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Pam Hodgson, master cheesemaker, inspects cheese curds in the curd tank at the Sartori Company in Plymouth, Wisconsin. SARA STATHAS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

How a Wisconsin Farmer Became the Big Cheese

Pam Hodgson is one of two U.S. women ever to achieve the elite title of master cheesemaker; 'patience is important.'

By Francesca Fontana

Pam never thought she would make cheese. Now she is one of two women in the U.S. with the prestigious title of "master cheesemaker."

Ms. Hodgson grew up on her parents' dairy farm in rural Plymouth, Wis., helping raise their calves from a young age. She always assumed she would follow in her parents' footsteps, but in 1991 she took a job in a cheese plant to help provide for her family.



Pam Hodgson stands outside of her office at Sartori. She is the second woman in the country to become a master cheesemaker. PHOTO: SARA STATHAS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"I loved how cheese-making engages all of your intellect, and your body too," she says. "It can be quite physical work at times."

She received her cheesemaker's license in 1996, and entered the master cheesemaker program in 2010. Wisconsin produces more cheese than any other state and has more than 1,000 licensed cheesemakers, but only about 60 people have achieved the master cheesemaker certification. Ms. Hodgson received her certificate in 2013 and now works at Sartori Company in Plymouth.

Here is Ms. Hodgson's story, edited and condensed from a recent interview.

How do you become a master cheesemaker?

The first step is to become a licensed cheesemaker. Wisconsin is the only state to require a license to make cheese. Typically it takes people roughly 18 months. You have to complete an apprenticeship and then pass an exam.

PAM HODGSON

- **Age:** 57
- **Where:** Plymouth, Wis.
- **Title:** Master cheesemaker at Sartori Company
- **Time in the job:** Master cheesemaker since 2013; worked at Sartori since 2005
- **Education:** Bachelor's degree in dairy science from the University of Wisconsin

Then to be considered a master cheesemaker, you have to have your cheesemaker's license for 10 years minimum and be making the varieties that you want to be certified in for a minimum of 5 years.

The exam is extensive -- it covers everything from milk quality to cheese grading to sanitation and food safety, and it should be, right? Because if someone is going to be called a master of something, they should be able to demonstrate that level of mastery.

What does your job as a cheesemaker entail? What skills do you need to make cheese?

Part of my job is to develop new cheeses, which is quite a challenge. Cheese-making is an ancient process, so to be able to come up with new cheeses is remarkable. We look to Europe and we look to other cheesemakers for inspiration. We want to be inspired, but we don't want to imitate.

Attention to detail is definitely important because the composition of milk varies seasonally, so we always have to watch the process to know when we want to make small adjustments.



'It takes hours to make a vat of cheese, so it can't be rushed,' Ms. Hodgson says. PHOTO: SARA STATHAS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

For example, a very critical step for us is when we cup, which is the first step in separating curds from the whey. We can't do that too soon or too fast; we have to observe and do it precisely at the right time. We also collect data on that, and after a while, we'll analyze the data and we'll see if there are other small adjustments to our process so that we can do a better job. We want to be very efficient and we want to make consistent, high-quality cheese, batch after batch after batch.

What are some of the other important skills you need to succeed as a master cheesemaker?

Patience is important. It takes hours to make a vat of cheese, so it can't be rushed. We have to listen to the product and take the next step when the product is ready for it.

I also think teamwork and communication are important because it's very rare for one person to be doing this all by themselves. It's important to train and mentor the team members around you. When I started in the dairy plant, and still today, cheese-making is a male-dominated industry. There were people who were very patient with me that I look back at with great fondness, and there were a few people who weren't supportive.

I've been dedicated to the craft of cheese-making, and I fully expect the people that I'm working with now will be better than I am. So it's very humbling to be a part of that entire process and that legacy.

Where do you work? What is your uniform?

I actually work in a lot of different places. I don't have an office but I have a team workroom that I work in, between that and the plant.



Inside Sartori's cheese caves Ms. Hodgson uses an instrument called a trier to grade a wheel of Merlot BellaVitano cheese with colleague Jeremy Werdeo. PHOTO: SARA STATHAS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

I spend some time in our labs when we're creating new cheeses. I'll make a small batch of cheese in the lab before we'll scale up in the plant because I don't want to disrupt the plant process.

We have dedicated footwear and uniforms for the plant and wear hairnets and sleeves, all to maintain a very clean environment because we're making food and we need to have everything very clean.

What is your team like? How many people do you work with?

We run our plant 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We have shifts of about 10 or 12 people who rotate to get everything covered.

Typically I work 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. although if there's a project that needs attention at different hours, I'll come in for that. I feel really cushy saying that. I have worked every shift there is to work. There's always something going on, every day around the clock.



'Cheese-making engages all of your intellect, and your body too,' Ms. Hodgson says. 'It can be quite physical work at times.' PHOTO: SARA STATHAS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Do you think your children will keep the tradition of cheese-making in the family?

Our daughter is a licensed cheesemaker and a quality assurance supervisor in a cheese plant in Wisconsin. I'm certainly hoping at some point that we'll be the first mother-daughter master cheesemaker combination, but that's up to her.