

# Southsider magazine



## True Bleu

**Kenny Mattingly is producing the state's best-known cheeses at his Barren County base**

Sophisticated, handmade food is often associated with big cities, fancy gourmet stores, and white tablecloth restaurants. Kenny Mattingly Jr.'s products can be found in places like that, but their origin is much simpler.

Outside of Glasgow, Ky., down curvy roads that meander past fields and farms, sits the home of what may be Kentucky's most well-known cheese.

Kenny's Farmhouse Cheese originates in the simplest of ways from the simplest of sources. There is a barn, a milking parlor, a cheese shop headquartered in a metal-roofed building, and a white farmhouse.

Behind these buildings on a sloping piece of pasture graze 110 docile creatures ranging in color from a latte brown to the archetypal black and white. Twice a day these ladies plod down the hill and turn their milk over to Mattingly and his crew. Often it is Kenny himself doing milking duties at 3:30 a.m. and p.m.

The milk goes straight from their udders through a set of pipes, and into the cheese parlor and a large vat where that day's variety of cheese will begin the multi-step process required to make it into raw milk gouda, aged cheddar, Kentucky Bleu, or any of the other 19 types and flavors that are turned out here on a regular basis.

Kenny and the other members of the Mattingly family are not gourmands. They did not set out to win any awards or earn particular praise. In 1977 Ken Mattingly Sr. moved his wife and seven children from Indianapolis to fulfill his lifelong dream of becoming a dairy farmer. Land in Indiana, Wisconsin, and Minnesota was too expensive, but he found a good spot in Barren County near Austin, Ky., that he could afford.

"I didn't like the idea but anything adventurous sounded exciting to me," said Mary Rose Mattingly. "He'd wanted a farm since he was a teenager. I'd feel so bad for him not getting to have his dream. I said 'if it doesn't work, we could go back.' "

So the Mattingly family settled in, every child taking a turn at working on the farm. Ken "Kenny" Mattingly Jr. was 19 when the family moved. Although he didn't settle immediately into a farming career, his father said he always showed more interest than his siblings. "He loves the animals, he loves the land, and he loved being outdoors," said Ken Mattingly Sr. "All the other kids worked on [the farm] but wanted to go on to something else." Kenny Mattingly said he wasn't as focused in his early 20s as he is now. He described himself as a hard worker, but said he has some distractions as well. A farm accident refocused him, but not solely on farming. "God worked on my heart," he said. "The door had opened up for me to work at this inner city community center so I left the farm. It was real hard leaving because we were starting to see some success in our dairy operation." He returned to Indianapolis for four years but came back to Austin in 1986.



At that point the operation was dairy cows and an occasional crop for their consumption. In 1989 the younger Mattingly was part of a farming group that toured Holland. Part of the trip included a stay on a dairy farm that made gouda. Soon after that trip, milk prices plummeted. Within a few years Kenny had begun buying the land and the herd from his parents and cheese started to creep into the conversation as a potential way to make more money with the same product.



"When I got into this there were two things I hoped to accomplish; one was to sustain our family farm," said Mattingly. "I didn't want to be a world-renowned cheese maker, I told my wife I don't care what the American Cheese Society thinks about us, we're not going to enter that contest. I just want to do this to make a living farming. The other thing I hope that this would accomplish, is that our success would cause other farmers to look on what we're doing and say we can do things differently and be successful." As Mattingly began the long research process into learning cheesemaking, another Kentucky cheesemaker was leaving the business. A woman in Louisville, who also happened to make gouda, was trying to sell her full set of equipment. Her price kept coming down so finally, about his fifth conversation with

the woman, Mattingly bought her equipment, including the 300-gallon, stainless steel vat he still uses. However, when he first acquired it, it was stored in his barn for four years. "I had just begun purchasing some of the farm from my parents," he said. "I just felt like I couldn't take on another project at that time."

While the equipment sat unused, Kenny took trips to Vermont and New Hampshire, learning how to make cheese. "You don't have a real strong culture here in Barren County to become an organic farmer, or a cheesemaker, so when we decided to do things out of the box, we had to find a culture to support us. In the cheese business, I found that culture in New England and Canada."

