



THE GIRLS OF LA MOUTONNIÈRE

BY CHARLES CAPALDI

Eleven hundred miles and two hard days driving from my farm in Wisconsin lays the village of Sainte-Hélène-de-Chester, Québec, little more than a cluster of houses surrounding the church, post office and Chez Gaston, the local mini-mart. On the bluff overlooking the village, my car tires crunch to a stop in the gravel driveway of La Moutonnière – Québec’s first sheep dairy and cheese-making operation.

The muffled pat-pat-pat-pat of a vacuum pump echoes off the distant hillside and a white line of East Friesian dairy ewes slowly winds its way from the milking parlor to the mountainous pastures above. As I stop to take in the view, the milk house door

flies open and a fiery, red-headed Quebecoise in her early 50’s greets me with a warm smile, a big “Bien le bonjour!” and a welcoming kiss on both cheeks. One hand beckons me into the barn; the other holds back a Maremma sheep dog named “Belle Gueule” who guards the flock and would clearly like to eat me for lunch. “Arrête Belle Gueule!” she yells, commanding the woolly mammoth to back off. I’ve finally found her, Lucille Giroux, the mother of sheep dairying in Québec.

Lucille uses her maiden name, as do most Quebecois women since the quiet revolution of the 1960’s. A city girl born and bred, she grew up in Longueuil, a suburb of Montréal, where she met and

married her husband, Richard Caisse. Richard was an elementary school art teacher, a profession from which he finally retired a dozen or so years ago. While they started their family, Lucille worked as a nurse and arranged her schedule so they could spend long weekends in the countryside, far north of Montréal's bright city lights. Lucille explains, "We knew we wanted to get out of the city, and raise our children in the country. For three years, we looked for a place to live and for a way to make a living. When the farm in Sainte-Hélène came on the market, we already had a plan in mind and knew we had to act quickly." Just twenty-five years old and full of hopes and dreams, they were a self-sufficient couple willing to throw caution to the winds in their move "back to the land" – much to the muffled surprise of family and friends. Within two weeks, they had purchased the farm, found new jobs in the country (Lucille as a nurse in a town 20 minutes away and Richard, teaching art). As Lucille puts it, "Richard, our two girls, the farm, and nature were everything I needed in order to be complete ...and they have continued to be a limitless source of energy to me for the past twenty-seven years."

It's a good thing her energy was limitless because it wasn't an easy ride. "From the time we decided to move to the country, I knew I wanted to raise sheep. I had this bucolic vision of myself, in a country dress with a flock at my feet..." But the practical and economic reality of those early years was much harsher than she had ever anticipated. As it turned out, the country dress wasn't practical for mucking out pens. Bare feet squished in the manure and by the time the day was over, everyone was far too tired to meander off into the sunset. Even if she sold cuts of lamb, bags of composted manure, handspun yarn, comforters, lambskin mittens, and clothing insulated with a layer of

carded fleece, the operation still needed another 200-300 ewes in order to be financially viable. With numbers like those, it would have to operate on an industrial scale and as Lucille puts it, "I wanted the pleasure that came from having sheep without having to turn it into an industrial operation." With an investment in Swedish sheep milking genetics (the first East Friesians ever imported into Canada) and drawing on her own imagined connection to biblical shepherds who watched their flocks by night, Lucille was off and running - the first person to milk sheep in Québec and to produce cheese from her own milk.

Living proof that opposites attract, Lucille's business partner, Alastair Mackenzie, pops into the aisle, a hand stuck out to shake mine. "G'day Mate," he says in English with a New Zealand lilt that sounds just like Crocodile Dundee – an observation that I didn't dare to make out loud. Dundee is an "Aussie" and not a "Kiwi." For a moment I'm thrown. Lucille and I have been speaking French, but she deftly switches to English and introduces us. In his late 30's and the father of three, Alastair has the rugged look of man who is intimate with hard work and the back end of a manure shovel. He harkens from a long line of farmers on New Zealand's south island, where he was the fourth generation to manage his family's beef, sheep and crop farm, worked as a professional shearer, and got a degree in Agriculture. If farming is a calling for Lucille, for Alastair it is clearly a profession, and one he's proud to call his own.

