

# La Ferme est fermée

## ACOA-backed goat cheese creamery on the block

by David Lindsay

Two years after opening its doors with plans to supply specialty cheeses for restaurants and connoisseurs, a Nova Scotia dairy facility built with ACOA (Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency) backing looks destined to become a summer home. The sale of the cheese plant at Chebogue Point, just south of Yarmouth, would mark another chapter in what has been an often confusing and sometimes acrimonious saga for local residents and former milk suppliers.

Vaughn Perret, one of the owners of La Ferme d'Acadie, recently told *Rural Delivery* that cheese-making operations would, "in an ideal world," be relocated from the creamery on Chebogue Point Road to the site of a new venture, a woodland resort called Trout Point Lodge, some 25 miles inland. A Florida resident named Jim Friss confirmed reports that his offer on the oceanfront property had been accepted, and that the cheese-making equipment would be removed before he commenced renovations to convert the structure into a summer residence.

An Internet advertisement for Yarmouth-based Future Group Realty Ltd. indicated that the chalet-style creamery was placed on the market in June, 2000, the year after it was built. The parcel is described as totaling 100 acres, including a 20-acre island, for an asking price of \$335,000. The owner is identified as Charles Leary, who is Perret's partner in La Ferme d'Acadie and Trout Point Lodge, along with a third owner, Daniel Abel.

Friss said the property was not listed with Future Group when he saw it posted "for sale by owner" elsewhere on the

Internet. He said he dealt directly with the owners, arranging a purchase contract to close on August 15.

Early media reports about the creamery promised a unique agricultural and culinary tourist attraction. A new market for goat's milk sounded like good news for farmers too. Neither prospect has been fully realized.

La Ferme d'Acadie was never intended

sheep's milk to be supplied by La Ferme d'Acadie's herd of East Friesians. Perret was quoted as saying the company was looking for additional supply: "All the sheep and goat producers in the province could not produce all the milk we could use." A quote from Leary may have made Nova Scotia goat farmers optimistic about the future of their small and fragmented industry: "We're going to focus on what we think we can do best — increasing the volume as much as possible so our contracting producers can expand."

### RESPONDING TO THE CALL

A few goat producers acted on that optimism, investing in facilities or herd expansion to supply milk for La Ferme d'Acadie. The cheesemakers and their suppliers have given conflicting accounts of disputes over milk quality and shipping arrangements

in the 1999 production season. Both sides have claimed they were accommodating, making extra efforts or compromises to help the venture gain momentum.

At the time, these problems could have been attributed to growing pains, and at least goat's milk cheese was being made on Chebogue Point. Some locals bought cheese directly from the creamery in 1999. Gary Arnett, of Yarmouth Natural Foods, says he stocked four or five different types of cheese from La Ferme d'Acadie, though the products were available for less than a year.

Goat's milk shipments to the creamery ceased that winter, with producers agreeing to start again in the spring after their does freshened.

In 2000, the creamery's second year, disagreements over shipping put an end



La Ferme d'Acadie creamery overlooking the Chebogue marsh in Yarmouth County, N.S., has worn a "for sale" sign for the past year. It is now poised to sell for a summer home. (David Lindsay photos.)

to produce cheese on an industrial scale. The focus was on high-quality, European-style cheeses, made by hand, using traditional methods. There was, however, an expectation of steady and increasing production. *Farm Focus*, a bi-weekly farm news tabloid published in Yarmouth, reported in December, 1998, that the creamery would soon be processing 500-700 gallons of milk per week, with three full-time employees and two part-time employees working at the facility. (Promotional material for La Ferme d'Acadie drew attention to the fact that the cheese would be "made by women of Acadian ancestry," naming workers Sharon Doucette-Mancer, Nora Muise, and Corrine Nickerson.)

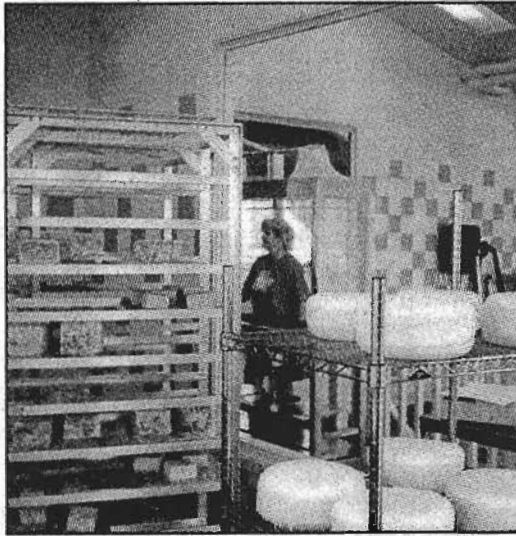
The *Farm Focus* article said cow's milk would be used initially, with some

to all supply of goat's milk. Perret and Leary have said repeatedly that they had no contractual obligation to haul milk, and that they only provided some support for shipping on a voluntary and temporary basis, to help suppliers get up to speed in the first year. In a letter published in *Farm Focus* last July, Leary said the lack of supply was due primarily to the fact that milk producers "would not take the responsibility of hauling onto themselves." The letter also said quality problems were linked to the fact that "many producers see goat milk production as somehow an 'alternative' or less serious business than cow dairying, which it is not."

