

MAKERS AND MONGERS

Inside the minds (and rinds) of the cheese world's brightest

Mateo Kehler: Building world-class cheese rooted in place, purpose and rural community

By Christina Paschen

GREENSBORO, Vt. — Few people have shaped the American artisan cheese movement as profoundly as Mateo Kehler.

As co-founder of Jasper Hill Farm in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, a rural region in the state's northeastern corner known for its dairy farms, Kehler has helped produce some of the country's most celebrated cheeses. He also has reimagined how artisan cheesemakers can support one another, strengthen rural economies and preserve working landscapes.

His influence reaches well beyond his own creamery.

"Mateo inspires the rest of us to be brave, to take risks and to take care of each other," says Andy Hatch, head cheesemaker and co-owner of Uplands Cheese in Dodgeville, Wisconsin.

Hatch credits Kehler not only with producing exceptional cheese but with helping shape the direction of the artisan cheese community itself.

"He zooms out and works on macro-economics, federal policy and rural development. And then he zooms in and works on cheese microbiology and dairy cow rations," Hatch says. "He learns quickly, remembers everything and shares it all."

For Kehler, however, the work began

with a much simpler question: What would a meaningful life look like?

"I spent two to three summers thinking what a whole life might look like — came up with three important needs: meaningful work in a place we love with people we love."

Growing up, summers in Greensboro, Vermont, became the center of family life. As dairy farms across the Northeast Kingdom disappeared and the economics of agriculture continued to shift, Kehler and his brother Andy Kehler saw an opportunity to build something that could help preserve both the land and the community they loved.

Those ideas became the foundation of Jasper Hill Farm. From the beginning, the brothers envisioned more than simply making award-winning cheese. They wanted to demonstrate that transforming milk into artisan cheese could create enough value to sustain family farms and the rural communities that depended on them.

• Building a vision

An unexpected opportunity soon broadened the brothers' vision shortly after Jasper Hill began making cheese in 2003.

Cabot Creamery, based in Cabot and Waitsfield, Vermont, approached Jasper Hill with an idea to produce and age a traditional English-style Clothbound Cheddar. The partnership



Photo courtesy of Jasper Hill Farm

CELLAR AROMAS — Mateo Kehler evaluates a wheel of cheese in the aging cellar at Jasper Hill Farm. Kehler says Jasper Hill's pursuit of quality is driven by a commitment to producing cheeses that reflect the place, practices and people behind them.

proved transformative. Cabot brought the scale while Jasper Hill provided the affinage expertise, eventually producing a cheese that earned Best of Show at the American Cheese Society Judging and Competition in 2006.

The success also revealed a broader opportunity.

Rather than simply aging its own cheeses, Jasper Hill began purchasing fresh, unaged cheeses from farmstead producers throughout Vermont, ripening them in its cellars and helping connect those producers to broader markets.

The concept was ambitious — and far from simple.

"The cheese arrived with all its inconsistencies and problems. We were working with 13-14 different cheesemakers, and it was chaos. I was making cheese every day, managing relationships, ripening and marketing cheese for a lot of different small producers. Not everyone shared our commitment to quality," Kehler says.

The experience prompted Jasper Hill to step back and reconsider where it could have the greatest impact.

• A mission rooted in community

About eight or nine years ago, Jasper Hill undertook a company-

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Mateo Kehler

wide visioning process inspired by the work of Ari Weinzwieg and Zingerman's in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Employees throughout the Jasper Hill organization were asked to write their own visions of greatness and success.

One idea emerged clearly.

"One of the things that came out of that process was to focus impact on a 15-mile radius — our own community," Kehler says.

Rather than continuing to seek partnerships with cheesemakers across

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Photo courtesy of Jasper Hill Farm

FARM FOUNDERS — Mateo Kehler, right, and his brother, Andy Kehler, co-founders of Jasper Hill Farm, stand in front of the creamery's copper cheese vats in Greensboro, Vermont. The brothers founded Jasper Hill in 2003 with a mission of producing world-class cheese while supporting Vermont's working landscape.

