

Say Cheese!

Face Rock Creamery returns cheese making to Bandon

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In the heart of Bandon, Oregon, near where the Coquille River meets the ocean, Face Rock Creamery buzzes with locals and tourists enjoying free cheese samples, ordering sandwiches and ice cream cones, and studying historic black-and-white photos of boats hauling milk. A glass wall runs almost the length of the store, giving visitors a view of the cheese as it's made — and giving the Face Rock cheese makers a view of the visitors.

"It's fun to watch people through the window," says Brad Sinko, the head cheese maker. "They take a bite of the three-pepper cheddar and they start waving their hand like, 'It's hot!'"

Named after the massive rock formations just off the coast, Face Rock Creamery gives the impression of having stood in this spot forever. In fact, it occupies what was once the Bandon Cheese Factory, where Brad got his cheese-making start, and which Bandon Mayor Mary Schamehorn once called the town's biggest tourist attraction after the Pacific Ocean. For a long time, "Bandon" was synonymous with cheese. But until four years ago, no cheese was being produced in the

town, and what is now Face Rock Creamery was nothing but a gravel lot.

Bandon was making cheese even before it was incorporated as a town in 1891, with records showing 10 established cheese facilities in operation in the 1880s. Fantastically, in 1936, the town famously produced one of the largest blocks of cheese ever made at the time in the United States: a single cheddar that weighed one ton. Ten more one-tonners were planned, but a month later, the Great Fire of 1936 destroyed the majority of Bandon. The town was rebuilt the following year, including the Bandon Cheese Factory. The factory had operated consecutively for nearly 60 years when Brad Sinko's father, Joe, purchased it.

As Brad tells it, he was rudderless at the time: a single parent just graduated from the University of Oregon with a degree in microbiology. "My dad said, 'Why don't you give me a hand?'" recounts Brad. "That was in '93 or '94, and I haven't left the cheese industry since."

Brad worked his way up at Bandon Cheese until he was managing the entire factory. "We were using big, 40,000-pound vats," he says.

"I would get the hell kicked out of me, and I didn't even know if I liked it. But eventually I got pretty good at it and knew every step of the process."

Then, in 2000, Oregon's largest and most famous dairy, the Tillamook Dairy Association, bought the Bandon Cheese Factory, along with the Bandon brand. "Bandon's cheddar was pretty well known," says Brad. "That's why Tillamook bought it." He continued to work as manager, but two years later, the factory was closed. Tillamook moved the production of its Bandon cheese brand to its own facility, and all that was left of Bandon's cheese culture was the Tillamook retail store, located in the otherwise defunct factory.

"They were trying to sell Tillamook cheese in a Bandon retail store," says Brad, "and it didn't work." The retail store closed in 2005. Not long after, the building was demolished, leaving an empty lot in its place, and a cheese-shaped hole in the fabric of Bandon.

Brad left the area, too, going first to Guatemala to consult for a commodity cheese producer. Then he received a call from



Beecher's Handmade Cheese, in Seattle, and he soon became the very first employee at the now-iconic cheese producer.

While Brad was at Beecher's, Bandon tried to figure out to do with the large empty lot in the center of town. Daniel Graham, a local businessman, observes, "Losing the cheese factory was like ripping the heart out of Bandon." After the city bought the property back from Tillamook in 2009, Daniel proposed building a new creamery, called Face Rock. His plan got a positive response from the Bandon City Council, and he teamed up with a friend, Gregory Drobot, and broke ground.

There was just one problem: neither had any experience making cheese. Recalls Daniel, "The creamery was halfway built, but we still didn't have a cheese maker."

Brad was in the throes of success at Beecher's when he received the call from Greg and Daniel. He'd invented Beecher's Flagship, its signature cheddar, and had built Beecher's cheese plants in Pike's Place Market and New York City. "I'd just received Best in Show out of 1,800 cheeses at the American Cheese Society competition," says Brad. But the decision didn't take long. He missed his parents, and he

missed Bandon's natural beauty, its massive coastal rock formations riddled with caves.

"I walked in the next day and quit. You know, I took a big pay cut. I took a really big pay cut," he says with a laugh. "But I have ownership, which I didn't have at Beecher's."


In 2013, after just six-and-a-half months of construction, co-owners Brad, Daniel, and Greg opened the doors to a brand-new, \$2 million facility. Face Rock Creamery was soon humming with visitors, much like Bandon cheese factories of yore. In its first two years, its cheeses won two first-place blue ribbons in the annual American Cheese Society competition, widely considered the most respected cheese awards in the country, and in 2015, Face Rock was already ranked the fourth-largest cheese producer in Oregon, behind Tillamook Dairy, Rogue Creamery, and Ochoa's Queseria. A 20,000-square-foot building is currently planned, to open in 2017 or 2018.

Face Rock's curds and cheddars come in flavors like Vampire Slayer, which packs enough garlic to fend off even your closest friends and relatives, and the spicy three-pepper cheddar In Your Face. Its aged cheddars come in 12-month, two-year, and three-year versions. The two-year has a dry,

friable texture, but when you put it in your mouth, it becomes creamy and buttery. And the tangy sharpness is real — perfectly letting go just before becoming overpowering. Face Rock also makes a limited selection of cloth-bound cheddars, which are available only online and at the creamery.

Brad credits the quality of Face Rock's cheddar to the natural terroir of the region's milk. Face Rock gets nearly all of its milk from the Scolari Family Dairy, a 140-head Jersey and Holstein dairy run by a third-generation dairyman just up the river in the Coquille Valley. Already, Face Rock is facing milk shortages, and it now sources a small percentage of its milk from other local dairies. "There used to be 150 dairy farms, and now I can probably count them on one hand," says Brad.

The other part of the Face Rock equation is the unique culture Brad developed — which, he notes, "experts said would never make a true cheddar cheese." But between the celebrated cheeses at Beecher's and Face Rock, that theory can be put to bed. In the cheese making facility, it's added to newly pasteurized milk in Face Rock's 14,000-pound vats.

On the other side of the window, visitors watch, popping cheese curds so fresh they sometimes squeak, washing them down with beer, which tends to pair best with cheese. Brad believes in transparency, as evidenced by the floor-to-ceiling window and the copious free samples. "We always say, 'You're not going to buy it if you don't taste it,'" says Brad. "We don't hide anything." 

Face Rock Creamery

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