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# *Dairy Made*

CAN ARTISANAL CHEESE  
HELP SAVE VERMONT'S HISTORIC  
LANDSCAPE?





“You’re probably going to get some cow poop on your shoes today,” says Eliot Lothrop, as we climb out of his truck, along with his dog, Cyrus. It’s a windy, muddy spring day at the Conant family farm, along the Winooski River in Richmond, Vermont.

Before us towers the Conants’ huge, historic red barn, standing where a barn has stood since the 1850s. This version dates to 1915, when it was rebuilt less than four months after a fire. We enter through a more modern, adjoining cowshed, tiptoeing on the slick floor around a few dozen noisy Holsteins. One cow, very curious about her visitors, slips free of the gate, and Lothrop and I spend a few awkward, messy moments guiding her back to where she is supposed to be. Let’s just say Lothrop was correct about my shoes.

I don’t mind, though. I figure if I want to truly understand the relationship between historic preservation and the state’s dairy industry, I have to first deal with barns and cows.

Once we enter the Conants’ barn, now empty of livestock, the space opens up majestically. In the wind, the wooden beams and posts gently creak and groan. Standing there in silence, it feels like we are in the hull of an old ship at sea. “They designed these things to

last,” Lothrop says. “But these barns aren’t set up for modern dairy farming anymore.”

He would know. Lothrop earned a master’s degree in historic preservation, and his contracting company, Building Heritage, is in the business of restoring old barns. These days, most of the barns he saves end up being used for non-agricultural purposes. He’s showing me this one simply because he likes it; the Conants aren’t clients of his. “We’ve never actually worked for anyone who’s a dairy farmer,” he says.

Most farms in Vermont, however, are dairy farms. The 930-acre Conant farm is pretty big by Vermont standards, with 400 Holsteins producing milk for the well-known Cabot co-operative creamery. But among the 800-plus dairy farms in the state, about 80 percent have fewer than 200 cows. That’s tiny when compared to large industrial dairy farms out West, where several-thousand-head herds are the norm. For a Vermont-size dairy farmer—with milk prices fluctuating as they do—putting money into an obsolete barn can be impractical.

Outside, Ransom Conant, the farm’s tall, burly sixth-generation co-owner wearing a flannel shirt the same color as his barn, walks over to greet us. “I was hoping



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you were here to buy this barn,” he jokes. “When you look at it from here, it seems sound. But it’s sagging under the weight of the roof.”

Conant says he and his family have looked into state grant funding to help with repairs. So important are barns to Vermont’s landscape that the state established a Barn Preservation Grant in 1992. The program has dispensed more than \$3 million toward the preservation of 300-plus historic barns. Still, there are likely thousands more in need of repair.

“When someone says the word ‘Vermont,’ the images that come to mind are barns and covered bridges and rolling hills. We’re talking about something intangible here. Something that doesn’t necessarily come up in economic equations,” says Thomas Visser, director of the University of Vermont’s Historic Preservation program and the author of *Field Guide to New England Barns and Farm Buildings*, published in 1997. “For many people here, there is an emotional, sentimental connection to historic barns. They reflect the heritage of the community.”

For more than two decades, Vermont seems to have been in danger of falling from an idyllic Eden. The entire state has *twice* appeared on the National Trust for



*Previous pages:* Ransom Conant outside the 1915 barn at his family’s dairy farm in Richmond, Vermont. *Opposite:* Preservation contractor Eliot Lothrop inside Conant’s barn. *This page, top to bottom:* Conant, his wife, Alison, and their daughter, CC, with a few of their Holstein cows; The building’s traditional gambrel roof and six-over-six windows.



## PROMOTING VERMONT'S ARTISAN, HIGH-END DAIRY INDUSTRY HAS BECOME A MAJOR PART OF THE STATE'S MULTIFACETED APPROACH TO KEEPING ITS FARMS AND LANDSCAPE INTACT.

Historic Preservation's list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places, due to threats that big-box retail development would ruin its bucolic landscape and picture-perfect small towns. When I was a college student at the University of Vermont in the early 1990s, it was the only state that did not have a Walmart, and there was a lot of protest when one finally was built. For at least as long, the decline of Vermont's small dairy farms has become a familiar story.

"When we look at the history of Vermont's barns, we have to face the issue of obsolescence," Visser says. "There are fewer and fewer dairy farms in the state." He's received a steady flow of reports about barns featured in his book that are now lost. "One after another," he says. "It's pretty sad."