In 1998 Kenny's first cheese rolled out of the barn. The first cheesemakers were his parents. Their only variety was raw milk gouda, meaning the milk was not heated to 145 degrees for pasteurization, but instead aged 60 days or more to achieve the proper flavor and consistency. To this day all of Kenny's cheeses are raw milk cheeses.

Ouita Michel, chef and owner of Holly Hill Inn in Midway, Ky., remembers the early days of Kenny's Farmhouse Cheese (then called Kenny's Country Cheese). "The first of his cheeses I ever had was his raw milk gouda. His mom and dad were doing all the deliveries and they pulled up in a conversion van, and sometime after that Kenny was making the rounds in a pickup truck, and I just remember thinking that I was out in my parking lot and there's this truck filled with this really delicious gouda cheese, I thought it was hysterically funny. I still do, it's so incongruous." Although Kenny's Farmhouse Cheese has grown in size and sophistication, it still remains very much a family business, which is part of the reason it has had such success. Mary Rose and Kenneth Sr. aren't the regular cheesemakers anymore, but they sell a whole lot of it, covering one of the larger farmers markets in Louisville on a regular basis. Even though Kenny's Farmhouse Cheese is available at places like Good



Foods Market, Liquor Barn, Wild Oats (in Lexington), and Whole Foods (in Louisville), 20 percent of its sales are still at the farmers market level. Mattingly said it is still more important to him to hook the individual consumer than the large-scale buyer.

"They're going to end up getting it from the large buyer anyway and normally they're the ones that convince the restaurants or the retail outlets to look into a product that they get at a farmers market," he said. "Their voice goes a long way. I really value marketing through farmers markets because you build more relationships there."

The entire Mattingly family continues to spend a lot of time and attention on building those relationships. Kenny does much of the marketing and customer relations work himself, appearing at markets, groceries, special events, and personally visiting chefs. His wife, Beverly, quit her teaching job in 2005 to focus on the cheese business full time. Often it's her voice on the other end of the line when chefs, stores, or individuals call to place an order.

One of Kenny's more profitable relationships has been with Gil Logan, executive chef at Churchill Downs. A big fan of Kenny's, Logan puts his money where his mouth is, buying nearly 20 percent of Mattingly's yearly production of about 50,000 pounds of cheese, and serving it year-round at the racetrack.

Logan moved to Louisville in 2003 and had Kenny's Farmhouse Cheese at the racetrack by that fall. "I tasted the cheese and said 'oh my God this guy is phenomenal.' I could tell by tasting it that this was raw milk cheese, this guy isn't pasteurizing," said Logan. "I went right away down to Kenny, I went to Austin and said 'I'm Chef Gil, what are you doing?' " Since that initial meeting the two have become fast friends and have even developed a number of cheeses together, including an English-style cheese with cranberries made specifically to accompany turkey served at Churchill Downs during the fall meet.

Chefs Michel and Logan are both well known for their loyalty to Kentucky products, but if the product itself was not of high quality, they would not continue to serve it. Both of them started with the gouda, but as Mattingly has added new flavors and varieties to his offerings, their orders have changed and in many cases, increased.

"I think he gets better and better at it," said Michel of the cheese quality. "I'm always trying to improve my own skills, and it's really nice to work with people who are also doing that. He's become a lot more sophisticated in his cheesemaking. He's really learned a lot in the time he's done it."

"This cheese thing, you can't cheat on it," said Logan. "It's perfect, it's how it should be done. I like those kinds of foods, they're artisan foods and they just taste better."

Although the Kenny's Farmhouse Cheese lineup includes flavored cheese with additions like horseradish, tomato and basil, or peppercorns, both Logan and Michel are loyal to the straight stuff, which they use most often either as a cheese course or on a cheese tray.

"When you taste this gouda [the flavor] basically starts in your mouth and tastes like butter. Then when you chew it, you're going to taste a pecan nuttiness, and it finishes with a citrus snap. This cheese has everything in it. It's like tasting wines," said Logan.