After following his wife, Karine Piché, back to her native Quebec, Alastair spent a year playing Mr. Mom to their sons Elby and Luka, while acclimating to life in North America. "Culture is something most people don't realize they

have, until they leave home and realize how much a part of them it is.” Alastair remarks, a Kiwi at heart, who loves his country and speaks with candor about the move, “I was prepared to lose many things but mostly the obvious ones: climate, family, friends, favorite places. The things I didn’t expect to lose in coming here were the ease of making new friends, the adaptation to a new culture – not only language, but also things like [a different] sense of humor.” As he continues to talk, it becomes increasingly apparent that he has gained as much as he has given up. Their daughter, Anika, was born two years ago and the family lives in Victoriaville, a small town 20 minutes from the farm where Lucille and Richard still reside.

In 1999, Alastair and Lucille joined forces in La Moutonnière. He explains, “Neither of us have specific roles in the form of job descriptions. We each have qualifications that the other doesn’t have, and we are always up front about who should do what because of the skills involved.” In spite of the division of labor, both partners take turns in the milking parlor, and both work in the cheese room. In fact, they each do just about everything at one time or another, from turning cheese in the aging cave to hauling buckets of grain out to pasture on the back of a battered four-wheeler. “We work independently of each other, but we respect each other’s work. At any moment, one of us will, without hesitation, take over any job that the other has started if they need to be called away.” says Alastair. Their success in this unforgiving Northern climate is built on communication, a shared vision, and plain, old-fashioned hard work.

“Since La Moutonnière makes, markets, and distributes its own products ... life is busy,” Lucille adds. In spite of the time demands placed on them, the folks at [La](#)

[Moutonnière](#) buy into the philosophy of ‘**Farming to live - not living to farm**’. For Alastair, that means hitting the ground running in the morning and working efficiently to fit everything into a day that runs from 7am to 6 pm so he can spend time at home with his children. Lucille, whose daughters Catherine and Mélanie are grown up, has a different take on things. “I see farming as a way of life [and] I see myself as part of a larger system in the country, where people, land and animal husbandry combine to result in sustainable production ... which means, I can make a living and be happy doing it.” Whether it is a way of life or a question of efficiency, for both partners it boils down to milking the sheep and making cheese.

The milking parlor sports a double row of elevated, metal platforms. Each platform has twelve stanchions sized for sheep. The ewes willingly climb the ramp, pushing their heads into the self-locking units with a satisfying “thunk.” It’s an impressive ballet – they fill the row of stanchions consecutively, starting at the far end and filling each stanchion in turn. With their heads locked in, their rear legs are millimeters from the edge of the platform, yet not a single ewe slips or falls. “Nothing like a row of pinkies, eh mate?” Alastair says, referring to the row of pink, uniform, milk-filled udders arrayed before him at waist height. Despite the Lilliputian scale of this milking parlor, you could be in any dairy barn in the country.

Alastair works his way down the row of sheep, putting a milking unit on every other udder, before pivoting to the opposite side of the parlor and repeating the process. Milk runs from the ewe’s teats, into the milking unit, through a clear hose, and into the pipeline. The pipeline travels along the ceiling, and ultimately into the bulk tank which sits in an adjoining room. As he puts on the last unit, a sucking

sound comes from the other end of the parlor. The udder of the first ewe to be milked is now only 1/3 of its original size, the pink flesh now flaccid. He pushes the teat cups further up, gives her udder a quick massage and strips out the last of the milk before attaching the unit to the next ewe in line. Udder by udder, he makes his way through the flock of three hundred sheep, twenty-four ewes at a time. The girls clearly know the drill. With the flick of a lever, he releases the row of stanchions, the ewes back out and exit calmly in a single file.

