

Dairy Queen

Former publisher Petra Cooper brings local, artisanal cheeses to the people.

BY VALERIE HOWES

Petra Cooper pats down a fuzzy round cheese, looking at it fondly, as if it were her first-born. She indicates a whole rack of semi-ripe goat cheeses down in the cool, damp basement of Fifth Town Artisan Cheese Co. with her plastic-gloved hand: “They’re doing so good we’re going to release a few today.”

Since June 2008, the Prince Edward County artisanal cheesemaker has been sending goat and sheep cheeses out into the world from the forest-green boutique of her facility, which has Platinum certification in Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

Just five months after opening Fifth Town, Cooper’s Cape Vessey cheese was named grand champion at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in the goat cheese category.

She snagged gold medals for her Petal Luna, Lighthall Tomme and Wishing Tree cheeses too.

Cooper’s penchant for inventive and evocative names might be attributed to her experience in publishing (18 years worth). She was planning on moving from Toronto to Prince Edward County on retirement, with husband Shawn, to enjoy the peninsula’s natural beauty and slower rhythm of life. But when Cooper gave birth at 38 to their daughter, Augusta, they fast-tracked a life shift.

The new mom sat with her personal accountant and took stock of what she could invest. And she talked business strategies with friends and associates, some of them former classmates from the EMBA program at University of Toronto that she took in 1995. “I’m fairly adroit in these things,” she says.

After taking cheesemaking courses in Vermont, Wisconsin and California, Cooper practised obsessively at home, passing on her handiwork to friends. “I wanted a career that would keep me busy and productive well into my 90s,” she says.

