

# ISLAND *Life*

Quebec's Fromagerie de l'Ile-aux-Grues is a little company with a big success story

BY HÉLÈNA KATZ

The Ile-aux-Grues is part of an archipelago of 21 islands in the middle of Quebec's St. Lawrence River

The small plane arrives at the tiny airport on Ile-aux-Grues to bring the cheese produced here to market. Flights to waiting trucks on the mainland seven kilometres away only take about five minutes, but it's a big production. The cheese from La Fromagerie de l'Ile-aux-Grues must be loaded one box at a time because the pallet is too wide to fit into the plane. But for the islanders and their customers, overcoming numerous challenges has been well worth the effort.

The Ile-aux-Grues is part of an archipelago of 21 islands in the middle of the St. Lawrence River not far from Quebec City. The tiny island's 120 residents have always lived from the land.

They decided to start making their own cheese when the off-island butchery to which they used to send cream from April to November each year went belly up. Milk from the island's cows couldn't be shipped off-island because planes were too expensive and ferries arrived at variable hours according to the tides. Realizing that aged Cheddar could be easily stored and transported, what could have spelled the end of the community instead led to a new vocation. The Société coopérative agricole de l'Île-aux-Grues, a co-operative of 14 local dairy farmers, was founded in 1976 with cheese production beginning in 1977, using only milk from the island's dairy producers. "It guarantees the authenticity of the product," says general manager Christian Vinet.

Although the Fromagerie now produces four cheese varieties, it began with just one, Cheddar de l'Île-aux-Grues, an aged Cheddar. For the first 10 years, the small, 3,000-sq.-ft plant only operated in summer because the island's roads weren't cleared in winter. This made it impossible for trucks

to drive from one farm to another to pick up milk. But reclaiming their shelf space each spring proved to be a challenge, explains Vinet. "In the fall we would no longer have anything to put on store shelves, so we would lose our space until April. Then we would have to fight to get it back each year." Another problem was that farmers would only be paid for their products for part of the year. In 1987, the municipality acted on pressure from producers

to clear the roads in winter, making it possible for the Fromagerie to operate year-round.

In 1995 the operation faced a new challenge. "The co-operative emerged from a need for producers to unload their milk, not from market demand," says Vinet. "The market was getting tighter. If we continued the way we were going, we could find ourselves at an impasse." According to Vinet, the co-op was having difficulty competing against bigger players. Since they weren't making enough money to reinvest in the business, they couldn't afford to buy new equipment. This, in turn, made them less competitive.

It was a case of adapt or die. Since 25 of the island's 40 families relied on the Fromagerie for their livelihood, "it had a certain social responsibility," says Vinet. "If we close the business, we close the village. People wanted to stay here, so we needed to move towards industrial production." To do this the co-op's philosophy had to change. While continuing to meet members' needs to unload their supply of milk, the Fromagerie sought to increase its focus on consumer demands. As a result it doubled the size of the federally inspected plant and purchased new equipment.

But it wasn't out of the woods just yet. The co-operative



members soon realized that selling only Cheddar wasn't enough, and that they needed more varieties of cheese to survive. The plant expanded again in 1999 and "a miracle happened," says Vinet. The company built a small annex to the co-operative and began experimenting with soft cheeses, something it hadn't tried before. "It was clear that if we didn't succeed, we'd have to close. It had to work." It turned out to be a busy year. Vinet, who was trained as an agro-economist, went back to school in the winter to take a cheese-making course. The annex was built in the summer, Vinet experimented with cheese making in the fall and the Fromagerie launched its first soft cheese in March 2000.

The soft Mi-Carème, named for the island's annual traditional costumed carnival, was a hit. At the Festival des fromages fins de Warwick in Quebec in 2000, it placed among the top three cheeses in the Innovation in the Dairy Industry category, as well as in the Prix du grand public. The following year it won the Industry prize. It also took first place in the new product category at the Grands prix de l'Excellence de la Corporation de développement économique de la MRC de Montmagny. Vinet still can't believe they pulled it off. "When you have your back to the wall and you know you have to succeed, you do," he says. "When I look back, we were crazy." But, he says, the changes breathed new life

tonnes per year. In 2003 it also brought its fourth cheese, Le Tomme de Grosse-Île, onto the market. The cheese is another product unique to the island. Between Ile-aux-Grues and the neighbouring island, Ile-aux-Oies, is a swampy area linked by road that produces a particular type of hay. Le Tomme de Grosse-Île uses milk from cows fed with this hay, and comes from a young farmer who Vinet encouraged to settle on the island.

Although the volume of milk the co-operative processes has increased, the number of producers has dropped from the original 14 to the current six as farmers have retired. Ensuring there are enough dairy farmers to supply the operation is one of the issues Vinet continues to face. But having a surplus of milk is a more frequent occurrence. "Even if we need 10,000 litres but 12,000 arrive, I have to find a place for it," he says. Surplus milk is used to make Cheddar because it can be stored longer until a buyer is found.

Being situated on an island presents the Fromagerie with two other challenges. While ferries travel between Ile-aux-Grues and the mainland for seven months of the year, the island is only accessible by plane from December to most of April. This means raw materials not produced on the island, from packaging to salt, must be brought in by boat during summer months to ensure the plant has adequate supplies on



Ile-aux-Grues now produces four award-winning cheeses.

into the company.

In 2001, the Fromagerie began producing the Riopelle de l'Isle, named in honour of celebrated Quebec painter and island resident Jean-Paul Riopelle, who lent his name and one of his paintings to promote the new cheese. One dollar from each cheese that is made is donated to the Fondation Riopelle-Vachon, which gives bursaries to help the island's youth gain a post-secondary education. The painter passed away a few months after the cheese was launched. "The week after Riopelle's death, store shelves were empty," says Vinet. In 2002, Riopelle de l'Isle followed in Mi-Carème's footsteps and was honoured at the Warwick cheese festival, this time with the Prix de la presse and the Prix de la presse nouveauté.

The co-operative has also been recognized for its business efforts. At the Fidéides 2001 gala in Quebec City, la Société coopérative agricole de l'Île-aux-Grues received the Fidéide Marketing from the Chambre de commerce régionale de Sainte-Foy for its exceptional performance and its contribution to the economic development of the Quebec City and Chaudière-Appalaches regions, where it is located.

By 2003 the public was clamouring for a new cheese. But, admits Vinet, "It's hard to make something that's better than a Riopelle." That year the Fromagerie grew to its current size of 14,000 sq. ft., expanding milk processing to about two million litres of milk annually, and cheese production to 200

hand to get through the five months of the year that they are virtually cut off from the mainland.

Then there is the problem of recruitment. While the company has about 15 employees, Vinet has more than job postings and interviews to worry about when he needs to hire new people. With only 120 residents on Ile-aux-Grues, the pool of potential employees is limited. So Vinet has to find people who, first and foremost, want to live on the island. Then he looks at whether their skills are a match. He also needs to be sure they will be able to find a place to live if they move to Ile-aux-Grues. Affordable housing has become more difficult to find in recent years, as real estate prices have skyrocketed thanks to city slickers buying cottages. A chalet that sold for \$25,000 in 1995, for example, went for \$105,000 in 2003. To help solve the problem the co-operative acquired housing that it rents out to new hires until they buy a place of their own. "If there's no housing (available), there's no point in posting the job," explains Vinet.

Vinet believes the co-operative's success stems from its willingness to adapt to changes in the business environment. Being a co-operative is also a plus. "I'm not the only one making decisions," he says of his board of directors. "It puts five or six heads together instead of just one or two. We move more slowly but we make better decisions." Fans of the island's cheese would tend to agree. FC