



Hillsborough Cheese Company

It's a surprise to discover the Hillsborough Cheese Company's location, nestled in the narrow tract between Interstates 40 and 85 in Hillsborough. Then you realize that the enterprise is not so much a farm (in spite of the goats wandering around) but more like an artist's studio. At the



end of a long gravel drive, there's a small olive green building that matches the house behind it; the open door reveals racks of drying buckets, plastic containers and a large cooler.

Cindy and Dorian West are the Hillsborough Cheese Company; Cindy is the cheese-maker and artist, while Dorian handles the business side of their enterprise. The venture began when Cindy left a business job, working her way up until she was a chef; she then attended culinary school in France. She was working at the Magnolia Grill in Durham when the kids came along, so she started cheese-making as a way to work from home. The work fits well with home life: she can be up at all hours of the night, or start part of a long process and then go inside to make dinner. The Wests are fond of quoting Monty Python: "Blessed are the Cheese-makers."



Hillsborough Cheese Company began making sheep's milk cheeses, but the Wests couldn't find a local supplier of sheep milk so they switched to goat and cow milk. They worked with several local dairy farms, developing long-term relationships and helping each other out with cheese-making advice. Dorian visits the farms to pick up the milk. They currently get cow milk from Maple View Farm in Hillsborough, where the cows feed on all-natural pasture and chemical-free hay. Their goat milk comes from Wilderness Trail Dairy in Trinity, NC. The goats are free-range, grass and grain fed, and hormone-free. The Wests aren't interested in maintaining their own milking herd because, in their words, "We enjoy being small, and we enjoy taking vacations."

Hillsborough Cheese Company is fairly small on the local cheese-making scale: they process about 100 gallons of milk a week. (One big bucket of milk (about three gallons) makes ten small wheels of Camembert.) They sell their cheese at the Eno River Farmers' Market, the Chapel Hill Farmers' Market, the Western Wake Farmers' Market,

and the South Durham Farmers' Market, as well as in our stores. Hillsborough Cheese Company produces twenty varieties of cheese on a rotating schedule. They make primarily traditional European-style cheeses but occasionally experiment with different

cheese blends to suit local tastes.

Their regularly produced cheeses can be broken down into three categories: soft, fresh cheeses, bloomy-rind cheeses, and aged raw-milk cheeses (aged at least 60 days in compliance with US law, but oftentimes aged for longer).



Cheese-making is all about extracting liquid, which can be done by cooking, pressing, hanging, or adding salt. Some cheese-makers treat the process like a science experiment, monitoring pH and other indices. Cindy

prefers to work by “feel,” striving for consistency but with more of a “funky approach.” Their field is small because, for many would-be cheese-makers the expense of buying a pasteurizer -- a water heater sized stainless steel container -- as well as special thermometers and other equipment, can't be managed.

Hillsborough Cheese Company cheeses are stored in “the cheese cellar”; since they don't have a good cave, the cheeses are aged in a reach-in cooler. This isn't a time for the cheeses to be neglected. Some must be turned every other day; others must have their container opened when the humidity gets too high. They have a hard cheese, which ages from the inside out, and a bloomy rind cheese, which ages from the outside in. The bloomy rind is now growing an appetizing layer of white fuzz.



The finished product is a wonderful cheese, wrapped in paper. I'm busy trying to keep up with all the cheeses, keeping track of which turns into what, taking pictures and notes. In the midst of the flurry of cheeses, a black goat appears in the doorway of the

Cheese House. He starts to move forward, clearly wanting to join us, but stops when Cindy commands him.



Frank is the ringleader of a herd of Nigerian dwarf goats, family pets who also serve as the whey disposal system. (Since it's full of bacteria, whey can't be poured down the sink.) They've been let out to forage around the yard, and Frank decided to see what we are up to. Cindy shoos him away until he trots back to the herd. I take some pictures of the Wests holding cheese wheels, and when we leave the building, the goats migrate towards us. Halfway down the drive, they take a liking to a magnolia tree and began tugging at its lower branches. "We put them back in the pen when they start on the house," Cindy tells me.

Now that the goats have arrived on the scene, Dorian wants to introduce the new puppies as well. They come flying down the driveway towards us, but after a quick sniff, they head off to annoy the goats. Who knew life between the Interstates could be so good?

<http://hillsboroughcheese.wordpress.com/>

