

# Two brothers EMBARK ON a winning path



Crafting a lush cheese  
with bark and beer

By JANET FLETCHER



Left: The landmark that inspired several names of Jasper Hill Farm cheese.  
Right: Winnimere cheese aging in its spruce bark wrapper.

**F**or adults, memories of youth often conjure a beloved summer place — a park, camp, or swimming hole where most of the good times occurred. For Mateo and Andy Kehler, brothers with deep family roots in Vermont, childhood summers unfolded at the state's scenic Caspian Lake in Greensboro, on a section of shore known as Winnimere.

"My family has been summering at Winnimere since the early 1900s," says Mateo. But in the late 1990s, with dot-com fortunes driving up property values in the area, the brothers began to worry. "We were looking at being priced out of the happy place of our childhood."

Determined to own their own piece of this vacation paradise, the brothers bought a derelict dairy farm near the lake a decade ago. Five years later, they had released the first cheeses from Jasper Hill Farm and soon devised one they christened "Winnimere."

## Saving the Farm

Initially, the brothers had no clue what to do with the 240-acre parcel they bought, but they knew the venture would require a new business model. All around them, dairy farms were closing. "If we were going to make it work, we were going to need to add value to the milk on the farm," says Mateo. "There was just no chance we could possibly make it shipping milk."

Winnimere, a washed-rind cheese similar to a French Mont d'Or or a Swiss Vacherin, embodies the strategy the brothers eventually hatched. They purchased 15 Ayrshire cows, a Scottish breed whose milk is well suited to cheesemaking. Andy, a former building contractor, designed and built a state-of-the-art creamery. Then, the brothers began creating cheeses to show off their raw milk.

Introduced in 2005, Winnimere debuted two years after Jasper Hill's first cheesemaking successes: Bayley

## THE WOODEN WRAP

Mateo Kehler trained local loggers in how to harvest the cambium layer — the thin sheet between the bark and the heartwood — from the property's spruce trees, each spring when the layer separates easily. The strips are cut into bands long enough to wrap the fresh cheeses, then dried and stored until cheesemaking begins in the fall. Like pasta, they are stiff and brittle until boiled for about 15 minutes, which renders them supple enough to bend around the cheese. Workers apply the spruce strip when the wheels are just a day old, holding it in place with a rubber band. Over time, the strips dry and become rigid again, and the cheese attaches itself to the wood.

CHEESE PHOTOS: WIL EDWARDS  
ON LOCATION PHOTOS: KATE ARDING  
TREE BARK PHOTOS: OGDEN GIGLI  
CENTERFOLD: MATEO KEHLER

we're talkin' cheese:  
UP CLOSE with  
**Winnimere**

**WORST THING ABOUT BEING A CHEESE:** I get eaten and disappear!

**BEST THING ABOUT BEING A CHEESE:** I get appreciated and loved.

**TURN-ONS:** A Belgian-style ale such as Chimay Blue or, if I'm in a sophisticated mood, a crisp, spicy and fragrant wine such as Gewürztraminer made by Kuentz-Bas.

**TURN-OFFS:** Most red wines. Especially hefty reds containing a lot of tannin. Awful company.

**LAST BOOK READ:** *The Cheese Plate* by Max McCalman and David Gibbons. Those guys really understand cheese.

**FAVORITE MOVIE:** *I Am The Cheese*—Director Robert Jiras's adaptation of the Robert Cormier novel. I cry every time.

**FAVORITE MEAL:** Lambic-glazed pork chops with a crusty baguette and a fresh green salad.

**GADGET I CAN'T BE WITHOUT:** A beautiful spoon made of horn that is perfect for scooping out my soft interior.

**BEST FRIEND:** The spruce tree. I am encircled in its beautiful bark. I just love being wrapped in spruce and capturing some of its nuttiness.

**ON 'AGING':** It's a double-edged sword. I love getting older and more seasoned, but within reason. It's no fun if I'm left too long and go 'over the top.'

**FAVORITE DESTINATION:** Centered on a porcelain plate, with everyone sitting around admiring me. Yeah.

**MOST MISUNDERSTOOD QUALITY:** My aroma. People fail to understand that my scent is far stronger than my taste.

**SUPERSTITIONS:** I will do anything to avoid cling wrap.

Want this cheese?  
Go to page 56





Mateo Kehler and his Ayrshire cows.