In front of Conant's barn, Lothrop says, "A barn like this is an icon. But how can a farmer put money into something like that?"

Conant sighs. "It really needs about a million bucks of work. Putting emotions aside, it's a huge elephant in the room."

"So why do you keep the old barn up?" I ask.

"Well," he says, seeming surprised at the question. "It's beautiful."

**T**he 1950s barn at Jasper Hill Farm in Greensboro, in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, is painted with a hippie-style celestial mural that includes a moon made of blue cheese. It's the first clue that Jasper Hill is not a typical dairy farm. Given its award-winning artisan cheeses such as Bayley Hazen Blue and Harbison, the farm is held in awe by cheese lovers all over the country.

"This is as much a social experiment as it is a dairy farm," says Molly Browne, who at the time of my visit is the company's cheesemonger liaison. Zoe Brickley, the sales, marketing, and education manager at Jasper Hill, says that a key mission of the creamery is to "create sustainable agriculture that is thoughtfully placed within the landscape."

As we look at the barn, which houses 45 Ayrshire cows, Browne tells me, "There's a milk crisis, a surplus of milk. For a 50-cow dairy to be competing with farms out West with 1,000 cows is not feasible. The answer is cheese. Cheese gives farms a better economic viability." Quite simply, farmers can earn more money making artisan cheese than by selling milk alone—as long as they let the cows graze freely and use non-GMO feed, both qualities that big-city foodies like.



*Opposite:* The 1909 barn at Bragg Farm in Fayston. *This page, from left:* Bragg Farm's owner, Marisa Mauro, wraps her artisanal Ploughgate Creamery butter; The packaged butter is sold in specialty stores in the Northeast.

"Cheese is our vehicle for preservation," Browne says. Indeed, along with barn preservation grants and farmland conservation, promoting Vermont's artisan, high-end dairy industry has become a major part of the state's multifaceted approach to keeping its farms and landscape intact.

"We need a patchwork of solutions to preserve Vermont's landscape," says Allison Hooper of Vermont Creamery, one of the state's original artisan cheese companies. In 1997, Hooper cofounded the Vermont Cheese Council, a roughly 55-member group that's been instrumental in branding the state as a Napa Valley of cheese. Says Hooper, "At the end of the day, high-value food products bring real value to the land."

As my tour at Jasper Hill moves from farmyard to creamery, we enter a completely different environment. Gone is the mud and poop, and now there is an intense focus on sterility. In a white room, we scrub down; put on white lab coats, hair covers, and high rubber boots; and then wash the boots with a cleansing liquid. When dealing in raw-milk cheese, there's no leaving hygiene to chance.

Inside, we watch an enormous batch of fermenting milk being stirred hypnotically. Talk turns to curds and whey and starter culture and rennet. Browne asks the cheesemaker if it's time to make cheese, and he says we'll need to wait until the pH is ready. "There's still a whey to go," he says, with a wink.

In 2003, when Jasper Hill was a fledgling producer,

cheese giant Cabot approached it to collaborate on aging a special Cheddar. The result, Cabot Clothbound, has become a bestseller, and with several hundred thousand pounds sold each year, it represents nearly half of Jasper Hill's annual sales volume.

The partnership with Cabot led Jasper Hill to enter into several other partnerships with smaller cheesemakers throughout Vermont, becoming a sort of cheese-business incubator. Jasper Hill pays its collaborators some upfront money, and then ages and markets their cheeses. Aging offers even more profitability to smaller farmer-producers. "If you have a \$3-per-pound Cheddar and age it," says Browne, "you could possibly sell it for \$9 per pound."

We walk into a vault in Jasper Hill's aging cellars, and Browne says, "This is where we keep the stinky cheeses." Four workers wash wheels of a rosy orange cow's milk cheese called Willoughby, created by one of these smaller collaborators.

"What's up?" Browne says to the workers.

"Nothing much," says one. "Just washing the cheese. Letting it do its thing."

**i**n Burlington a few days later, I meet Willoughby's creator, 32-year-old Marisa Mauro, who is selling small-batch cultured butter at the Saturday farmers' market. Inside the city's auditorium are at least a dozen vendors hawking local specialty dairy products—cheese, yogurt, ice cream, you name it.



Mauro takes a break from selling butter and we sit on the auditorium steps. “I’ve been involved in the dairy industry since I was 15 years old,” she says. “I’ve never really thought of doing anything else.”

