while the cave-aged version is stored in a cave built with Lake Champlain stones from the neighboring town of Panton. The cave, which is warmer and more humid than the cooler, keeps the cheese ripening for up to one year and allows it to develop a clean, natural rind.

HOW TO VISIT

Marjorie and Marian are willing to impart

their expertise with those who are interested, if time permits. Call ahead to check when they are available, as this is a working farm with no retail shop.

DIRECTIONS

Take Route 7 to New Haven, continue one mile up a hill, and turn onto Lime Kiln Road. Travel two miles to a four-way intersection, then continue straight for another mile to the second farmhouse on the right. The house is pale yellow with blue trim, and the underground cave, red barn, and silo are located down the hill.

ABOUT THE FARM

*M*ARJORIE AND MARIAN HAVE INSPIRED countless cheesemakers since founding Orb Weaver in 1981. In 1977, they lived on a farm in Massachusetts and taught themselves how to make a farmhouse cheese in their kitchen. When Marjorie graduated from agricultural school, the two moved to Vermont, where they assumed everybody made cheese from their own cows. The two had been hired by a dairy farm in Monkton; Marjorie managed the farm, while Marian looked after the heifers, and they lived in a rundown farmworkers' house that has now become their own beautiful, handcrafted home.

The house, built in the 1780s, is perched on a hill with a great view of the fields and within a rural network of other farmhouses along the dirt road, yet when they moved in, it had a leaky roof, aluminum siding, and no east-facing windows overlooking scenic fields. After a year, when the farm was up for sale, Marjorie and Marian purchased the house, thirty acres, and the run-down heifer barn, and bought their first cow, a Jersey named Sultana.



Marjorie Susman and Marian Pollack hold wheels of OrbWeaver cave-aged cheese. Each wheel is imprinted with the farm's cow logo, a lot number, and date.

In their home kitchen, they made cheese from Sultana's milk, but only for their own consumption. Eventually, the herd grew to fifty head, and milk was sold to a dairy cooperative. Orb Weaver Farm's reputation as one of the five top-producing farms in the nation was well known, and the dairy business was balanced with a large market garden. After almost fifteen years, the long hours and hard work to achieve this notoriety was wearing thin, and Marjorie and Marian were not convinced this was the way they wanted to spend their life. In 1995, they sold their prized herd, keeping only ten Jerseys, and began to make cheese with the four milking cows that remained. They now own 103 acres of lush fields and seven Jersey cows, and they produce close to 7,000 pounds of cheese per year. It's a small amount compared to some other cheesemakers, but it works for them, especially when offset by the four acres of market vegetables they continue to sell to local chefs and food co-ops.

The farm's namesake, orb weaver, is a common Vermont spider known for weaving an intricate, circular web; this web is a metaphor for the carefully structured nature of Marjorie



The aging cave at OrbWeaver farm was built into the hillside and constructed with Lake Champlain stones from the neighboring town of Panton.

and Marian's farm, the circular rhythm of the seasons, and all the connections that a self-contained farm can achieve. The two women make farming and cheesemaking look so easy, because they enjoy what they do and because they are highly organized.

It has taken them close to three decades to strike the right balance and learn how to work with the rhythms of nature. From May until the end of October, they tend to the vegetable-garden business. In November, after the cows give birth, they use the available milk for making cheese until May, when the cows dry off.

Over the years, Marjorie and Marian have held true to their com-

mitment to local agriculture, growing their own food, and making their own bread. They take time to enjoy meals and the view from their screened-in porch on the east side of the house, overlooking the fields and the herd grazing happily on wild pasture all summer.

Orb Weaver Farm... A Little Slice of Heaven

by Laura Cahners-Ford

When you walk into Orb Weaver Farm in New Haven, Vermont you feel like you're walking into a little slice of what heaven might be like. First there's the large Victorian farmhouse surrounded by flower and vegetable beds. The red barn, greenhouse and cheese building are down the hill and to get to them you walk past more flower and vegetable beds. The farmstead itself sits on a ridge overlooking a sweeping view of green fields and pasture land capped by the Green Mountains in the background and their large organic market garden to the north. The whole scene emanates peace and serenity as do the industrious and content women who oversee the farm—Marjorie Susman and Marian Pollack.

For over twenty-five years Susman and Pollack have owned and run this diversified landhold which successfully produces artisan cheese and organic vegetables. Their cheese is farmhouse cheese meaning they milk their own cows to make the "rich, raw milk cheese with a slightly tangy, full bodied flavor," as they describe it in their brochure.

