

Savoring Sustainability

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"By adding a value-added product to the dairy, we reinvented our family farm," says Lynn Stray (second from right). From left are sister Diana Hagan, herdsman Brian Waymire, father Robert Giacomini and sister Jill Basch.

Environmental vigilance seals this dairy's sustainability claim and allows it to become an award-winning cheesemaker.

It's one of California's most scenic, affluent and environmentally conscious areas: Marin County, located just north of San Francisco, where vigilant citizens actively guard their treasured redwoods, coastal headlands, oyster beds and other wildlife habitat.

Here, along the eastern shore of the long-fingered inlet known as Tomales Bay, Robert Giacomini's dairy is using conservation measures to sustain its business operations for future generations.

"We want to be as sustainable as we can," Giacomini says. "It's a viable model for some, not all. It's a way for us to compete and survive."

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Dairying near Point Reyes Station since 1959, Giacomini developed a business model some 15 years ago that was based on a decision not to be bigger but better.

In the late 1990s, as conventional dairying became increasingly difficult, Giacomini saw the need to diversify by adding a value-added product to the farm's output. His four daughters agreed to come home from lives and careers elsewhere and join a family business that would now produce artisan cheese with the herd's milk as a

way to keep the dairy productive and sustainable. Today, each of Giacomini's daughters—Lynn Stray, Diana Hagan, Jill Basch and Karen Howard—oversee a different part of the dairy and cheesemaking operations.

"Our decision to make cheese dramatically changed our way of looking at the dairy business," says Stray, chief operations officer and vice president of sales. "We always had to consider the health of the land and the animals, but now we were also concerned with what the cows ate because it may impart a flavor in the milk and thus into the cheese.

"We had to look at ways to mitigate rising feed costs compared to stable milk prices," Stray says. "We created a brand in the marketplace instead of just one milk truck picking up our daily milk production. That



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brand, Point Reyes Farmstead, meant we were responsible to the consumer."

The Giacomini dairy now milks 350 cows twice daily on 750 acres of rolling hills along Tomales Bay. The Giacomini downsized the herd from 500 cows a few years ago to take pressure off the land. Today, the dairy produces 3,000 gal. of milk a day, ranking fourth among the North Bay DHIA's high herds with a 27,270 lb. per cow energy-corrected milk production. Humane animal care is high on the dairy's list of priorities.

Installed in 2009, the dairy's methane digester generates power for the milking parlor and the creamery, which totals 65% of the farm's energy needs. Dried manure is used for cow bedding and fertilizing the land.

The digester's ability to break down bacteria in wastewater allows maximum uptake by plants when the liquid is applied to pastureland. Rotational grazing helps keep grass and soil healthy.

The farm, which produces about 35% of its feed supply, uses a no-till drill for planting, which means less soil erosion, less runoff and more water infiltration. The dairy's water-quality program recycles the water used in sanitizing the creamery for irrigation.

The dairy also flushes its barn stalls with water that's gravity-fed from a stock pond above the barns. The Giacomini also implemented a restoration project, which includes planting trees near stock ponds and creeks to eliminate erosion and runoff.

About 70% of the milk from the Giacomini's cheesemaking process ends up as whey. Mostly water, whey is high in proteins and minerals.

"Most creameries have to haul their whey off the farm or they process it into powder for another revenue source," Stray says. "Smaller dairies like ours are able to use it as feed for the cows. Whey replaces 3 lb. of corn per cow per day. Any extra whey not used as feed is added to the methane digester, adding more bioactivity to the wastewater."

To ensure their land would stay in agriculture long after they were gone, the Giacomini sold the development easements on their farm in 2005 to the Marin Agricultural Land Trust. MALT, the nation's first agricultural land trust, preserves farmland throughout Marin County.

"This commitment to the land is in perpetuity, giving us peace of mind that it will never be developed," says Stray, a MALT director and past board president.

The Giacomini dairy is also part of a case study for the Marin Carbon Project, which emphasizes the value of local soil carbon sequestration.

"**The Giacomini dairy reflects the best of family farm operations,**" says Stacy Carlsen, agricultural commissioner for the County of Marin. "In this day of large-size dairy operations and shrinking numbers of small, sustainable operations, it's refreshing to witness the likes of the ... Giacomini dairy.

"The Point Reyes Blue Cheese produced on the Giacomini farm," Carlsen adds, "has set Marin County on the map as the 'first blue cheese company west of the Mississippi,' and, it goes without saying, the best-tasting blue cheese, as well."

The dairy's success is no small feat along Tomales Bay, where only three dairies remain of the 30 that once



This view of Giacomini Dairy shows the billowing black cover of the digester in the foreground and the red buildings of the cheesemaking operation behind.

operated there. The Giacominis' commitment to conservation has done more than win Marin County's respect.

"Sustainability practices and value-added products have saved our family farm," Stray says.

Later this month, the Giacomini family will learn whether it's won the prestigious **2013 California Leopold Conservation Award**, which honors private landowner achievement in voluntary stewardship and management of natural resources. The family operation is one of three finalists and the only dairy in the running this year. Whether or not it wins the top award, the Giacomini dairy will remain on course.

"The investment of the digester will pay off in five years, but the real payoff is becoming more self-sustainable through management practices and conservation opportunities," Stray says. "This is what makes our family business economical and ensures it will be around for generations."

The Secret Behind the Cheese



Branded Blue - Launched in 2000, Point Reyes Cheese Co. produces four branded and award-winning-cheeses: Original Blue, Point Reyes Toma, Point Reyes Bay Blue and Fresh Mozzarella.

While the Giacominis' conservation efforts have earned the dairy statewide accolades, the dairy is better known in some circles for its award-winning brands of cheese.

Since 2000, the Giacominis have operated **Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Co.**, which produces 800,000 lb. of cheese a year. Launching the artisan cheese operation "saved the dairy and helped get my family back in the business," Bob Giacomini says.

Their branded cheeses are Original Blue, Point Reyes Toma, Point Reyes Bay Blue and Fresh Mozzarella. Toma took the gold for best dairy product at the **Specialty Food Show in 2013**, the same award Original Blue received in 2011. Bay Blue received the Best Overall New Product award at the 2013 Specialty Food Show and a gold medal at the 2013 Good Food Awards.

"We work hard to preserve the flavors so unique to this area," says Giacomini's daughter, Lynn Stray, chief operations officer and vice president of sales. The secret lies in the unique combination of three ingredients:

Grade A raw milk from a closed herd of Holsteins that graze pastures overlooking Tomales Bay; coastal fog; and salty Pacific breezes.

Point Reyes Cheese Co. describes its Toma as a semi-hard farmstead cheese that's creamy in texture, buttery in flavor and finishes with a subtle grassy tang. Toma is Italian for "cheese made by the farmer himself."

Bay Blue started out as cheesemaker Kuba Hemmerling's nod to Stilton. The flavor is earthy with slight mushroom notes that turn sweet and mellow with a unique salted-caramel finish. Although Bay Blue shares the same strain of *Penicillium roqueforti* (blue mold) as Original Blue, pasteurization, different cultures and enzymes, and altered aging processes have resulted in an entirely different blue cheese.