

Aged *With* Love





*At Laurel Valley Creamery,
making cheese is a family affair.*

Story by **Holly Coletta** | Photos by **Jenna Smith**



Celeste Nolan lets her youngest child, Harlan, taste test a piece of delicious cheese.

When Celeste Nolan moved onto a 110-acre farm in Gallia County in 2001, she didn't know a thing about dairy farming. Fast forward 12 years, four kids and 15 cows later and she's the cheesemaking queen of Laurel Valley Creamery. Laurel Valley Creamery creates about 10 different types of cheeses, from seasonal pepper jack and Jersey Drover to year-round mozzarella and aged Gruyère.

The Nolans and Laurel Valley Creamery are also responsible for the much-loved fried cheddar curds at Jackie O's and creamy Guava Cloverton ice cream at Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams in Columbus. Their cheese is sold at local farmers markets, Fluff Bakery & Catering, Casa Nueva and Village Bakery.

"I didn't even drink milk growing up," Celeste says. "I didn't ever really think about where it came from. It was always just like, 'from the fridge.' I was oblivious."

Now, she knows exactly where her milk comes from: Jersey cows, 1,500-pound dairy Hulks, some affectionately given monikers, such as "Edgarina," and others referred to as their delivery numbers in the milking barn beside her home.

Laurel Valley Creamery is as locally focused as a local business can be. Celeste and her husband, Nick, run every aspect of the business by hand. Nick spends his afternoons in the milking barn and taking care of the animals, while Celeste prepares the cheese. The Nolans' animals, 15 cows and seven "heirloom" pigs (a nickname for old-fashioned breeds that haven't been hybridized or genetically modified in any way) are fed handmade whey and leftover kitchen or garden scraps.

The Nolans also handle all the packaging and shipping of the cheese and are responsible for transportation to farmers markets during weekends. Celeste says there is usually someone who comes in to help clean and package, but for the

most part, she's the triple-threat who handles cheesemaking, selling and mommy duties.

The 34-year-old Michigan native churns out cheese with all the savvy of a pro, despite lacking a college education or pinstriped suit of a stereotypical businesswoman. Instead, Celeste met her farmer-in-crime in Florida, while she was "chasing boys after high school." The two stuck together through a long-distance relationship and eventually ended up in Southeast Ohio, close to his farm-fanatic family.

Celeste admits she used to have anxiety about not going to college.

"I still go back and forth like, 'I should have gone to college,' you know, just to say that I could. But [the

creamery] is really successful. It's a good thing to teach my kids," she says.

And often clad in a casual comfy outfit of button-down blue plaid, ripped jeans and a magenta wool hat, she looks much more laid-back than any degree-holding businesswoman. Her brown hair is usually pulled back away from her face in a bandana or ponytail, and her brown eyes are warm and welcoming.

"I can't even imagine going and working for someone else," she says.

After all, the cheese magic she makes at Laurel Valley Creamery couldn't happen in an office cubicle. Instead, it happens in a two-room barn shed dubbed the "cheese house slash daycare." Here, Celeste spends at least five days a week mixing ingredients—pasteurized and unpasteurized milk, cultures and rennet—to create Laurel Valley Creamery's signature cheeses.

The exact amount can vary, but Celeste says she can usually get a pound of cheese for every gallon of milk. A typical batch can yield as much as 120 pounds of cheese, which is then placed in wheel molds and later left to a two to six month shelf life.

When she's not brewing the enormous metal cheese cauldron, Celeste does housework or paperwork, often with little helpers, Lilah and Harlan, her two youngest children. The curly-haired tots, ages 4 and 2 respectively, often accompany Momma Nolan on her cheese-making days, busying themselves with crayons, toys, visits to grandpa's (who lives next door) and, of course, cheesy snack breaks.

"It's funny how the two little ones eat cheese versus the two older ones," Celeste says. "[Edgar and Gus] didn't grow up with the cheese. Lilah will eat, like, a half pound of the Cloverton if I salt it. Like, no questions asked, she'll eat it with a spoon."