Once the flock has gone through the milking parlor, the raw milk is delivered by bulk tank to the cheese plant in the century-old farm house, no more than a couple hundred feet from the barn. Sheep's milk is higher in solids than cow's milk. It has the consistency of heavy cream with a lingering unexpected sweetness. The higher solid content results in a greater cheese yield when compared with cow's milk. The flavor is perpetuated in the cheese and since the milk can be frozen and thawed just before use, cheese production occurs year round. Alastair and Lucille purchase milk from other sheep dairies as far west as Ontario and as far south as Wisconsin. Still, they prefer to get milk closer to home so they can lend a hand to new sheep dairy farmers who seem to be springing up all over the province. Alastair points out that "It's a lot easier to help a mate suss out what's wrong with his milk if you can go over and see his flock and his operation."

Whether frozen or fresh, the milk flowing into the cheese plant is converted into one of ten different hand-made, artisan cheeses. Lucille, coiffed in a hair net and wrapped in a white apron grins at me as I walk into the small cheese-making room. She diverts a measured quantity of milk into a vat that is large enough to bath several children in

at once. From a small incubator across the room, she removes several small containers in which she has grown the necessary lactic cultures (natural bacteria to increase the acidity of the milk) to make Fleurs des Monts, their signature cheese. She measures them carefully into the milk and turns on the agitator to keep the culture in suspension. The vat is thermally controlled to maintain a preset temperature and from time to time, Lucille draws out a sample of the milk to test its acidity. "I like to think that a thousand loving gestures go into the making of our cheese, as it goes from the pasture to your table," she says, waxing philosophical.

It strikes me that these two business partners couldn't be better suited to one another. Lucille's ability to see the spiritual connection between her back-40 and your dinner table is the perfect foil for Alastair's rugged logic and efficiency. "I hope you aren't just watching me make cheese and trying to write down the recipe." She teases as I scramble to take notes. "This is the birth of a food, and like any birth, you have to participate in the process." She's referring to the subtle changes that occur in each day's milk as a function of the pasture the sheep are grazing, the weather, and where the ewes are on their lactation curve. "The artistry in cheese-making is being able to hear what your curds and whey have to say." She says with a smile.

Try as I might, I can't hear the curds and whey saying anything, but judging from the final product, I'm willing to bet that Lucille does. She adds rennet to the cheese-making vat and gently agitates the milk by hand. Rennet is an enzyme extracted from the lining of a calf's fourth stomach. When introduced into the milk, it causes the protein and fats to separate into the characteristic curds and whey that Little Miss Moffet enjoyed so much. I am surprised that what I thought was liquid milk in the vat has actually set up

into a large block of curds with the consistency of Jell-o™. Using a whey knife made from piano wire, Lucille quickly reduces this block of curds to a consistent mass of 1” cubes. As she cuts, more and more whey magically appears in the vat - a clear, yellowish liquid. “The heat and the agitation release the whey.” Lucille explains. “In order to make good cheese you have to get just the right amount of whey out of the curds. But just because we want to get it out of the curds doesn’t mean that it is a waste product. We save the whey and make other kinds of soft cheese from it – like ricotta.” The room is warm, Lucille’s hair net has skewed on her bottle-dyed red hair, and her face is flushed with excitement. “And when we can’t get anything more out of it, we pump it to the barn and use it to feed the hogs. Have you met my hogs yet? They are wonderful boys!”

Lucille scoops up the semi-drained curds, and packs them into a series of plastic, cheesecloth-lined molds that are set on a stainless steel draining table. She fills each mold to overflowing, covers it with cheesecloth, and places a follower over the top. The follower is a plastic disk that allows the cheese press to exert even pressure across the surface of the curds. Varying pressure is used for each type of cheese – the objective always being to press out the extra whey to force the curds to knit together into a cohesive wheel of cheese. Over the course of the next few hours, the cheese is removed from the molds, unwrapped, turned, rewrapped in cheesecloth, returned to the molds where the pressure is slowly increased. By the next day, it can be unwrapped, and set out to dry on straw mats before it is transferred to the aging cave.

