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"Finding meaning in 'terroir' for the dairy desert of Central Illinois"

Setting up our small farmstead goat dairy in the midst of corn and soybean fields several years ago, we have always felt a bit isolated from other dairies and cheese makers, especially given the wealth of creameries, history and knowledge in our Wisconsin neighbors to the north. As the only commercial dairy (of any kind-cow, goat, sheep) in Champaign County, I like to call our region the "dairy desert." As we forged ahead with establishing our repertoire of goat and now sheep milk cheeses, we have always acknowledged the ties of our milk to our land, and in particular our rich black prairie soils.

The opening keynote session of the conference given by Quebec Agronomist, Pascale Tremblay, spoke about the meaning of "terroir" in the New World. The old world meaning of terroir embodies the link of food products, particularly wines and cheeses, to specific regions in Europe. It implies very distinct histories and traditions of how these products must be produced--specific varietals of grapes grown on specific soil types, specific breeds of dairy animals eating very specific kinds of vegetation and their milk collected at certain times of the year to make specific kinds of cheeses. So, the question is how do you create "terroir" in the "new world" (aka north and south America) when the history is so short in comparison to the old world and the cheese traditions are loosely based on those of immigrants from the old world. Ms. Tremblay presented a series of three examples where several regions and farm families are creating their own unique cheeses, keeping dairy farming alive and reinvigorating a breed of dairy cattle "La Vache Canadienne" whose genetics have French origins, but were modified by the early settlers in Quebec in the early 1600s. The stories were fascinating and inspiring in their message of renewal and reinvigoration of small-scale artisanal cheese production and its impact on rural economic development. They were especially comforting in that these cheese makers were inventing new cheeses with regional ties with no preconceived notions of how these cheeses should be produced.

The next day I attended the session called "Growing Mold Gracefully," presented by Drs. Rachel Dutton and Sister Noella Marcellino. Here the concept of terroir was taken to the microscopic level. From the caves of France to the cellars at Jasper Hill in Vermont, it was clear from their research that indigenous strains of bacterial, fungal and yeast cultures dominate regional cheeses, DESPITE inoculating milk with non-native strains of starter and ripening cultures. The microbial 'will' to exert its influence on our cheeses is strong indeed.

The stories and research findings made me think about how we can define terroir in our little neck of the woods--the prairies of central Illinois. I believe that our rich black soils are the foundation for our diverse pastures and our luscious alfalfa hay. Does that count as terroir? Our cheese washes made from pear leaf tea and fruit jams and eaux de vie--don't they impart a connection of land to cheese so essential for terroir? Is it legitimate for us to claim terroir in our cheeses if we feed our goats forage grown out their back barn door? Does the prairie wind carry microbial strains to our cheese rinds that are distinct to our region? Do our Nubian-La Mancha crosses represent a feeble attempt to create dairy goat characteristics that might be better suited for the kinds of cheeses we want to produce on our land? Is it legitimate to claim terroir without a rich cultural history or even other fellow cheesemakers???

And what is our little creamery's contribution to reinvigorating food traditions in a region not known for more than large-scale cash grain agriculture production? The thing I really like about this idea of "terroir in the new world" is that you don't have to cling to specific and ancient traditions--you can tie your products to the land and the region and it is valid. It's the face to a place mindset.