Susman and Pollack moved here in 1980 from Massachusetts to work on the farm they bought one year later. Pollack had been working as a family psychologist and Susman had a newly minted degree in animal science from UMass. As Susman reminisces "We decided we wanted to be farmers and thought there would be a lot of people with diversified farms. When we got here we found we were the first farm to do that." For 15 years they milked 30 head, made cheese and sold organic vegetables. Then 12 years ago they downsized the dairy end of things to

seven Jerseys and focused on making cheese and growing organic vegetables.

When I walk down to the cheese building I find Susman elbow deep in the cheese vat, stirring or "cutting" the curds and whey through her fingers. The building's clean white interior is

the vat to give Susman a hand. They stir the milk mixture with their hands while working the curds through their fingers to cool them down. As the whey liquid drains into a hole in the floor Pollack adds salt. When all the whey has drained off (they use it to fertilize the

they produce a total of about 1000 pounds of Orb Weaver cheese a year.

Although Susman and Pollack make cheese on Monday and Thursday, the rest of the week is filled with related chores. Besides milking twice a day, they must clean the cheese making area and wax the molded cheese. "This takes about as long as making the cheese," says Susman. "On Wednesday we milk and then deliver cheese. We have no distributors because we like to do this personally. It's really nice getting to know the people we sell to." They deliver to about 12 locales—stores and restaurants—from Middlebury and Bristol up to Burlington. They also ship cheese to co-ops in Montpelier and Barre.

And come summer the cheese making stops and the gardening begins. "We make cheese from November through May. We give our cows and ourselves a break every summer while we tend our organic gardens." In the summer they deliver their copious loads of veggies twice a week to the Middlebury Coop.

When asked about taking vacations, Susman says "October is sort of a month off for us as the gardens are done and the cows don't calve until November. Occasionally we will take a long weekend somewhere but there is no place more beautiful than where we live."

The ladies are looking down the road to "retiring" as making cheese and tending gardens is hard physical work. But will they sell it all and rake off? No way. Their next venture might be raising beef. As Susman says "All our fields are certified organic." This would provide a suitable income and be less labor intensive.

At visit's end I slowly make my way back to the car enjoying the view, the garden beds and the wonderful way this place makes me feel. It doesn't hurt that I have two, five-pound wheels cradled in my arms (gifts for my kids) and a large bag of curds to munch on.

The Orb Weaver ladies are working on their web page which should be up in a few weeks. It will provide a virtual tour of the garden from greenhouse to harvest, of milking cows and of making cheese and will also offer up recipes. Stay tuned and try punching in orbweaverfarm.com on your keyboard or go to vtcheese.com for a link.



Marian Pollack and Marjorie Susman have made Orb Weaver cheese for decades!

bright with afternoon sunlight and with the sounds of Leonard Cohen coming through the iPod hooked to speakers on the window sill. It's been hours since the jerseys were milked (to the sounds of classical music) and their fresh milk was piped straight from the barn and into this vat. The vat heats the milk mixture (rennet and starter—bacteria cultures from Europe) to 90 degrees and slowly raises it to 100 degrees. Susman methodically cuts the curds and whey while the mixture cooks in the vat. She keeps talking and stirring and at one point stops to offer me a taste of curds. Much to my surprise they taste delicious and have a nice squeaky texture against your teeth.

The curds start to settle out and by the end of the cooking time (about 5 1/2 hours) their strands of protein have coagulated and the curds take on a firmer texture. Finally it's time to drain off the whey. Pollack then comes into the building and after a quick introduction dons her rubber boots, sticks a colander over the drain and leans over

fields) they put the curds into plastic molds of 2 to 10 pounds. Then all the molds get stacked on top of each other and are put into two presses. The molds get turned and repressed a few times until the next morning. Then the cheeses come out of their molds and are placed in the cooler—an adjacent room which is filled with metal shelves stacked with cheese wheels. This new batch gets turned every day for a week and then gets waxed and stamped with a date and batch number. Most of the 140 pounds of cheese made today goes and stays in the cooler. Only about 26 pounds worth goes into the cave where it is aged, unwaxed, for a year. "We don't wax cave-aged cheese, but instead turn and brush the wheels every other day for several months, creating a natural rind. The end result is heaven for cheese lovers." When I visited at the end of May they were making their 50th batch of the season. During the seven months they devote to cheese making



Orb Weaver cheeses are produced in two-to-ten-pound wheels.



Photos by Laura Cahners-Ford



Orb Weaver's cheese cave is built with Panton stone.