



“I am Rusty Plummer, the Cheese Maker at Hickory Knoll Farms Creamery in Onondaga, Michigan. This is Michael Metzger, my partner on this farm for the past thirty-four years. He does all the milking, and I make all the cheese.

I’m a lifelong farmer. I was born right here in Eaton Rapids, and my family had a farm north of town on M-99. We raised fifteen Holsteins, about a dozen Berkshire sows, and my mother had about four hundred laying hens and had an egg route in Lansing. My favorite part of farming was always the baby animals. As a farm kid, you partake in the farming operation as much as you are capable of – at eight years old, I was driving tractor; that’s just the way it’s done in the farming community. But there was a time when my family had to leave farming – in my teens, I was a city boy. My mother became so concerned about the commercial industry and the foods she was buying in the grocery store. So, she started a food co-op in Owosso – all organic foods. She would take monthly orders from people in the community, and coordinate a delivery to the People’s Food Co-op in Ann Arbor. Finally, when I was a senior in high school, I talked my parents into buying another farm and moving back out of the city and onto a farm in Owosso. So, at the age of eighteen, I started experimenting with making cow-milk cheese. But then I started having trouble with consuming cow milk, so I got a couple goats and started a small goat herd. That’s kind of where it all started, back forty-five years ago.

Michael and I moved here in 1989. Shortly thereafter, the goats got out of control as just a ‘hobby herd’ – when you’re milking forty-five goats, they have to start paying their own bills. So, we became

a Commercial Goat Dairy in 2001, and then in 2011, we decided to put in this creamery. Our first farmers market we ever sold at was the Allen Farmers Market back in May of 2011. We showed up with a cooler and one type of cheese – plain chevre. Throughout the season, we started adding flavors and expanding what we offered. Now, we are farming on twelve acres. We have right around two hundred goats, eighty-five being milking goats. We have seventeen cows, and four are milking cows. Chevre is still our number one product.

We offer five flavors of chevre: Plain; Cranberry Pecan – that was my mother’s favorite, so I continue to make that as a tribute to her since she is the one who backed me and supported me in starting this business; Sundried Tomato, Basil, and Garlic; Basil, Garlic, Pine Nut Pesto; and finally, Rio Grande, which is smoked jalapeño peppers, tomatillos, cilantro, and roasted red peppers. We also have cheddar cheese in both cow and goat milk. We have fresh cheddar cheese curds in three flavors. The first cow-milk cheese we ever made was our French-style Tomme; we named that LouNell because the first two cows we had were Louise and Nellie. We do a goat-milk Tomme as well, which is called Charbonnel – it’s the only cheese I ever exhibited at a national cheese show, and it ended up ‘Best in Class’ in its division. We also have a half-goat, half-cow Tomme called ‘Deux Laites’ – ‘Two Milks.’ We have a cow-milk gruyere called ‘LeaMin,’ which is named after two cows as well – Leana and Minnie. That’s my favorite cheese. We make a Feta, a Swiss, Mozzarella, Asiago, a Romano, a Pepper Jack, Monterey Jack, Gouda, etc. I could go on, but a lot of the cheeses that I make are cheeses that you would traditionally find in Europe - in France and Switzerland.

I really appreciate Allen Neighborhood Center’s Veggie Box program. When I was approached on whether or not I was willing to participate – willing to sell my product through this program – I mean, heck yeah. Veggie Box is such a great option for us. Kat’s job managing this program – it takes a lot of time. A lot of time and a lot of effort to coordinate all these moving parts: the food, the suppliers, the members, and everything that can go wrong in-between. Veggie Box puts good quality, local food onto the tables of people who may otherwise not have access to this kind of stuff. It makes supporting local, easy. And it introduces new foods into the diets of hundreds of people.

I want people to know how much goes into all of this. I mean, the dairy farm itself – we can’t just go out there and get milk. It takes 24-30 months for a calf to grow up to the point where she’s producing milk. We harvest the milk and we make the cheese, but then it’s in the aging room for 6-24 months before it is ready to go to market and be consumed. With the goats, we have to milk our goats twice a day, every day, Sundays and Christmas. They don’t take a day off. There is so much planning ahead. But then there are so many factors outside of our control: weather conditions, the production of the animal, competing with Big Ag, and the market. But in all this unpredictability of farming, at least there’s Veggie Box. It’s a great support system to have.”