

Audio Transcript, Maytag Blue Cheese

MYRNA VER PLOEG, Newton, Maytag Dairy Farms

I'm Myrna Ver Ploeg and I'm here at the Maytag Dairy Farms for just about four years now. My favorite part of my job is tasting the cheese. It's a very complex cheese, both in its flavor components and also just in the complexity of making the cheese. And I like the whole array of how it does change seasonally. I see that both in appearance and in flavor.

In 1919, E. H. Maytag began developing this herd—was wanting a safe source of milk for his family and for the local community here. That was something that was lacking at that time. And so he started small and built this herd up and bred the cattle for being good milkers and for having a high quality of milk.

There were other dairies in the area by 1940, and so they were looking to do something else with the milk, and looked at making cheese, as they had visited with Iowa State University back in the 19—late 1930s and paired up with the dairy research department.

At that time they had been researching a recipe of making blue cheese or Roquefort-type cheese out of cows' milk versus sheep's milk. Roquefort cheese is made with a sheep's milk, and it has a different composition as far as the fat particles. And they were looking at finding ways through homogenizing of the milk to make the cows' milk resemble that of sheep's milk.

From the beginning to the very end of the cheese-making process is a hand-made artisan small-batch cheese, but it doesn't end there. When it's brought out of the curing, it's in hand-made wooden boxes by a little man, Stan the woodman. That's right behind

the cheese plant in a little building here, and makes all the wooden boxes and all the wooden racks by hand. The wooden boxes come up into the packaging department. And there we have a number of ladies and a few gentlemen—they are anywhere from 18 to 80—and they are standing in front of stainless steel tables with large knives. And they crack the wax off the outside of the cheese. And then they trim it down by hand. And then they are hand-wrapping that wheel of cheese, either as the whole wheel or they have someone who is hand-cutting that into smaller portions, which would be either a two-pound wheel or the wedges of cheese.

One of the things I see in our company also is that people are—know more than just their job. The office people at Christmas, when it gets hectic, will be loading the UPS with the little boxes of cheese. And the people in packaging will come up and be answering the phones when they get extremely hectic. We almost all know how to wrap wedges. I'll be back at the table elbow to elbow with the rest of them in their white aprons and wrapping cheese when it's our crunch time at Christmas, and we're trying to get out a special order. So there's a lot of cross-training, mostly just because people value the product of what they're putting out.

As far as being involved with the quality and the tasting of the cheese on a daily basis, part of that came back to originating, knowing what was required as far as a fine source of milk. From being raised on a dairy, you knew what smelled good with milk and how the milk was produced and what the components were of the milk. And I've just kind of taken that one step farther as far as the aging process on the cheese.