"I serve it mainly as my cheese presentation. You get big huge chunks of cheese and little honeys and chutneys and stuff for dipping, some berries on the side, crackers. On the chef's table I'll use 10-pound wheels and let everybody hack at them. They eat a lot of cheese at Churchill Downs." Still, Kenny's Farmhouse Cheese has an increasing business on all fronts, pushing the company past its current storage capacity. "We've been growing 15-40 percent every year," said Mattingly. "Just in the first four months of 2007 we sold 57 percent more cheese than the first four months of 2006. Our demand has always taken everything we've made, but now we're running out." In retail outlets, different flavors of Kenny's Farmhouse Cheese are preferred. Teresa Simon, cheese supervisor at Wild Oats in Lexington Green, said the white cheddar-sundried tomato-basil is most popular with her customers of the 10 varieties regularly available at the store. She said she personally makes an effort to carry local cheeses, but the quality of the product has made it a no-brainer. Repeat customers have increased her ordering frequency from every six weeks to twice a month.

"Knowing that his product is a good product, knowing that it's raw milk, which is what a lot of customers want to know [is important]," said Simon. "A lot come in with dietary considerations or they're really concerned with something that

is local or that it isn't mass produced."

About 85 percent of all the cheese made by the Mattingly family is sold and consumed within Kentucky's boundaries. However, his reputation is growing regionally as well. Star Provisions, the retail arm of Bacchanalia restaurant and Quinones at Bacchanalia in Atlanta, also carries Kenny's Farmhouse Cheeses. All three businesses focus on products that originate in the Southeast. The white cheddar and the Kentucky Bleu are perennial varieties in the store and the restaurants.

"I make it a staple in the cheese case and we always have it," said Tim Gaddis, who oversees the cheese selection at Star Provisions. "People have received it really well. I get the cheddar in 10-pound blocks and go through 20 pounds per month and 12-15 pounds of the Bleu per month. They've become cheeses that I don't have to push, I don't have to tell people 'hey check this out,' people have come to know them."

At Quinones, which features a 10-course tasting menu exclusively comprised from ingredients that originate in the Southeast, the Kentucky Bleu is a perpetual favorite.

"The chef (David Carson) absolutely loves Kenny's Bleu," said Gaddis. "Sometimes I feel like I have to lie to him and tell him I'm out of it to get him to use something else."

Although he didn't get into the business for recognition, Kenny's efforts have earned him praise and prizes. Inside the door of his cheese shop are numerous Kentucky State Fair Awards, but the one he takes most pride in was his placing in a Southern Foodways Alliance contest. Among 76 entries, his Kentucky Bleu finished in the top 10.

"It was a new cheese for us and I thought, 'I like this cheese, I want to see what they think,'" said Mattingly. "Because of that, we've gotten more regional attention."

Increased attention aside, Mattingly has remained personable, approachable, and humble. He is constantly exploring new cheese varieties, weighing input from his staff, customers, and chefs to develop something that tastes good and sells well. He is also looking at new ways to improve his most important ingredient, his milk. Mattingly is currently in the second of a three-year process toward becoming organic certified. He hopes to become an Organic Valley milk producer in 2008, but he said

he is already seeing improvement in herd health and production from using organic practices. That can only make his cheese better.

"What we've done is make a cheese that people in Kentucky like," he said. "It's farm made, it's local, yet it's not too funky that people won't try it."

Theresa Simon of Wild Oats may have summed it up best. "Kenny made me realize he is a real person with a real product, and it's local, and for me that's very important."

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### **Cheese Storage Tips**

According to Kenny Mattingly of Kenny's Farmhouse Cheese, cheese is not preserved through refrigeration, it is preserved through fermentation. If cheeses like Swiss and Harvarti were not aged at room temperature, they would never develop their "eyes" or holes, that are created during aging. Putting cheese in the refrigerator simply slows down the aging and texture process.

- If you'd like your cheese to continue to age and mature (and sharpen, in many cases), simply place it on the countertop under a glass cover. "My uncle would keep a big hunk of cheddar out under a glass cover and cut off of it, it got sharper and sharper quicker," said Mattingly.
- If you are cutting a block of cheese open and plan to keep it in the refrigerator for daily consumption, you can wrap it in paper towels damp with vinegar, then put that into a plastic bag. This will discourage mold until the vinegar dries out, and the cheese will not absorb the vinegar flavor.
- If your cheese does develop mold, you can simply slice it off and use the clear cheese underneath.