

Marketing/Management

Friends join forces to create their own artisan cheese line

By CASSANDRA THOMAS

KRISTA Dittman and Charuth Loth began their dream of creating artisan farmstead cheeses over dinner after a loyal friend and customer came up with the idea. They laughed at first, thinking about all the work it would require, all the resources, all the time and energy. Where would they begin?

Dittman and Loth focused their dream into Farmstead First LLC in 2004, with the help of the NebraskaEDGE program. Enhancing, Developing and Growing Entrepreneurs is a community-based, 12-week training program designed to encourage expansion of small businesses, including agricultural operations. Since 1993, EDGE has helped nearly 2,200 individuals transform their ideas into viable business opportunities.

Dittman and Loth also worked with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Food Processing Center, conducting a feasibility study and participating in the Recipe to Reality and From Products to Profits courses.

At a glance

- Friends realize their dream of making on-farm artisan cheese.
- They received help from UNL small business programs and training.
- They market from their farms and at Lincoln and Omaha markets.

Krista Dittman, along with her husband, Doug, owns and operates Branched Oak Farm near Raymond. They produce certified organic poultry, eggs, beef, grain products and cheese. Their operation includes about 25 grass-based Jersey cows, which are milked once a day in their New Zealand-style parlor.

Charuth and Kevin Loth operate a small, family-owned specialty vegetable farm just southwest of Lincoln. The couple specializes in producing organic certified vegetables and herbs, cut flowers, and goat meat and cheese. Their operation includes about 55 Alpine goats, which are milked daily and are also used for meat.



CHEESE WITH A SMILE: Krista Dittman (left) and Charuth Loth enjoy their cheesemaking craft and marketing their products.

Artisan cheese is made from small batches of cheese ladled by hand. "Farmstead" means that the milk used comes from a farmer's own herd, and the farmer is responsible for making the cheese.

For the first year, the partnership operated out of UNL's Food Processing facility before investing in its own equipment. "It was really helpful for us to start making cheese at UNL," says Loth. "Their professors and resources helped us learn about cheese production as

well as marketing and sustainability."

On-farm production

Their production plant is based at Branched Oak Farm, 16 miles north of Lincoln. They purchased a \$20,000 dual-purpose pasteurizer/cheese vat, which was imported from Holland. They also created a controlled-atmosphere cheese cave where they age specialty cheeses for at least 60 days.

The partners share facilities but maintain separate herds and market

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