Farmstead Cheesemaking and Diversified Farming in Central Illinois

Leslie Cooperband & Wes Jarrell
Co-Owners, Prairie Fruits Farm, LLC
Our Farm in Champaign IL
Creating “terroir” in Illinois

- Seasonal, pasture based dairying
- Using our farm’s natural resources in our cheeses—fruits, flowers, tree leaves
- Raw milk cheeses contain native flora of milk
- Fresh tree and berry fruit!
How we got started:
Advice from mentor Anne Topham, Fantome Farm, WI: “get some goats”

June 2004:
3 Nubian does and 1 buck (all yearlings) arrive at Prairie Fruits Farm
Our organic fruit orchard
What did we want to be?

• Small dairy/creamery – 40 goats max
• Serve the local market
• Organic cheese?
• Grow fruits organically and sell to local markets, u-pick
• Living wage for 1-2 full-time workers
• Educate public
• Help new farmers get experience
What have we become?

- Milking 70 goats, buying sheep milk for cheese
- Market locally, Chicago, Midwest; 1 in MA, 1 in NY: retail, wholesale, distributor
- Organic land, not animals
- 13 acres of hay and pasture (22 total)
- Organic fruit and some vegetables; preserves, fresh sales, meals, u-pick, sorbettos
- Approx. 5 full-time workers, income > $25,000/year
What have we become (cont’d)?

• Restaurant:
  – Dinners on the Farm: 500+ different guests per year
  – Breakfasts on the Farm: about 250 guests per week for 6 weeks
• Gelato and sorbettos
• Tour destination
• Education of visitors
• Six of worker “alums” farming at some level
Sustainability - Economic

- Net profit by fourth year
- Sufficient net income for a family
- Employ 11+ employees, fulltime and part time
- “Living” wage (+food!)
- New entrepreneurs
Sustainability – Environmental

- All land treated organically
- All manure and kitchen/processing byproducts composted and spread on land
- Water recycling begun
- 20 acres annual cropland converted to perennials
- Alternative energy?
Sustainability - Social

- Dinners and breakfasts build community
- Education through meals, tours, projects
- Informal farmer training
- Animal Welfare Approved herd
- Donate to community causes
Joys of Being First Farmstead Cheese Plant in IL

- Unique enterprise
- Showcases what Central IL has to offer
- Hard work translates to products we are proud of
- Sky’s the limit on our creativity
- Tremendous community and regional support