Hazen Blue and Constant Bliss, the latter a mold-ripened cheese initially patterned after France's Chaource. For the aromatic Winnimere, Mateo, who oversees the cheese-making, found his inspiration unexpectedly in New York. During visits to the cheese counters at Murray's and Artisanal, two premier Manhattan retailers, he sampled Forsterkase, a pungent Swiss wheel washed with white wine and encircled with a strip of fir bark. The little-known cheese, likewise made by two brothers, fascinated him.

#### Washed With Beer

Bringing the taste memory back to Jasper Hill, Mateo began experimenting. To get the luscious richness he wanted, he decided to make Winnimere only from October through April, when the cows are on dry feed. Their milk is more than 20 percent higher in fat then, says Andy, who manages the herd. The brothers persuaded a friend with a talent for home brewing to produce a beer on their premises, a lambic style fermented spontaneously with

the ambient yeasts. Mateo mixed the resulting brew with salt and used that brine to wash the first batch of Winnimere, laboriously basting the one-pound wheels with a paintbrush twice a week.

"It ends up being a circular track," says Mateo, with the cellar microflora fermenting the beer, and the beer then flavoring the cheese.

Winnimere spends 60 days in Jasper Hill's aging room, the legal minimum for raw-milk cheese. During that time, yeasts, molds, and bacteria colonize the rind, lured by the sugar in the beer and the cheese's moist surface. As enzymes break down the milk fats and proteins, the cheese becomes creamier and more fragrant, and the spruce scent works its way into the paste from the band that encircles each wheel.

#### Aromas the Room Can't Contain

A ripe Winnimere glistens on the surface, its crusty rind the color of crème caramel. Brought to room temperature



#### HOW TO SERVE IT

A whole Winnimere, if fully ripe, can be served with a spoon, the portions scooped from the creamy interior. A partial wheel can be cut into wedges, with or without the bark strip. The supple, ivory paste will be as spreadable as mascarpone and may start to puddle, like fondue. Lush and thick, the cheese coats the palate, its salt apparent but not excessive, its flavor earthy and tinged with faint bitterness.



Left: Washing the wheels with brine. Right: After 60 days in Jasper Hill's aging room, Winnimere is soft and aromatic.

on a kitchen counter, it exudes aromas that the room can't contain — a yeasty, woody, fruity fragrance that suggests porcini mushrooms, bacon, and ripe tropical fruit.

Learning to manage the cheese's maturation so that it reaches 60 days without over-ripening has made him a better cheesemaker, says Mateo. Last year, on a visit to France, he brought a wheel of Winnimere to a lunch at the home of a prominent *affineur*, or cheese-aging expert.

"He was blown away," says Mateo. "He said, 'I haven't tasted cheese like this in France for 30 years.' Cheesemakers aren't making cheeses that can go the distance, because they don't have to." French cheesemakers, who can sell their semisoft raw-milk cheeses before 60 days, have no financial incentive to give these wheels extended aging.

Mateo developed his *affinage* skills during a three-year stint in Europe before launching Jasper Hill, much of it spent at Neal's Yard Dairy, the London retailer and exporter. He also apprenticed with several of the British cheesemakers who supply Neal's Yard, such as the producers of Ticklemore and Berkswell.

#### Wrapped with Spruce

Jasper Hill makes Winnimere once a week, producing about 180 wheels at a time. One day's evening milk is combined with the morning milk from the following day, cultured, then coagulated with animal rennet. The fresh curds are molded, drained overnight, then unmolded and brined before being wrapped with their spruce bands.

The Kehlers' beer-making friend has moved to Copenhagen, so Mateo expects to transition to a commercial brew for the 2008-2009 vintage of Winnimere. What won't change is the brothers' commitment to using raw milk from their own cows, nourished largely on their neighbors' hay. Like the other Jasper Hill cheeses, Winnimere is "rooted in the landscape," says Mateo. For these two brothers, who hope to encourage others to invest in Vermont cheesemaking, success brings rewards and at least one frustration.

"It's kind of ironic," says Mateo, "but we don't get to the lake much anymore." **c**

#### PAIR IT WITH...

The best counterpoint for Winnimere's big personality is a high-alcohol beer, such as the dark, dry, and wine-like Chimay Blue from Belgium or the Koningshoeven Quadrupel Trappist Ale, a robust brew from the Netherlands with sweet, cider-like notes.