

America's Most Luxurious Butter Lives to Churn Another Day

Animal Farm Creamery, one of the most highly regarded small dairies in America, was nearly lost. Then, a young couple down the road stepped in.

By [Melissa Clark](#), The New York Times

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A pioneer of American buttermaking, Diane St. Clair recently retired and sold her business, Animal Farm Creamery, and her herd of Jersey cows to her neighbors. Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times

SHOREHAM, Vt. — In a wooden barn perched on a grassy hill, some of the most celebrated cows in the dairy business — the bovine royal family of American fancy butter — sampled hay in their new abode.

Diva, the bossiest of the group, hovered regally over the shy, gentle Cinnamon. Lying down were Ruby and Lacy, who were chewing cud over their folded forelegs. Rutabaga, May and Patch ruminated impassively as Dell peed, effusively, in greeting.

A few months earlier, in February, the herd's former owner, Diane St. Clair, loaded them onto a trailer and drove them seven miles down the road from her [Animal Farm Creamery](#) in Orwell, Vt., to [Rolling Bale Farm](#) in Shoreham, a 100-acre organic property nestled into a clearing about an hour south of Burlington.

"That was a hard day," Ms. St. Clair said. "But there was no way for me to continue."



Rolling Bale Farm in Shoreham, Vt., is the new home for Animal Farm Creamery, which makes some of the most expensive and sought-after cultured butter in the country. Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times

Ms. St. Clair had spent the previous 22 years making the most sought-after small-batch cultured butter in the United States. It's the same butter that the chef Thomas Keller serves at [the French Laundry](#) and [Per Se](#) — and that retails for an eye-popping [\\$60 per pound](#).

But at 65, she was ready to retire. Decades of twice-daily milking, barn mucking and hoisting 70-pound jugs of fresh milk into the butter churn had taken a toll on her back. Her husband, Al Clarisse, a large-animal veterinarian who was her only helper, had developed knee problems. And although her heart still clung to her cherished Jersey cows (her "other family," as she called them), her creative urges had shifted from butter to a new, more sedentary, but just as aromatic, passion: blending exclusive perfumes.

The question was, would she be able to find the right people to take on her treasured herd and her churn? Or would her extraordinary butter, with its subtle nutty, grassy flavors that changed with the seasons, simply disappear?

For many small dairies in Vermont, retirement can be a heartbreak matter of selling off cows and equipment to large agribusinesses and calling it quits. In 1969, Vermont had 4,017 dairy farms, most of them small, family-run operations. [By 2020, that number had dropped by 84 percent to 636](#), with many having consolidated to benefit from economies of scale.



Clove, Diva, Cinnamon, Ruby and Patch, five of the 10 cows that make up Animal Farm Creamery's herd, were let out to pasture.
Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times

Even at farms where the next generation wants to step up, dairy farmers are finding it increasingly difficult to make a living. A national oversupply of milk, [made worse during the pandemic, brought down prices](#) to the point where it may no longer make financial sense to keep going.

All of this has caused the demise of many beloved farms and dairy products, including the prizewinning cheeses from [Orb Weaver Creamery](#), whose owners spent years trying to pass on their dairy to young cheesemakers before finally having to sell off their last cow and close down.



Hilary Haigh, an owner of Animal Farm Creamery, feeding Tammy, a 3-week-old calf, with her sons, Emitt, 3, and William, 5. Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times

This was something Ms. St. Clair intended to prevent: Keeping her business intact and her bovine “other family” together — and far from any industrial mega-farms — was her top priority.

“I wanted my cows to go to a farm that would treat them like I did, with people who would know their names, and who would name their calves,” she said.

Happily, Ms. St. Clair’s story is a rare piece of good news in the world of small dairies. It’s an example of how one single-minded, cow-loving farmer was able to create a market for the kind of handmade cultured butter that had nearly gone extinct in the United States. Then, through a combination of resolve and serendipity, she was able to pass that business to a young family with exactly the right kind of grit, experience and disposition to carry it on. And they happened to live just down the road.

Building a Better Butter



Freshly made balls of Animal Farm Creamery butter have a texture like velvet, a slightly nutty, milky flavor, and a retail price of \$60 per pound. *Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times*

When Ms. St. Clair started Animal Farm in 1999, she knew she wanted to raise Jersey cows. With them came a seemingly endless river of milk that needed a purpose.

“Everyone else in Vermont was doing cheese,” Ms. St. Clair said, “I saw a niche with butter.”

Specifically, the kind of tangy, high-fat, marigold-colored butter she’d eaten in Europe, for which the ultra-creamy milk her Jersey cows produced was perfectly suited. (Most dairy cows in the United States are Holsteins, which yield a larger quantity of milk with a lower fat content.)

Back then, no one she knew in the United States was making small batches of European-style butter from their own cows, and there were no guidelines for how to do it. The nearby [Vermont Creamery](#) had started making European-style butter a year earlier, in 1998, but from purchased milk, which, like making wine from purchased grapes, puts the agricultural part of the equation out of the producer’s control.

