

Farm Profile

Fearann Kisha/Wandering Shepherd Cheese

In the space of only a couple years, Ron Muise went from working as a chef in a high-end London restaurant to being a farmer and artisan cheese-maker in Grand Mira North, Cape Breton. Fearann Kisha (Gaelic for Kisha's Farm) is home to Ron, his wife Christa MacKinnon, and their two-year old son Lauchlan (and new addition arriving in late June).

Ron grew up in Sydney. As an adult, he spent many years in Europe working as a chef in high-end restaurants. But he grew tired of 90-hour work weeks in the high-pressure restaurant environment and decided to move back to his roots. Ron and Christa are now working to restore Christa's family farm and develop a new industry in Nova Scotia for sheep's milk cheese.

Why cheese? Why sheep's milk? Ron has always been interested in producing food, not just selling it. He learned about farming as a boy from his own grandmother, who had a dairy and sheep farm. Ron was very involved in the local food movement in the United Kingdom and knew a lot about cheese. "I found the dairy cattle regulations intimidating," Ron says, "And I am not particularly fond of goats and like goat cheese the least of the three. So I looked at sheep."

There are other advantages to sheep. They're cheaper to buy and cheaper to feed than cattle. Furthermore, although dairy sheep are seasonal milkers, the composition of sheep milk doesn't change when it's frozen. Ron plans to freeze quantities of it to thaw and make cheese with throughout the winter. Sheep milk contains 7-11% butterfat, which makes for rich cheese. The butterfat composition changes throughout the sheep's lactation so every batch of cheese will be a little different. "This is a positive feature of artisanal cheese," Ron says, "But it does require educating consumers about what they're eating and what the sheep are eating."

Pioneering a local industry is certainly not for the fainthearted. "Being the first person to do something [in a province] is a big challenge," says Ron. "There are always unforeseen problems in doing something new. No matter how much you think you're prepared, you're not. You have to be prepared to react to whatever comes up."

Ron has taken advantage of all the support he can. Gary Koziel, Cape Breton's Agricultural Resource Coordinator, has been very helpful in introducing Ron to the farming industry and available programs. Jonathon Wort, Perennia's ruminant specialist, was a great help for sourcing animals for Ron's flock and flock management advice. He's also worked with Enterprise Cape Breton Corporation (ECBC), the Farm Loan Board and the Homegrown Success program to access certain funding programs.

Ron brought a strong food and business background to this new venture, but he still lacked all the knowledge he needed to succeed as a farmer and cheesemaker. He attended NSAC's Modern Shepherd course for a hands-on introduction to sheep raising. He also took a cheesemaking course at the University of Guelph and then continued to hone his cheese production skills in his home kitchen. Christa's uncle is a forage farmer, so he's been a big help with hay making.



The construction of his milking parlour and cheesemaking facility also posed a challenge. Ron discovered that Nova Scotia had no regulations pertaining to sheep dairies, so he had to work with the Department of Agriculture to rewrite a subsection of the Dairy Act. While he was able to construct his milking parlour relatively cheaply, their provincially inspected cheesemaking facility had to meet federal standards, which he found complicated and expensive to comply with. He was able to save some money on construction costs by building as much on his own as he was legally allowed to do, with help from his father-in-law and a neighbour.

Fortunately, Ron continued to push forward and now has cheese for sale at the Cape Breton's Farmers Market, Baddeck Farmers Market and select restaurants and retail outlets under the Wandering Shepherd Cheese brand. He's producing a variety of soft and semi-soft French cheeses. This is partly market-dictated but also because soft cheeses require less ageing so it helps with his cash flow. Ron is also producing sheep's milk yoghurt. In addition, he makes several cow's milk cheeses to make full use of his facility while his supply of sheep's milk builds.

On the sheep side of things, the Fearann Kisha flock now includes over 40 East Friesian, Lacaune, and British Milk sheep ewes. Ron plans to expand to 60 and import Lacaune semen from Europe, as the genetic pool for North American dairy sheep is limited. Ron has limited access to cleared pasture, so he intensively grazes what he has, rotating the ewes every week to help control parasites. He uses a combination of page wire and electric fence, as well as a livestock guardian dog, to keep the sheep confined and protect them from predators. He also houses the sheep indoors at night, which he finds good for his peace of mind and eases the process of getting the ewes to the milking parlour. He's now experienced his fourth lambing season.

Ron discovered early on that there was a Dairy Sheep Association of North America with more than 200 members, mostly making artisan cheese with milk from their own sheep, or perhaps purchased from a few other farms. The Association also holds annual conferences. Ron was surprised at the size of the industry and the support and information available. Contacts he's made with other farmers in the Dairy Sheep Association have been very helpful to him throughout the process of developing his business.

Ron also networks with other Cape Breton farmers. He's currently a Board member of the Cape Breton-Richmond Federation of Agriculture and the Sheep Producers Association of Nova Scotia (SPANS). He also wants to buy sheep milk from other farms and encourages and mentors two other Cape Breton farmers who are interested in keeping dairy sheep.

Ron speaks about his farming venture with obvious passion. "I've always been my own boss," he says. "I like that I'm producing good quality products that are unique to this area, that reflect Cape Breton's *terroir*. I'm also glad to help bring agriculture back to this part of the province. I like being outside and not in a commercial kitchen. I find cheesemaking fun and challenging, I like knowing the origins of my food and enjoy being able to provide locally raised lamb and locally produced cheese to our customers with lamb and cheese."

Ron is very willing to share his experiences and what he's learned with other farmers and cheesemakers. He was a speaker at the From the Ground Up workshop in St. Ann's and also spoke on the cheesemaker panel at AgraPoint's recent Artisanal and Farmstead Cheesemaking Workshop in Bible Hill.

Want to try some of Ron's cheese? Ask for Wandering Shepherd cheese at a retail outlet near you (but you might have to go to Cape Breton to get it) and enjoy the taste of a great idea, hard work and persistence!

