

## Farm diversification new business ideas – Adding Value to Farm produce

# Farmhouse cheeses

### Key points to consider

- Cheese consumption in Northern Ireland is increasing.
- Production of speciality cheeses for sale in specialist shops may be the most lucrative option.
- Cheese making may be labour intensive.
- Cheese making is governed by strict hygiene regulations.



### Market overview

A substantial amount of cheese including speciality cheeses is imported into Northern Ireland each year to meet demand, and cheese consumption in general is growing throughout the United Kingdom. This would suggest that there may be a local market for 'hand-made' cheese. However, there are very few individuals in Northern Ireland with traditional cheese-making skills and it is one of the more difficult milk added-value enterprises.

Before embarking on a cheese making enterprise it is essential to research the local market to identify what particular cheese type is suited to the consumer and processor. Production of hard cheese requires quite a high capital investment and the time involved in maturing the cheese can make it costly. The fresh/soft cheese sector, including mould ripened, may offer the best opportunity. There may be a market for 'gift' cheeses sold through specialist shops and delis. In this case the key factors are innovative flavours and distinctive packaging and presentation. The cost of distribution can be high.

Good manufacturing practice, hygiene, quality assurance and marketing are critical to the success of the venture.

### Production requirements

Cheese can be made from the milk of cows, goats and ewes. The process involves concentration of the solids in the milk by removal of the whey or liquid portion and shaping the solid particles (the curd) by placing them into predetermined sized moulds. Depending on the variety of cheese being made, the cheese, product is then left to mature. A suitable cheese maturation store will be needed. As the cheese maturation time can vary from a few days/weeks for soft cheeses to months/years for hard cheeses the cheese storage area capacity will be determined by the target cheese variety and intended throughput plans.

The equipment required for cheese making will also depend on the type of cheese being produced and specifically designed facilities will be required. Advice/factory design should be sought from Loughry College – The Food Centre and the Environmental Health Officers attached to your local District Council Offices. If you are considering going into cheese making you should try to get some training. The main areas to consider are cheese manufacture, pasteurisation, quality control, hygiene and marketing. Some part time courses may be available through Loughry College – The Food Centre.

### Legal requirements

#### Hygiene Regulations

Food Safety is an important consideration for the business. Cheese making in Northern Ireland is also governed by strict hygiene regulations and temperature control is a key factor. The exact details will depend upon the volume of milk being processed, the variety of cheese being manufactured, and other factors such as packaging, staff facilities and storage areas required. It is advisable to discuss issues such as food hygiene with a local Environmental Health Officer, who can be contacted through your local council.

## Milk licence

A producer requires a licence to offer milk or milk products for sale to the public. In addition, he must comply with provisions contained in The Dairy Products (Hygiene) Regulations (NI) 1995 this legislation covers areas such as building design, standards for milk quality, health marking of products etc.

## Other legislation

You should also be aware of legislation surrounding labelling of food products, trades descriptions, weights and measures and the sale of goods.

## Planning

Planning permission is required for new buildings and for change of use of an existing farm building. You should seek advice from the local Divisional Planning Office.

## Health and safety

Familiarity with current health and safety regulations is desirable and advice on fire precautions can be obtained from Fire Authority personnel.

## Financial considerations

### Capital costs

Capital outlay for constructing a purpose built facility for cheese making would be substantial. Where buildings are being converted it is hard to estimate the capital requirement, but in both cases the costs of ensuring that the buildings meet hygiene regulations could be high.

### Equipment

The range of equipment outlined above can cost between £10,000 and £30,000.

### Running costs

The main direct costs involved are milk, packaging and labour. Labour input can be high. The cost of marketing and distribution is additional, and distribution costs in particular can effect the overall viability of the business.

### Returns

The price you can sell your cheese for will vary depending on whether or not it is a speciality cheese and where your market is. The period from production to time of sale could be up to six months so you will probably have a negative cash flow in the first year.

## Further contacts

Loughry College- The Food Centre  
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E-mail: [loughry.food.centre@dardni.gov.uk](mailto:loughry.food.centre@dardni.gov.uk)  
Website: [www.loughrycollege.ac.uk](http://www.loughrycollege.ac.uk)

Quality Assurance Division, Milk Section  
Room 1019, Dundonald House, BELFAST, BT4 3SB  
Tel: 028 9052 0972  
E-mail: [qadadmin@dardni.gov.uk](mailto:qadadmin@dardni.gov.uk)

### Useful Publications:

Cheesemaking in Practice, R. Scott, 1986.  
Practical Cheesemaking, Kathy Biss, 1988.

This information sheet has been compiled by Rural Enterprise Advisers.

For advice and guidance on your farm diversification idea contact your local Rural Enterprise Adviser. For details of the adviser in your area:

Tel: 028 9052 4406.

E-mail: [ruralenterprise.afds@dardni.gov.uk](mailto:ruralenterprise.afds@dardni.gov.uk)

Website: [www.ruralni.gov.uk/farmdiversification](http://www.ruralni.gov.uk/farmdiversification)

Note: the information provided herein is for general information only. It is not necessarily complete and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any proposed enterprise. The market and circumstances may change substantially. Further research will be required before embarking on any new enterprise.

ISBN 1 85 527560 0  
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