Both Cook's Dairy Farm Ltd., down the road from La Ferme d'Acadie in Chebogue, and Farmer's Co-operative Dairy Ltd., in Middleton, were contacted by Perret and Leary about shipping cow's milk to the cheese plant, but neither became regular suppliers.

Seventeen East Friesian sheep imported by Perret and Leary, which were supposed to be the foundation

for a considerable milking herd, have been dispersed.



La Ferme d'Acadie cheese room when farmer's hopes were high.

#### DASHED DREAMS

Among the suppliers of goat's milk to La Ferme d'Acadie were Jonathan Lee and Peyton Leavitt, a couple who

had brought some goats with them when they moved from British Columbia to Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley in 1995. They contacted Perret and Leary after reading about the creamery in *Farm Focus*.

In January, 1999, Lee and Leavitt received a letter from Leary indicating that the cheese-making facility would be in operation that May, and offering to purchase the couple's milk production from up to 200 goats in the first year. La Ferme d'Acadie loaned a few thousand dollars to Lee and Leavitt to help them with the investments required to become suppliers.

That June Lee and Leavitt also obtained a loan of \$25,000 from Annapolis Ventures Limited, an ACOA-funded business development agency based in Bridgetown. They built and equipped a milking facility on their farm, and increased their goat herd with new breeding stock.

Lee and Leavitt supplied milk through the summer of 1999, but the next year they made only a few shipments before things fell apart. With deductions from their milk cheques to pay off the loan from La Ferme d'Acadie, and disputes related to milk quality and volume, the couple found it uneconomical to continue as suppliers.

An Annapolis Ventures officer refused to release any specific information about clients, but said the agency currently charges approximately 12 percent interest on business loans, and will take security on assets in cases of delinquency.

In February, 2000, Lee and Leavitt received a letter from the Middleton barristers firm Cole Sawler demanding payment to Annapolis Ventures of \$24,900 in outstanding principal and \$1,179.48 in accrued interest. The letter mentioned a second mortgage that had been placed on property belonging to the couple, and a collateral chattel mortgage placed on equipment. It also said Annapolis Ventures had given Cole Sawler instructions to institute judicial proceedings in regard to the debt, and to recover legal costs in the event of court action.

Lee and Leavitt told many people that they planned to move to Saskatchewan to make a new start. As of the end of June they could not be contacted in that province or in Nova Scotia. Their farm in Torbrook West appeared abandoned, with the door of

## The three restaurateurs

On their Internet website, foodvacation.com, Vaughn Perret, Charles Leary, and Daniel Abel are described as "food-world entrepreneurs" with impressive credentials in the culinary arts. Perret and Abel are natives of Louisiana, and it was in this state's Washington Parish that the trio founded Chicory Farm in 1990, establishing themselves as purveyors of organic produce, specialty mushrooms, and European-style cheeses.

A biographical sketch of Perret indicates he received a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant for alternative crop cultivation technology in 1994, and another USDA grant related to dairy sheep production in 1995.

According to the website, the partners started a restaurant called Chicory Farm Café in New Orleans in 1996. Then, in 1998, "they sold their Louisiana enterprises and moved to Nova Scotia, where they opened La Ferme d'Acadie and Trout Point Lodge."

In an article in *Food and Wine* (June, 2001), writer Marq de Villiers says, "The trio (Perret, Leary and Abel) had a farm, a creamery and a restaurant (in Louisiana), but to create a wilderness retreat that also included an inn and a cooking school, they had to move to Nova Scotia."

When they first came to Chebogue Point, Perret and Leary bought a farm with a barn for their East Friesian sheep, and an old house which they renovated. Nearby land was then acquired for the cheese factory. They sold the farm to Nina Hvoslef in 2000. A few of the East Friesian sheep still reside there.

The foodvacation.com website advertises cooking schools at the resort in East Kemptville, N.S.; in San Jose, Costa Rica; in Ithaca, New York; and in New Orleans, Louisiana. It also includes a link for Abel & Perret, Attorneys, a firm in Ithaca, New York, specializing in retirement planning, real estate, elder law, and international business. ●

the new dairy barn hanging open, and no goats in sight.

