



## Maytag Blue Cheese

[http://www.iowaartscouncil.org/programs/folk-and-traditional-arts/place\\_based\\_foods/stories5.htm](http://www.iowaartscouncil.org/programs/folk-and-traditional-arts/place_based_foods/stories5.htm)

Rachelle H. Saltzman, Ph.D.

Folklife Coordinator, Iowa Arts Council

© Copyright Iowa Arts Council. All Rights Reserved

### **Myrna Ver Ploeg, President**

#### **Maytag Dairy Farms Famous Blue Cheese**

PO Box 806

Newton, IA 50208

641-792-1133, 800-247-2458

Fax 641-792-1567

<http://www.maytagblue.com>

The relationship between ISU and Maytag Blue Cheese is probably the best known of Iowa's food stories. But what most people probably do not know is that the company made a decision some years ago not to expand their herd; instead, Maytag Dairy Farms opted to support local dairy farms by purchasing their milk and adding value to it by making what has become an award winning internationally known artisanal cheese. Maytag Dairy Farms prides itself in being a business that truly supports the "buy local" philosophy. They have also found that their best advertising is by word (and taste) of their blue cheese.

Myrna Ver Ploeg, the President of Maytag Dairy Farms, started working for the family owned business several years ago. She personally taste tests a wheel from each vat of cheese produced at the dairy, and that means trying between 6-12 wheels of blue cheese a day and sometimes up to 20 wheels. Maytag Blue Cheese is produced in small batches under the direction of a master cheese maker, who, like Myrna, samples every batch made. Another little-known fact to industry outsiders—cheese, like wine, can vary in flavor, mouth feel, and texture. This can occur naturally, due to a number of factors, including seasonal changes in the milk and the natural tendencies of an artisanal cheese—hence the need for experienced and knowledgeable tasters. In staying with their philosophy of keeping the business small and human, Maytag Dairy Farms also favors selling its cheese to cheese shops and small restaurants that feature the Maytag Blue Cheese name on their menu.

The Maytag Dairy Farm started in the early 1900s. The original cheese plant with a dormitory on the upper level, where the herdsman stayed, is still there as are the three grand old barns on the property. Today, Maytag family members remain active in the company's management. Family members are very conscious of the fact that this is grandfather's or great-grandfather's farm and part of their family heritage. They have truly emphasized their role as land stewards and try to create a quality product as well as

quality of life for their employees. In fact, there are several employees in this company that have been with Maytag Dairy Farms for over 31 years and one for over 60 years. Benefits are good, and workers' children and local Newton residents often take on parttime employment during the heavy seasonal business in November and December.

The dairy farm was started by E.H. Maytag to produce a safe source of milk for both his family and families within the community. It was his father who started the appliance business, which has no corporate relationship to the cheese company. So the Maytag Dairy Farm became a bottling plant and also established its herd of award-winning Holsteins.

Fred Maytag and Robert Maytag inherited the dairy farm from their father, and looked forward to producing more than milk from this fine herd of Holsteins. Fred approached Iowa State University Dairy Science Department where food chemists were working on a recipe for Roquefort cheese made from cows' milk. Traditionally Roquefort cheese is made from sheep's milk. Fred offered to build the cheese plant and to pay royalties to ISU in return for the opportunity to create an American Blue Cheese. In 1941, as the company website notes, Maytag Dairy Farms "began producing its world famous blue cheese in the heartland of America, with milk from a prize-winning herd of Holstein cattle."

The business developed from there, with no advertising or sales force—just word-of-mouth. Visitors would come through, tour the dairy, taste the cheese, and carry it home with them—around the country and around the world. An expansion in the 1970s was the only change in the company until ten years ago. At that time, Maytag Dairy Farms had to make a decision—expand the dairy herd or focus on the cheese making and acquire the milk from elsewhere. The company opted to disperse their herd and purchase milk from area dairy farms.

Maytag Blue Cheese starts out as whole, raw milk. Twice a day a small milk truck brings in milk from local dairy herds, which probably still have cows with the bloodline from the original award-winning herd of E.H. Maytag. Once the milk is delivered to the cheese plant, the cheese maker begins filling the small open vats. The process begins with separating the milk from the cream then adding them back into the warm vats. As the cheese takes shape in the vats, wire harps are used to cut the cheese into cubes, forming the curds in the whey. The whey is poured off, and the curds are hand scooped into stainless steel hoops. Fresh wheels of cheese are placed onto a drying table to expel any further liquid, and each wheel is hand turned to obtain the correct moisture level. Workers pull off the hoops the following day and place the 4 lbs. wheels in caves dug into the hillsides of the Newton farm. There, the cheese is exposed to high humidity and cool temperatures. Each lot is individually checked to make sure that the cheese hasn't aged too quickly or too slowly. The goal is to create a cheese that is creamy in texture and slightly pungent in taste.

The Maytag Dairy Farms business is committed to maintaining the personal touch with their customers by serving them to the very best of their ability. Packaging, like cheese production, is done by hand. Each wheel is trimmed and wrapped by hand, as is every wedge of blue cheese. The business was based on the ideal of tradition and simplicity and is committed to remaining that way.

Maytag Blue Cheese is now available on-line at <http://www.maytagblue.com> Or you can visit their specialty cheese shop at the farm or call to personally order your Maytag Blue Cheese.

© Copyright Iowa Arts Council. All Rights Reserved.

[http://www.iowaartscouncil.org/programs/folk-and-traditional-arts/place\\_based\\_foods/index.htm](http://www.iowaartscouncil.org/programs/folk-and-traditional-arts/place_based_foods/index.htm)

Funding for this project was provided by grants from the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University.