The two elder Nolans might not have the lactose cravings of their baby siblings, but they still help turn Laurel Valley Creamery into an all-out family affair. Edgar, the oldest at 9, helps out with the hay, bedding and calves. His little brother Gus, 7, likes to milk with dad. Celeste says both boys like to do other "boy things" and baseball, but they're also pretty good at babysitting their young siblings when mom needs an extra hand.

Not only are the kids learning valuable life lessons about healthy food and the farming lifestyle from mom and dad, but they look adorable doing it. With the exception of baby Harlan, who's a strawberry blonde, the Nolan kids take after their father with their ginger-colored locks. The dimples and spunk, however, come straight from mom.

"I don't figure that everyone will want to stay here," Celeste says. "I hope someone wants to, but if they don't want to, they don't have to. Right now, it's supporting us and our family and I'd like to grow as they grow so it can support them and their families."

The farm, which stretches across hills, fields and a small pond, has been in her husband's family since 1947, when his grandparents moved to Gallia from Boone County, West Virginia. They milked on the farm through 1990, and in 2001, Nick and Celeste moved to the farm to help with caretaking, eventually purchasing the land in 2003. By 2005, they began dairy farming, and in 2009, they turned to making cheese.

The Nolans got into cheesemaking because it seemed to be a more lucrative business than milking, and the start-up investment was cheap. Plus, cheese is a better long-term deal; if the milk didn't sell right away, they would have to throw it out. If the cheese doesn't sell right away, it gets reshelfed and, probably, even tastier with age.

As of now, the Nolans mostly sell to wholesalers and businesses, though they occasionally ship to some individual stores or people and often make appearances at farmers markets. Columbus, Athens and Huntington, West Virginia, are the



FROM TOP One of the Nolans' 15 Jersey cows grazes on the farm's grass; Celeste plays with her children, Harlan (left) and Lilah (right), as the cheese is churning.

SAY CHEESE

Keeping track of the Nolans' different cheeses can be a tough job. Here are tasty tidbits on some of their popular offerings:

» Cora

Simple, versatile and mild. Cora cheese melts easily, so it is commonly used in sandwiches and dishes.

» Cloverton

Soft and subtly sweet, Cloverton cheese is made fresh weekly in small batches—it's good right from the spoon.

» Cheddar curds

These small, bite-sized pieces of cheese can be fried or battered. Salty and flavorful, they make for a great snack, as seen at Jackie O's.

» Galaswiss

This raw milk cheese has a bold, nutty flavor, yet resembles the look and feel of regular Swiss. The name pays homage to the county seat.

» Havarti

Super soft and creamy, Havarti is a mild cheese most often served with fruit and wine.

» Jersey Drover

This cheese is exclusive to Laurel Valley as the taste is dependent on the cows' diet. It's a raw milk cheese with a sharp flavor and a natural rind.

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— CELESTE NOLAN

main markets, but Celeste has started shipping cheese to Cleveland and sometimes sneaks a block or two to friends in Michigan.

“Athens has been very, very supportive and encouraging,” she says. “They welcomed us with money and arms and, ‘Here, I want this cheese!’ which is good. It's good to have a market.”

As the Nolan family grows, Celeste also hopes Laurel Valley Creamery does, too. She says that she can see the future holding more cows and perhaps branching out into selling the whey they currently feed the animals. But she's not looking to set up farms across the U.S. and become a mega-corporation business.

Instead, she wants to keep the focus on their farm, adding things to make it a cheaper and cleaner environment. Celeste says they are looking into alternative-energy projects so that they are not so dependent on electricity. They would also like to look into biodiesel alternatives.

“That's how I see us growing,” she says. “Not larger and larger, but more sustainable and energy-diverse. The more that we can rely on ourselves, the better off we are.”

She also hopes that the pro-organics, environmentally conscious movement that is so prominent in many places in Southeast Ohio continues to move forward both in the community and beyond.

“In addition to it being good for my family if you eat my cheese, it's good for a community. The more things we can do locally as opposed to globally benefits us,” Celeste says. “Here in Gallia, we're taking grass, we're taking sunshine and water and we're turning that into something for the community.” ♦

LEFT The Nolans (clockwise from bottom left: Edgar, Nick, Celeste, Harlan, Lilah and Gus) keep Laurel Valley Creamery running on family ties.