Records in the Lawrencetown Registry of Deeds indicated the farm still belongs to Jonathan Lee, with Annapolis Ventures' \$25,000 mortgage remaining from 1999.

La Ferme d'Acadie briefly received goat's milk from Garnet and Andrea Dalton of Beaver River, north of Yarmouth near the Digby County line. This arrangement also ended with disagreements between supplier and processor. The Daltons refuse to speak to the media about the episode, except to say that the sale of all their goats did not cover investments they had made to produce milk for the cheese plant.

By contrast, Randy and Cheryl Hiltz say they didn't lose any money when they stopped supplying La Ferme d'Acadie. At their farm in Aylesford, Ran-Cher Acres, they have been raising goats for about 20 years. They have built up a modest but stable business producing cheese, which is sold in local supermarkets and healthfood stores, and also at the Halifax Farmer's Market. "We're making a living," says Randy, explaining that he and his wife never thought of phasing out cheese produc-

tion at the facility in their home. Instead, they bought more goats so they would have extra milk to sell to Perret and Leary.

Randy and Cheryl Hiltz say there were misunderstandings about shipping charges, but unlike the other suppliers, they never hauled milk to Chebogue Point themselves. "It's enough to look after your animals and milk them without getting involved in shipping," says Randy, citing the 100-mile distance between his farm in Kings County and the creamery in Yarmouth County.

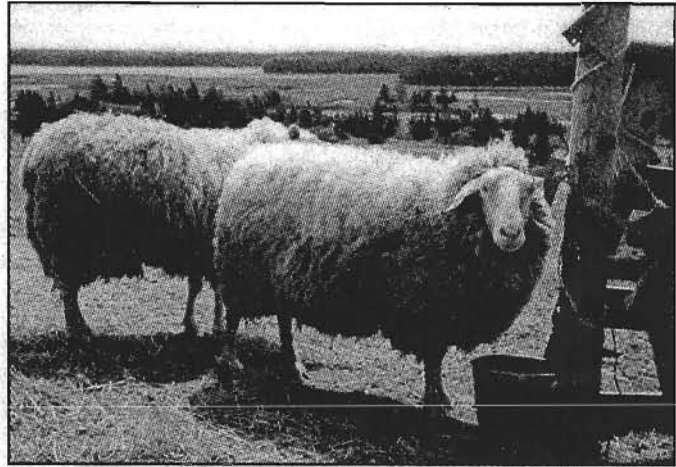
In the second season of production for La Ferme d'Acadie, the shipping fees being charged made it uneconomical for Ran-Cher Acres to continue as suppliers. "We'd be almost giving them the milk for free," says

Cheryl. "We couldn't do that, so that's when we stopped."

The couple say they felt their contract may have been breached, but they had little interest in taking legal action. "We didn't have the time and energy to go that avenue," says Randy.

The Hiltz herd is back to about its original size, with 23 does being milked currently. The farm has a reputation for

Continued on page 27



The remains of a small flock of East Friesian sheep still reside at a farm on Chebogue Point.

## Status of government loan "not in public domain" — ACOA

by Shawn Fuller

The Louisiana owners of the former cheese production plant La Ferme d'Acadie at picturesque Chebogue Point near Yarmouth may be selling that operation, but they remain in Nova Scotia as operators of the remote Trout Point Lodge.

Daniel Abel and Charles Leary are still listed as the owners of the Chebogue Point land which includes a 14.78 hectare island known as Moulton Island and a plot at 107 Chebogue Point Road.

The properties, purchased in 1996, housed their cheese plant and residence. Officials from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) provided little information on La Ferme d'Acadie. Nova Scotia-based communications officer Alex Smith confirmed that ACOA provided \$133,200 in funding to the company in 1998. When asked whether the money was repaid Smith would only say, "That is not in the public domain."

Other ACOA officials did not return phone calls by press time. *Rural Delivery* has filed an Access to Information request to ACOA seeking all documents related to the La Ferme d'Acadie file.

Registry of Joint Stock records show that Vaughn Perret, Charles Leary, and Daniel Abel dissolved the company La Ferme d'Acadie as a partnership in August, 1997, and established it as a limited company. That company status came to an end in August, 2000, when Registry of Joint Stock fees

where not paid.

Perret, Leary, and Abel have been partners in various ventures in Louisiana and Nova Scotia since 1990, including a gourmet store and café in New Orleans and a 100 acre farm north of that city.