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Vermont, Jasper Hill shifted its focus closer to home, purchasing milk from neighboring farms and investing more deeply in the local dairy economy.

Jasper Hill began buying milk from neighboring farms and turning it into some of its best-known cheeses, including Harbison and Moses Sleeper, Kehler says. The team also saw an opportunity to expand beyond its farmstead raw milk cheeses by developing a range of cheeses made with pasteurized milk. The expansion increased demand for local milk by transforming it into higher-value cheeses.

The broader portfolio also helped define Jasper Hill's identity.

"One of the things that makes us unique is you can assemble a cheeseboard with every style of cheese that we make," says Kehler. "It's also one of the things that makes our business so complicated."

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Andy Hatch

According to the organization's official mission statement: "Jasper Hill's mission is to make the highest possible quality products in a way that supports Vermont's working landscape. We are driven to be the standard bearer of quality and innovation in the artisan cheese industry while promoting our regional taste of place."

The commitment to quality also has produced some of the country's most celebrated cheeses. Jasper Hill has earned Best of Show at the American Cheese Society Judging and Competition four times with four different cheeses: Cabot Clothbound (2006), Winnimere (2013), Harbison (2018) and Whitney (2022). In 2025, Withersbrook Blue was named first runner-up.

For Kehler, however, awards never have been the objective.

"We weren't thinking about awards, but we were thinking of the path of most resistance — relentless pursuit of quality and of deliciousness," he says. "Our pursuit of quality has been the driver for decision making in everything we do and has positioned us to compete with the best cheeses in the world. We understood that for us to succeed in our mission, we'd need to produce world-class cheese."

"I've come to understand cheese as a form of memory and cheesemaking as a form of timekeeping."

Mateo Kehler

• Using science to protect tradition

That pursuit of quality also has led Jasper Hill to embrace scientific research in support of traditional cheesemaking.

Since 2012, Jasper Hill has partnered with microbiologists from Tufts University in a longitudinal study examining the farm's microbial ecology, milk and cheeses aging in the cellars. The research has led to published scientific studies, and in 2013 the creamery built a microbiology lab to support that work and engage "the ambitions and bright minds of curious people."

Rather than viewing science as a replacement for tradition, Kehler sees it as a way to better understand and protect the practices that give artisan cheese its identity.

"We're using science to defend traditional practice," he says.

The research helps Jasper Hill better understand how microbes, milk and the farm environment contribute to flavor and quality, reinforcing the connection between cheese and the place where it's made.

"We're trying to create cheeses that are linked to a place, practices and people. What we're selling is the opportunity to connect to something authentic and real," Kehler says.

• Cheese as memory

After more than two decades of making cheese, Kehler has come to see his craft differently.



Photo courtesy of Jasper Hill Farm

AGING CELLARS — Mateo Kehler stands among towering rows of aging cheese in Jasper Hill Farm's cellars. Kehler describes the space as where cheeses are "organized chronologically like a library," preserving the passage of time as each wheel matures.

"I've come to understand cheese as a form of memory and cheesemaking as a form of timekeeping," he says.

He explains that every wheel captures the season, the pasture, the herd, the microbes and the people whose work shaped it before revealing those characteristics months later in the aging cellar.

"As I've had the chance to make cheese all these years, we're marking and archiving time and the passage of time. If you go into our cellars, there are stacks of cheese organized chronologically like a library," Kehler says, adding that for him, that perspective transforms demanding work into something deeply meaningful.

"To participate in this procession across the seasons, knowing that we as

a species have been doing that since the dawn of civilization, I live for that," he adds.

His advice to the next generation reflects the same philosophy that has guided Jasper Hill from the beginning.

"Be very clear about your purpose — it will help you understand what the work actually is," Kehler says.

Perhaps that sense of purpose explains why Kehler's influence extends so far beyond Vermont. His legacy is measured not only in award-winning cheeses but in the people he has mentored, the farms he has helped sustain and the example he has set for an industry built on collaboration.

To Hatch, that is what sets Kehler apart.

"To be that smart and that generous is really special," Hatch says. **CMN**

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