

## A family of fromagers

A dairy farm in the Eastern Townships has become one of Quebec's best cheesemakers

BY JEFF HEINRICH, THE GAZETTE    SEPTEMBER 15, 2010



In less than a decade, a family dairy farm in the Eastern Townships has transformed itself into the Fromagerie La Station de Compton, producing award-winning cheeses. Now, a younger generation of the family has ambitions to increase both production and quality.

**Photograph by:** MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER THE GAZETTE, The Gazette

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A dynasty of farm cheesemakers is being moulded in the hills of the Eastern Townships.

It began more than a century ago, when a trail-blazing patriarch named Alfred Bolduc left the Beauce to be a lumberjack in the forests south of Sherbrooke.

His son, Marcel, switched to dairy farming in the 1960s, acquiring a herd of Holstein cattle whose offspring's milk today goes into the family's prize-winning, organic farm cheeses.

There are four varieties -two semi-firm white cheeses, another made in the style of a French Comte, and a raclette -and they fetch high prices -over \$50 a kilo -at markets and specialty shops in Montreal and beyond.

Unlike big factory cheeses, the family's production is highly artisanal -raw milk (all from the farm's own cows), small production, lots of manipulation by hand.

But business is growing as the farm's reputation soars, with sales doubling every year. And down the road, another succession is building in the wind that could take the business to a new level.

The latest generation of Bolducs -grandson Pierre, his wife, Carole, and their two sons, Simon-Pierre and Vincent -plan to augment the herd in two or three years with a new breed of cows from France.

"As the sons, our role is to develop the factory, increase the quantity and also the quality of what we produce," Simon-Pierre said at the farm, a two-hour drive east of Montreal.

"It means having a vision that's not grandiose, but ambitious," the 26-year-old added, taking a break on the porch of the business's retail shop overlooking a long stretch of Hatley Rd.

Besides the family, 10 employees staff the 170-hectare farm and its cheese factory, La Station de Compton, which opened in 2004 and was completely renovated in 2009.

Every night and early morning, the milk is drawn from the farm's 70 cows and piped in from the barn to a stainless-steel tub in the processing room just behind the shop, where it's filtered.

Pressed into round shapes called wheels, the cheeses are then transferred to three ripening rooms in the basement, where they sit for months on spruce shelves rising two storeys high.

There's mould on the shelves, but in the raw-cheese business, that's a good thing. In the temperature-controlled atmosphere -8, 12 or 20 degrees -the rinds are periodically washed by hand with gentle strokes of a brush.

As part of the federally licensed factory's drive to keep quality high and unwanted bacteria at bay, samples are removed, sliced and individually inspected and tasted by staff.

Everything is kept scrupulously clean, with buckets of disinfectant at the door of every room that employees in white smocks and rubber boots step into as they come and go.

Once a week, well-ripened wheels are transferred to a small packing room down the hall, where they're wrapped by hand and boxed for transport by refrigerator truck to the retail market.

The factory is certified by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, so its cheeses can be sold across the country. They're stocked by about 100 specialty cheese shops, many at public markets like the Atwater and Jean Talon markets in Montreal and St. Lawrence Market in Toronto.

"There's real demand for these types of artisanal products, not just in Quebec, but in Ontario and the other provinces, too," said Nancy Portelance, president of Plaisirs Gourmets, a Neuville fine-cheese distributor whose clients include La Station and 14 other producers.

"The sector is flourishing. In the last 10 years, a lot of businesses have started up. Not all survive, but overall, we're looking at 10-to 15-per-cent growth in sales every year."

One way to grow is to develop products that look different and win prizes. To wit: the distinctive black-on-orange label on La Station's Alfred Le Fermier cheese, which took top honours for packaging last

year at the Canadian Cheese Grand Prix awards.

Also in the works at La Station is a plan to specially label its "summer cheeses," made from the superior milk that cows produce when the farm's pastures are bursting with fresh hay, oats, soy, wheat and clover.

"We want to give the business a breath of fresh air, bring our youth into it and maybe a different way of doing things," said Bolduc, who studied organic farming at the francophone campus of the University of Guelph's Ontario Agricultural College in Alfred, near Hawkesbury.

One major change the family is considering: Adding a new herd of cows -the brown-and-white Montbeliard variety, from Franche-Comte in eastern France -to augment the black-and-white Holsteins the farm has now.