The aging cave is an underground, concrete, climate-controlled series of chambers where the flavor and rind develops under carefully managed conditions – for days, weeks or months,

depending on the variety of cheese. One room of the aging cave is devoted entirely to Bleu de la Moutonnière, filled with rounds of Blue Cheese that are turned daily and rubbed with salt. The mold which forms the tell-tale streaks of blue in the body of the cheese only develops its color when the cheese is cut and its surfaces are exposed to the air – requiring an element of trust that everything is working as it should. As each batch is ready for sale, Jacqueline Girard, the only other employee, cuts, wraps and labels it in preparation for delivery to fine cheese shops across the province as well as to La Moutonnière’s stall at the Marché Jean Talon, Montréal’s oldest open air market.

Lucille’s husband Richard delivers the finished product in the specially insulated trunk of their black Volkswagen Beetle. He also designs the cheese labels – labels that are worthy of a frame in their own right. Each one is a mini work of art that captures a Lucille of 27 years ago, sports a flock of sheep traipsing across a picturesque lane or is emblazoned with the head of an East Friesian dairy ewe in front of a hilly pasture of wild flowers. Richard has an uncanny knack for capturing light on his canvases – whether they are displayed in a frame, or affixed to a round of cheese.

La Moutonnière’s cheese-making license only allows them to sell within the province. However, plans are on the drawing board for a new facility that would meet licensing requirements permitting them to sell their cheese throughout the rest of Canada and the U.S. Progress is slow. Both Alastair and Lucille have concerns about growing too large, incurring too much debt, or doing anything that could threaten the artisan nature of their operation. It is in the nature of all things artisan that they require a substantial time investment. While it may not be the most “efficient” way to make cheese, the individual attention

paid to every sheep, to every drop of milk and to every wheel of cheese certainly accounts for the difference between an individually-wrapped slice of Kraft™ American cheese and a wedge of La Moutonnière's Fleurs des Champs.

Judging from the awards they have won in both countries, their cheese would be well received anywhere. After just one melt-in-your-mouth bite of La Moutonnière's "Fleurs des Champs" I can honestly say that it doesn't compare to anything sold on my supermarket shelves. And I should hope not, with a price tag of more than \$14 per pound.

"I can't afford to buy my own cheese at the prices charged by the cheese shops." Lucille complains. Just like in the U.S., farming in Canada is hard work that is not exactly well paid ... even if you have a world-class product. Many farmers focus on improvements to their quality of life, choosing farming more for the lifestyle than for the financial rewards. Alastair and Lucille are no exception to this rule. "Soon, we'll be able to make the same amount of cheese in half the time. And that will save a lot of scurrying around." Alastair points out, referring to a used cheese-making vat he hauled back from Ontario the week before my visit. "When our milk production peaks, we often have to run two batches a day, making for long days in the cheese room."

During my visit, the bustle of activity was offset by the persistent smile on everyone's face – sheep included. The girls of La Moutonnière number 300 bilingual dairy ewes (bilingual because they respond to feeding calls in both English and French) that graze the mountainous pastures and live a life of relative leisure – apart from a twice-a-day visit with Alastair or Lucille in the milking parlor. They shelter under an old-growth stand of maple trees, drink

free-flowing spring water and, contentedly chew their cud while being milked, the hallmark of a happy dairy animal. It is this level of animal comfort and satisfaction that prompted Alastair and Lucille to label each round of cheese with a 100% Mouton Heureux/100% Happy Sheep sticker. Clearly, cheese made from the milk of happy sheep makes for happy eaters of cheese as well.

The farmers, the farm and the sheep that populate La Moutonnière straddle two cultures, two countries and two languages. Yet, this unlikely team produces some of the finest artisan cheese available in the Northeast and provides a glimmer of hope for dairy sheep producers across the continent. This is a place where the bottom line is comprised of profit, personal satisfaction and quality of life. Not necessarily in that order.

You can visit [La Moutonnière](http://www.lamoutonniere.com) on the web in both French and English at <http://www.lamoutonniere.com>.