When she started making Willoughby, in 2008, she was living in the Northeast Kingdom. But in 2011, a fire put her creamery out of business. Jasper Hill acquired Willoughby soon after. “It’s such an honor for Jasper Hill to be making it,” she says. “They’ve been unbelievably supportive.”

After the fire, Mauro found herself bartending to make ends meet. Then she heard that the historic 50-acre Bragg Farm, in Fayston, had become available. The picturesque farm, dating to the 1850s, has one of the most iconic views in Vermont, appearing in many photos with Sugarbush ski mountain in the background. Its barn was built by the Bragg family in 1909, and at its peak there were 45 milking cows and a thriving maple syrup business. But the family put the farm up for sale in 2010.

That’s when the Vermont Land Trust stepped in. After a fundraising campaign that attracted 225 donors, it purchased the property through its Farmland Access Program, which solicited applications from farmers with ideas for how to use and conserve the land. “I

had a month to write a business plan,” Mauro says. “I couldn’t think of a cheese to make, so I chose to do butter.” When the program selected Mauro’s plan in 2012, she paid only \$165,000 for the farm, valued at \$745,000, the following year—with a conservation easement that permanently protects it from development.

“Other states don’t have anything [exactly] like this,” says Mauro, whose new company is called Ploughgate Creamery. “It was a huge opportunity for me. I’ve only scratched the surface with butter.”

**b**y now, there are so many artisan cheesemakers in the state that the Vermont Cheese Trail boasts about 55 producers.

“There are still plenty of people coming into cheesemaking, from many different backgrounds,” says Rachel Fritz Schaal, partner at Parish Hill Creamery in Westminster West and former president of the Vermont Cheese Council. “There are people who come here wanting a second career, but also seventh-generation dairy farmers trying to save the family farm.” Many artisan producers only make around 20,000 pounds of cheese per year, a drop in the bucket next to Jasper Hill or Cabot.

Allison Hooper, cofounder of Vermont Creamery,


started her cheesemaking career in the 1980s. She'd spent some time learning how to make goat cheese in France, and then drifted to Vermont. "My [thinking] was, why not raise goats on these hill farms that were obsolete and no longer had cows," Hooper tells me.

Now, Vermont Creamery is a \$20 million business with 105 employees, and its goat cheese can be found all over the United States. But Hooper is still interested in working to preserve Vermont's farmland. In 2012, with the help of the nonprofit Evergreen Conservation Partners, Vermont Creamery bought the 100-acre Ayers Brook farm in Randolph, with a conservation easement. "People were so worried that the farm would become a shopping center," she says. "I love repurposing what's here and revitalizing the community."

Hooper's goal is even larger than preserving just one farm. She and cofounder Bob Reese hope the Ayers Brook model can be replicated all over Vermont. With several hundred milking goats, it's being run as an "open book" demonstration goat dairy—meaning other farmers can study Ayers Brook and learn sustainable goat farming and breeding. The hope is to convert some farmers to producing goat milk, which fetches more stable prices than milk from cows. And with Vermont Creamery's growth, these new goat farmers will have an immediate buyer. In other words, it's one more part of the patchwork of solutions that will keep Vermont farms viable and out of developers' hands.

**a**fter visiting the Conants' red barn, Eliot Lothrop and I check out a barn dating to 1800 that a family is restoring in Westford. It will become a party space and kids' playroom, complete with a skateboard ramp. We explore another large red barn in Jericho, built in 1910, that is now used as a wedding and event space. They may not have been restored to their original uses, but they're preserved nonetheless.

My last stop with Lothrop is at the Edmunds Farmstead in Richmond, named for George F. Edmunds, who served in the U.S. Senate from 1866 to 1891. Lothrop used to rent the old milkhouse here when he was a grad student, and he wants to show me the abandoned monitor barn next door. It dates to 1901, and was made obsolete by a federal dairy act passed in the 1920s. This act required dairy barns to have washable (not wooden) floors, and it more strictly regulated where animals—and their manure—could be housed.

The building is "not in great shape," according to Lothrop, but it reminds him of why he started preserving barns in the first place. "When I lived here, I used to walk outside at night, and just look at this monumental historic barn," he says. "It was pretty inspiring." 

**JASON WILSON** writes about food, drink, and travel. This is his first story for Preservation.



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*Opposite:* A renovated 1940 barn serves as the centerpiece of Vermont Creamery's Ayers Brook Goat Dairy in Randolph. *This page, from left:* Vermont Creamery's Allison Hooper; A couple of Ayers Brook's most inquisitive residents.