They registered Trout Point Lodge Ltd. in East Kemptville, N.S., in December of 1998. Trout Point Lodge, not far from the former Rio Algom tin mine, markets itself as "a luxurious nature retreat offering superb outdoor recreation, outstanding cuisine and engaging food learning vacations."

The company's website, [www.troutpoint.com](http://www.troutpoint.com), states that it has a 200 acre wooded estate bordering the Tobeatic Wilderness preserve and the Tusket and Napier Rivers. Provincial property records show Trout Point owns seven plots of land scattered through the East Kemptville area near the "Prout Point Road" which total 193 acres. Trout Point Lodge purchased the properties in 1999.

Most of the property is listed as Resource Forest and has a low assessment tax rate. The main lodge with 10 guest rooms is assessed at \$615,000. This is a 3-story log cabin made of eastern White spruce logs imported from New Brunswick, granite, and sandstone. It includes a mezzanine library, dining room, and two bars. The company markets directly to Americans seeking to combine a vacation with culinary instruction.

semination. The extensive feathering continues down the legs to the tips of the middle and outer toes. For this reason, show birds are usually kept indoors to maintain that perfect look for the show pens.

When purchasing stock, broken foot feathers may mean that the birds have had access to the outdoors. This could mean that they might be fitter and better for breeding. Birds that have access to the outdoors should be confined on wet days, as the feet feathers may collect balls of mud or cause the bird to become mired.

The wings are small for a bird of its size, rendering it flightless and, thus, easily penned (although they will use low roosts). These small wings also mean that the greater proportion of meat develops on the legs rather than the breast. They have a forward carriage with the breast held low, bringing the head nearly level with the short tail. The rooster weighs about 11 pounds and the hen 8.5 pounds, each possessing a me-

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### **It was used extensively in crossing with local fowl to improve size and winter laying ability**

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dium-sized single comb.

A docile temperament makes this bird a beautiful pet but, if kept with other poultry, it could be pushed off the feed. The Cochin's maternal instincts are well known and it has often been used to foster chicks from game birds and other species.

Initially, the Cochin was largely buff in color. However, poultry breeders worked with any variation that appeared and soon other color varieties emerged. The Buff, Partridge, White, and Black were admitted to Standard in 1874. The Silver Laced, Golden Laced, Blue, and Brown were admitted in 1965. The Barred was admitted in 1982. These varieties are also available in bantam form, along with such colors as Birchen, Brown Red, Columbian, and Mottled.

The large number of color varieties is a testament to the bird's beauty and the tremendous esteem with which poultry enthusiasts hold it. It continues to be widely kept by poultry fanciers who admire the bird's beauty, history and character. ●

## **Ferme fermée**

**Continued from page 19**

breeding fine Saanen goats, so it wasn't hard to get good prices for the extra stock. "We sold about 20 head to Quebec because we didn't need that much milk," says Cheryl. "We probably did all right with the sale of those goats."

The couple still can't understand why there were so many supply problems for La Ferme d'Acadie. "They could have had lots of milk," Cheryl says, noting that other goat farmers were interested in the venture. In Cheryl's view, shipping should have been a predictable and surmountable hurdle: "Normally that would be part of your business plan. Wouldn't you do a study?"

### **IN BUSINESS**

Chebogue Point residents say they have observed little activity at the cheese plant since a period in 1999 when milk was being processed regularly. "There's been nobody working there," says Dan Earle, whose land abuts La Ferme d'Acadie property. "They may say they've been aging cheese, but it's two years old now."

Vaughn Perret says the business still exists, though the supply problem has prevented ongoing cheese production. "If we could find goat's milk, we would

be happy to process goat's milk," he states. "Send us goat's milk and we'll process it. I can sell as much chevre as I can make."

Without good milk, explains Perret, there is no point in trying to produce high-quality cheeses. "I'm not going to process for the sake of processing."

Asked about the \$133,200 loan from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency used to help start La Ferme d'Acadie, Perret states, "ACOA's not coming after us, because all our bills are paid." He says a significant contribution to the local economy has been made through the construction of Trout Point Lodge, where cooking and cheese-making courses are offered in addition to accommodation and fine dining. "We've invested at least two million dollars here," says Perret.

Meanwhile, investments at Chebogue Point do not appear to have made a lasting mark in the community. This summer locals may once again be providing directions to visitors in search of the cheese plant, which has never been identified with a sign. Longtime Chebogue resident Howard Jenkins comments wryly on the public image presented by the hilltop creamery. "They put it in the 'Doers and Dreamers' guide as a tourist attraction," he says, "but there's been a 'No trespassing' sign on it since it was built." ●



**Trout Point Lodge under construction at East Kemptville, N.S.**