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Cows wait to be milked at Rogue View Dairy in Grants Pass, the exclusive milk supplier for Rogue Creamery.

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Surrendering to American cheese

With mold from France, an Oregon plant leads the way in exports to Europe

By JEFF BARNARD
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CENTRAL POINT —

In the summer of 1955, American cheesemaker Tom Vella received a gift while touring France — a sample of the mold that goes into Roquefort cheese.

More than 50 years later, that mold is returning home with fanfare as the Oregon cheese plant Vella founded, Rogue Creamery, leads the way in an unlikely revolution of culture — growing numbers of American cheesemakers are exporting raw milk cheeses to Europe.

Such cheeses, which are made from unpasteurized milk, have long been the provenance of European dairies. But now American artisanal cheeses are demanding — and earning — respect here and abroad.

“In the wine world it has taken a long time for the Europeans, particularly the French, to recognize the quality of New World wines,” Randolph Hodgson, owner of the Neal’s Yard Dairy cheese shops in London. “We are only at the beginning of that with cheese.”

Raw milk cheeses generally are recognized as superior in taste but account for less than 10 percent of production, even in France, because the same aging required to make it



JAMIE FRANCIS/THE OREGONIAN/2008

Rogue Creamery is known for its Rogue River Blue, a world champion in 2003. The Central Point company leads a small wave of American raw milk cheesemakers pushing into Europe.

safe to eat also makes it pricey to produce.

The breakout moment for American raw milk artisanal cheeses came at the 2003 World Cheese Awards in London. Rogue Creamery’s Rogue River Blue beat out

hundreds of competitors for best blue cheese.

“That really put not only that cheese on the map, but also put the American artisan cheese movement in the spotlight,” said

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Cheese: Rogue River Blue is made only in fall

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David Gremmels, who with Cary Bryant took over Rogue Creamery from the Vella family in 2002.

After overseeing that blue cheese judging, Hodgson put in an order for the winner. But it took until 2007 for the cheese to arrive at his shop because raw milk cheese from the States had not been exported to the European Union before. There were forms to fill out and certificates to obtain, making the process cumbersome.

By 2006, American cheeses had won 140 international awards, and the U.S. Dairy Export Council started working



Gremmels
Artisan cheese is "in the spotlight"

"There are always going to be expatriates (in Europe) looking for cheese from the United States. But getting the mouth of the local consumer to appreciate the level of quality will be the challenge. Are they going to be willing to pay the premium to get that product?"

Cathy Strange, global cheese buyer for Whole Foods

on cutting through the red tape, said Diane Lewis, the council's vice president.

A year later, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued the required certificate, and Neal's Yard Dairy and Whole Foods Market in London started carrying Rogue cheeses.

Later this year, French cheese distributor MS Selection will show 10 American artisanal cheeses, including Rogue selections, at the Anuga Food Fair in Cologne, Germany, to kick off distribution in Scandinavia and Northern Europe. Each distributor was approved for European export, including such notables as Cypress Grove, Fiscalini and Marin French from California.

Gremmels is now working on signing up distributors to sell Rogue cheeses in France — the supreme test.

"There are always going to be expatriates (in Europe)

looking for cheese from the United States," said Cathy Strange, global cheese buyer for Whole Foods. "But getting the mouth of the local consumer to appreciate the level of quality will be the challenge. Are they going to be willing to pay the premium to get that product?"

Lionel Giraud of Fromi USA, a branch of MS Selection, thinks so. He said American food in Europe is characterized by McDonald's but fine cheeses will change people's minds. He likens it to the Beatles taking American rock and roll, giving it a Liverpool twist, and taking it back home.

While not initially experienced with making cheese, both Bryant and Gremmels were very experienced with marketing specialized products. They have since become proficient at both. Gremmels is president of the American Cheese Society,

and Bryant just finished a term as president of the Raw Milk Cheese Association.

Richer milk

The Rogue River Blue starts at Delmar Brink's Rogue View Dairy, where he milks 200 Brown Swiss, Holstein and mixed-breed cows exclusively for Rogue Creamery.

While they make blue and cheddar cheeses year-round, the Rogue River Blue is made only in the fall, before the cows go off pasture and into the barns for the winter rainy season. Gremmels said at that time of year the milk is richer and more flavorful.

"We see higher butterfats, higher solids and less quantity. But just really a more focused and refined flavor in the milk," he said.

Once the cheese is cut and dipped into wheels, it is rotated daily to form a rind. Then it is wrapped in grape leaves soaked in pear brandy, imparting flavors from the region's orchards and vineyards as it ages up to a year.

"My customers are just staggered that there is a cheese of that quality being made in the United States," Hodgson said. "That's what I want to do, shake up that preconception that America is about mass-produced food."

Saab: Official says GM ready to let brand go

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cash. But the danger of Saab's collapse looms because neither GM nor the Swedish government appears ready to provide

enough money to keep it as a free-standing entity.

GM, which has said it needs \$30 billion in U.S. government loans to avoid bankruptcy itself, hopes the three-month reorganization process will make Saab marketable, Chris Preuss, a spokesman, said.

If not, it appears the days of "Generous Motors" are over, with GM saying it will let Saab go and it may do the same with other unprofitable brands.

"We fully intend to be out of Saab by the end of the year," Preuss said.

GM's other European brands

are Opel in Germany and Vauxhall in Britain. GM also markets Chevrolet in Europe.

A union official who sits on the supervisory board of GM's Adam Opel GmbH unit said Friday that it needs some 3.3 billion euros (\$4.2 billion) — twice as much as previously discussed — to weather the economic crisis.

German officials have indicated a willingness to help keep Opel plants open but are insisting the company have a long-term plan. Economy Ministry spokesman Steffen Moritz said in Berlin on Friday that the automaker is expected to produce

that "by the end of next week."

GM and the Swedish government are saying the other needs to come up with money to keep Saab going.

Preuss said \$1 billion, of which GM was ready to pay \$400 million, was needed to keep Saab operating. The U.S. automaker had asked the Swedish government to guarantee the rest.

The Swedish government, which insists that Saab's survival is GM's responsibility, rejected the request because GM's business plan wasn't "realistic," Industry Minister Maud Olofsson said.