Besides, Ms. St. Clair said, “I was in it for the cows.”

Relying on out-of-print dairy manuals from the 19th century, she eventually figured out that culturing the cream before churning it, a process also called clabbering, vastly improved both the taste and the texture, making the end result thicker and more pliant, and adding a pleasing nuttiness.

Culturing is a standard practice for premium butter in Europe, and it was in the United States as well before the widespread industrialization of the dairy industry shifted to uncultured “sweet” butter, those pale, bland sticks in the supermarket, because it was faster and cheaper to produce at scale. (The intense labor involved in producing small quantities of handmade butter from Ms. St. Clair’s own Jersey cows, along with high demand from luxury restaurants, accounts for the extravagant price tag.)

Once Ms. St. Clair was satisfied with her experiments, she overnighted a sampler 3,000 miles away to a famous chef she’d never met, along with a handwritten letter requesting his feedback.

Thomas Keller remembered the moment well.

“Diane sent me five little knobs of misshapen butter in a Ziploc bag,” he said. “I called her immediately and said, ‘How much do you make? We’ll buy it all.’”

Eventually, she built a small dairy near the barn, brought in a few more Jersey cows and, still working mostly by herself and by hand, increased production to 100 pounds of butter per week and the plush, lightly sour buttermilk that was its byproduct.

This was the business she had needed to sell. Ben and Hilary Haigh, both 33, of Rolling Bale Farm turned out to be the ideal buyers.

Greener Pastures for a Cherished Herd



Ms. Haigh strains off the plush, tangy buttermilk, a delicious byproduct of buttermaking, from the churn.
Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times

Hilary Haigh has always been “a little obsessed with butter,” she said.

When she was studying animal science at the University of Vermont, her brother gave her a countertop butter churn, which she used for years before switching to a food processor when she and Ben married.

The couple met, coincidentally, at Animal Farm when they were both in college. Ms. Haigh, who grew up on a nearby farm, was cow- and house-sitting for Ms. St. Clair. Mr. Haigh was helping his uncle build the dairy’s roof.

The two started Rolling Bale Farm in 2014, raising pastured beef, chicken and lamb to sell at the local farmers’ market. They also kept a family cow to provide plenty of milk to drink and to feed Ms. Haigh’s churn.



Ben Haigh, who owns Animal Farm Creamery with his wife, Hilary, milking Meg, as Diva waits her turn alongside. *Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times*

Having a microdairy like Ms. St. Clair's was a dream, Ms. Haigh said, "it just happened sooner than we anticipated."

When she and Mr. Haigh heard that Ms. St. Clair was looking for buyers, they sent her a handwritten letter expressing their interest.

It reminded Ms. St. Clair of the letter she'd sent Mr. Keller all those years ago.

"Who sends letters anymore?" Ms. St. Clair said. "It's like it's all come full circle."

After piecing together two loans and a grant to come up with the \$281,000 necessary to buy the business and install a dairy at Rolling Bale Farm, the Haighs took over Animal Farm Creamery in January. (Ms. St. Clair wanted to retire on her farm, so the business and cows were sold, but not her property.)



Ms. Haigh stirred the buttermilk before bottling it. *Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times*



She produces about 100 pounds of butter and 200 quarts of buttermilk a week, all by hand. *Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times*

Now, several times every week, Ms. Haigh makes butter and buttermilk exactly as Ms. St. Clair taught her: by hand, by herself, in a dairy built on the same pasture where the Haighs' herd grazes, but with the addition of her two young sons tumbling underfoot, eating as much butter and cream as they can get their small hands on.

Then, once a week, she ships the butter to the same six accounts that Ms. St. Clair had long supplied: Thomas Keller, [the Inn at Little Washington](#) in Virginia, [Menton](#) in Boston, [Ocean House](#) in Rhode Island, [Dedalus](#) Wine Shop and Market in Vermont, and [Saxelby Cheesemongers](#) in New York.

So far, Ms. Haigh said, none of the accounts seemed to notice the change of hands.

Benoit Breal, an owner of Saxelby Cheesemongers, said the transition had been “100 percent seamless.”

“The quality is the same,” he said, “it’s still the quintessential artisanal butter. There’s no one else doing it like that.”



The Haighs with Ms. St. Clair, center. The couple, coincidentally, met at Ms. St. Clair’s farm while they were in college.
Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times

For her part, Ms. St. Clair misses her cows. But she’s happy to have the time to immerse herself in orris root, ylang-ylang and the other heady tools of perfumery needed for [St. Clair Scents](#).

And Diva, Cinnamon, Dell and the rest of the herd seem to have fully adapted to their new home.

“Ben and Hilary love their animals; they’re good farmers,” Ms. St. Clair said. “Now when I go to visit the cows, they’re like, ‘Oh, hi, Diane.’”

She paused and added, a little wistfully, “They’re doing fine without me.”