It will be complicated to import the French cows, and they'll have to be quarantined to prevent any potential spread of disease to the others. So the change won't happen overnight -maybe only by 2014, Bolduc said.

But the result, he added, should be worth it.

"Montbeliard cattle are a robust race and the milk they give is a little richer, more concentrated than the Holsteins," Bolduc said. "So if we go ahead and get them, we won't have to work as hard to make good cheese."

In the last two years, cheese output at La Station doubled and doubled again, Bolduc said, declining to give sales figures. With the new cows -the first to be added to the herd since it was established 40 years ago -the trick would be to ratchet up production without sacrificing quality.

Before the Bolducs switched to certified organic feed 12 years ago, the farm was purely a dairy operation, selling its milk but making no cheese. Now, as the family focuses on its specialty, almost all the milk is transformed into cheese.

There are four kinds: La Comtomme, a semi-firm white cheese whose name is a play on words of Compton, the village, and tomme, the French word for cheese wheel.

La Comtomme Signature is

aged a few months more than the regular Comtomme and has a more robust flavour.

Alfred Le Fermier, a limited-production

cheese made in the style of a French Comte and named after Alfred Bolduc, the great-grandfather. And last, Raclette de Compton, the Bolducs' version of the Swiss favourite that's traditionally roasted on an open fire before eating. (Grated half-and-half, Alfred and regular Comtomme are also sold as a fondue mix at the roadside shop.)

La Station's cheeses got several prizes and nominations as finalists at the 2009 Canadian Cheese

Grand Prix -its raclette was named best flavoured cheese -and at the 2009 Selection Caseus Quebec fine cheese awards, where the Alfred was named second-best cheese in all of Quebec and won the categories of firm cheese and washed rind. They've also had some prestige showings at venues like the Olympic Games last spring in Vancouver.

Not bad for a business that's barely half a decade young.

"All I can say is, it's super fun to have kids who can carry on what we've started," said Bolduc's mother, Carole Routhier, whose dedication to organic farming began with a naturopathy course she took in the 1990s. "Ten years ago, we had nothing like what we have today. It's amazing, really, the transformation."

But her sons' dynamism also adds an element of stress, she said. As in a lot of family businesses, it's the next generation that gets the old one to set its sights on something grander.

"They have a lot of energy -they act like entrepreneurs, so they show a lot of leadership and determination," Routhier said of her sons. "It's more stress for us, but it's a good stress."

The family's cheeses don't come cheap. At the farm shop, they sell for as much as \$40 a kilo. In the city, they can retail for more than \$50 a kilo. A typical wedge that fits in the palm of your hand costs about \$10.

Faithful customers, however, are willing to put up with the high price.

Lila Courval lives nearby and stops by the shop every couple of weeks to stock up. "Their cheeses are extraordinarily good," the Gypsydance instructor said as her sale was rung up.

"I've given up on imported French cheese; I only buy Quebec cheese now, especially from my region. It's got taste."

Sanahan Vijayakumar bought a wedge of Alfred to take back with him to Toronto.

"I tried it first with my host family, and I thought it was really good," the 16-year-old said, finishing up a summer job at a camp in nearby Coaticook.

"It's really hard to find raw-milk cheeses in Ontario. I figured I'd make the most of the time I've had here and bring some home."

In addition to the farmers' markets, La Station's cheese is available in limited supply at Yannick Fromagerie, 1218 Bernard St., Outremont, and Boucherie Champfleuri, 1577 Mount Royal Ave. E. For more on the Bolducs and their farm, go to their website [www.fromagerielastation.com](http://www.fromagerielastation.com). There's also a Facebook page in French: Fromagerie Station de Compton. Their distributor, Plaisirs Gourmets, is at [fromageduquebec.qc.ca](http://fromageduquebec.qc.ca).

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photo gallery

Get step-by-step snapshots of the Bolduc's cheese-making process at La Station de Compton, at [montrealgazette.com/life](http://montrealgazette.com/life)

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A tasting platter of Fromagerie La Station de Compton's cheeses and other local products. At the Canadian Cheese Grand Prix in 2009, La Station's Alfred won top honours for packaging. It wasn't all looks: Alfred was named No. 2 overall cheese by Selection Caseus Quebec.

**Photograph by:** MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER THE GAZETTE, The Gazette

