

Satisfying the affliction – A few moments with Keith Adams, Cheesemaker

By Lotus Fong

Background

Keith Adams and Rob Hunter are co-founders of William Cofield Cheesemakers, located at the Barlow in Sebastopol. Since 2016 they have been making cheeses using British technique and organic milk from Bloomfield near the Sonoma Coast. This winning combination is creating a bit of excitement. Just look at the sexy cover shot of their vibrant Bodega Blue gracing Wine Spectator's September cover. And the cheese? It's delicious...

But a cheesemaker is not born overnight. For Keith, it took multiple evolutions.

From Picky Eater to the Big Cheese

"One of the great ironies of life is that I was **a very picky eater** when I was a kid. Textures were a big deal to me and there many things that I just would not eat. And then as time went on, I really became fascinated with cooking. I worked in some restaurants, I actually was a bagel baker for a time and a prep cook and a sandwich guy and so I fell in love with the culture of restaurants and started become fascinated with food and ... then I pretty much started eating everything. And that was the beginning of my interest in fine dining and food in general".

From food aversions to awareness to devotee, Keith helped start a bagel shop in Minnesota and in time, there were five. Then there was a turn to success – partly to the Atkins diet, more competition and simple **burn-out**.

"We ended up closing those stores, I went bankrupt and divorced... That was not my best year but I got through it... I took a corporate sales job.... But I really started to feel like **I was dying inside**. I really wanted to get back into food but I didn't want to get into retail...

A life-long wine fan, the resources to start a wine adventure weren't available. Instead, he did the best pairing available – make cheese.

Some ten years ago, Keith bought a book on cheese making. "A lot of it was technical. A lot of it went over my head the first time. The last chapter was about a couple from Vermont who quit the rat race and started making cheese... **"I think I can do this...** Emotionally, I painted myself into a corner where the only option I had left to me was to make cheese."

Mentor, Sue Conley from Cowgirl Creamery in Marin, then introduced Keith to Margaret Morris from Glengarry Cheese who taught him how to make cheese.

“I suspected it would be something I would really love. We started out really, really small.... **There wasn't a day along the way where I questioned my decision to be a cheese maker.** I questioned my decision to start another business. There were two or three moments in the first three years where I was out of money and I had to scramble. And of course I had this overwhelming fear that I was going to fail at this and I was going to be a two time loser and it was going to be really awful. But I kept at it and I finally got to the point we were breaking even... and making wonderful cheese...”

“**A lot of us think there's some sort of affliction** we have to drive us into this insane, hardworking environment **but if you're suited to it there's nothing else**”, Keith beamed.

In 2008, Keith started Alemar cheese – a company in Minnesota specializing in French inspired soft cheeses which he still owns. Deciding to move back to California, Keith teamed up with Rob Hunter and began making cheese in Sonoma.

But why British cheese?

“My parents' heritage is very British... I got the opportunity to live in London for two years when I was a kid... I was there when I was nine and when I was seventeen. **I fell in love with England** and I try to go back often. Honestly at that time, the British cheese world had collapsed. Almost all the cheese being made in Britain at the time was mass produced - big factories, all industrial. In the late 70's early 80's a cheese shop in London called Neal's Yard Dairy opened in London... Randolph Hodson saved and brought back British cheese. He approached dairy farmers and said if you make cheese like your grandparents made it, I'll buy it and I've got a market for you.”

“Many of the regions have their own techniques that are not like anywhere else in the country or the world in terms of the way they make cheese. It was all figured out by trial and error back in the day. And whatever cultures were naturally present in the air where they were making the cheese so the idea behind this is that each of these techniques and the terroir of the areas that are producing this cheese will give you different flavors, characteristics, textures.”

“No one's really making British inspired cheese in Sonoma/Marin and this is a definite hot bed of cheese production in the US. My idea was to take British technique and history and try it out with beautiful

Sonoma county organic milk and that's what I set out to do. **British cheese was a fascination**, the fact nobody was doing anything like that on the west coast and then my backstory fed into my decision to do this.”

Keith gives Stilton cheese a craftsman's nod with his flavorful Bodega Blue. Stilton is a protected designation of origin (PDO) by the European Commission and can only be produced in the three counties of Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire.

And then there's Keith's McKinley Cheddar – aged a minimum of 6 months or 12 months for the “Big McK” which rounds out the current offerings. Cheddar has its origins in Somerset and unlike Stilton does not have a PDO.

The Philosophy which drives the business and Keith:

William Cofield buys organic milk exclusively from a fifth generation dairy family, the Camozzi's whose herd of Willow Creek Jerseys cows are pastured and raised in the Bloomfield town ship.

“We can pay a premium on the milk because we are able to sell our cheese at a certain price. Any commodity is subject to the whims at the market... We are paying 2-3 times what they are getting for their milk at the co-op. The idea is if we can buy all the milk from that one dairy we can ensure that they are going to stay in business. They're going to have enough money to make improvements, take care of their animals and hand it off to the next generation. And we are going to take that milk and turn it into something, hopefully, wonderful. People who are trying to support traditional farming, traditional

methods of making a product like cheese, fit together as a piece and **we are just one little piece in that big picture.”**

“The cheese world is small if you think about the whole nation as a big pie. There's a small slim group of people who are into high end cheese and it's growing slowly. Fortunately, the millennials are very interested in where their food comes from. We don't need to have everybody in the country wildly into what we are doing. **We just need a small band of devotees that will buy our cheese** and tell other people about our cheese... We are working every day to get the word and hopefully find some people it resonates with.”

Reality check

“I don't want all the money in the world. I just want to do this thing that matters to me and hopefully at the end have enough in my nest to carry me through to old age. **I love what I do and I feel fortunate every day that I get to do it.”**

<http://www.wmcofieldcheese.com/welcome>

<http://alemarcheese.com/>

<https://www.nealsyarddairy.co.uk/>

<https://www.cowgirlcreamery.com/sue-conley>

<https://glengarrycheesemaking.us/>

<https://www.winespectator.com/issues/touring-u-s-cheese-country-2019-09-30>