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**CHEESE WHIZ**

By Anne Ford Photos By  
Johnny Quirin

From the August 2007  
Issue

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When Jesse Meerman decided to help boost the profits of his family's Coopersville, Mich., farm by making cheese, he was armed with a taste for Gouda and not much else. "I was always buying different kinds of cheese and enjoying them, but I had no clue how it was made," he says.

His dad, Steve, and older brother Luke, with whom he co-owns the 125-year old Steve-N-Sons farm, didn't know, either. As the newish kid on the place – he'd left college a few years earlier to help work the family's 220 acres – Jesse figured it was his job to learn. To the Internet!

As he eventually realized, while you can learn a lot of things from Google, making stellar cheddar only comes through hands-on experience – and lots of it. Fortunately, farm animals have indiscriminating palates. "That first year, a lot of it went to the pigs," admits Jesse, 29. But after he took classes with master cheese makers in Vermont, New York and Wisconsin, his cheeses became less pig fodder and more cocktail appetizer.



Today you can find Steve-N-Sons Grassfields cheddar, Gouda, Edam and Leyden cheeses at nearly 50 outlets, including the Holland Farmers' Market as well as in upscale specialty shops such as Art of the Table in Grand Rapids and restaurants like Chicago's Bella Luna Café. "Eaten with crackers and fruit, Grassfields cheeses are delicious," writes Grand Rapids Press food editor Jaye Beeler. "But placed in the hands of a good cook, they are wonderful."

A retail shop on the farm is open Thursdays through Saturdays, selling the organic cheese as well as beef, pork, chicken and eggs (and the occasional mewling barn kitten). If Jesse happens to be making cheese that day, visitors are welcome to watch. Kids get a kick out of one particular detail: The halved soccer ball he wears in lieu of a hair net. ("Hair nets look so bad," he says. "The soccer ball does too, but at least it's something different.")

At first, the Meermans didn't see much need to pursue organic certification for the farm, even though they didn't use hormones, steroids or antibiotics on their animals. "We shied away from [certification] for quite a while because we wanted people to know what we were doing, not just trust a label," Meerman says. But after realizing how much that "organic" label could drive demand, he and his family changed their minds. As of June, Steve-N-Sons products are certified organic.

Creating the Grassfields brand was first discussed in 2002, as the family sought new ways to make the farm more profitable. Expanding production was another option, but they refused to consider one idea: pasteurization.

The only milk most of us drink these days has been pasteurized, that is, heated to between 145° and 280°F to kill any dangerous bacteria lurking in it. But raw-milk proponents like the Meermans insist that unpasteurized milk is no riskier to drink than pasteurized. They further assert that the heating process damages the milk's flavor.

"When I taste pasteurized milk, which isn't very often, it tastes really flat and almost a little bit bitter," Jesse says. He and his family feel especially passionate about preserving the taste of Steve-N-Sons milk because it comes from cows fed entirely on grass, which many say produce milk with a more complex flavor than cows fed on grain do.

Raw-milk cheese, Jesse says, is the perfect solution: It allows the farm to preserve the milk's flavor and make more profit from it at the same time.

"It's also the best way, I feel, to represent the farm," he says, "because what you do comes through in the product." Unlike some cheeses labeled "raw-milk," he adds, Grassfields Cheese isn't heat-treated at all: "Our milk never gets any warmer than the inside of the cow."

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