The long game for excellence

Long Paddock Cheese is an ambitious new project in Australian cheesemaking, showcasing traditional production methods and running a school to teach professional-level dairy techniques. **Tim Grey** talks to founder, Alison Lansley.

LEFT: Long Paddock's Banksia cheese is similar to a French Raclette.

BEFORE turning to cheese making, Alison Lansley was a lawyer. Then her passion for all things fermented took hold, with Long Paddock Cheese and its sister business, The Cheese School, the result.

"Australians aren't familiar with fermented foods generally. This is the problem: there are only really small, micro-sized cheesemakers or they're full-on industrial," Lansley says.

"The cheese industry is probably 30 years behind where the wine industry is at. What we're trying to build is that middle ground: we never be as big as the industry in France or the UK, but I'd like to think we can get further down the track."

To realise her dream of a cheesier nation, Lansley completed some cheese making courses but was left wanting. She headed to the UK and trained with qualified fromagier Ivan Larcher at the School of Artisan Food in Nottingham.

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"I saw how other cheesemakers were struggling with the lack of support, the lack of training, the lack of collaboration and knowledge-sharing, but when I did the course in England with Ivan, I thought: wow, this is what we need," she recalls.

The pair had an instant connect, and what started as a twice-a-year consultancy turned into a partnership.

Larcher, migrated to Castlemaine with his wife Julie only days before the pandemic closed international borders.

Lansley and Larcher then set about opening not only a local cheese education business but a state-of-the-art fromagerie.

FROM THE GROUND UP

As a greenfield site, Larcher had carte-blanche to design the facility to his exacting specifications. Specifically, what he wanted was not so much technology-heavy, but to strike a balance between automation and handmade.

"We wanted for the factory to be able to produce a lot of different products using different technologies: from fresh products, butter, cream, yoghurt, lactic, soft, blue, semi-hard and hard cheese," explains Larcher.

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The most technologically sophisticated piece of kit is Long Paddock's batch pasteuriser, whose delayed-start function superheats their certified-organic milk at 3am every morning, giving the liquid time to cool down to a suitable temperature for processing once staff arrive at a more reasonable hour.

"We selected a batch pasteuriser that is the least damaging for the milk, with the most gentle thermal treatment we could find," says Larcher. "It's saving us a lot of time."

Otherwise, plant and equipment were chosen for its flexibility, with a key consideration being that artisanal cheesemakers need to intervene on the process by hand. The hard cheese production vat, for instance, is a combination of modern and traditional, featuring high-quality engineering without

handing over the entire process to machines.

"It's been designed to have the best yield and the least waste in terms of the format, the shape, the steering mechanism, the cutting device, and it's been worked through so it helps us achieve the highest yield possible. But it's still an open vat, it's not fully closed. We touch the milk, we touch the curd," describes Larcher.

"It's still very much artisanal equipment, but it allows us to produce a large volume without breaking our back. I think it's the best combo that lets the cheesemaker make the cheese."

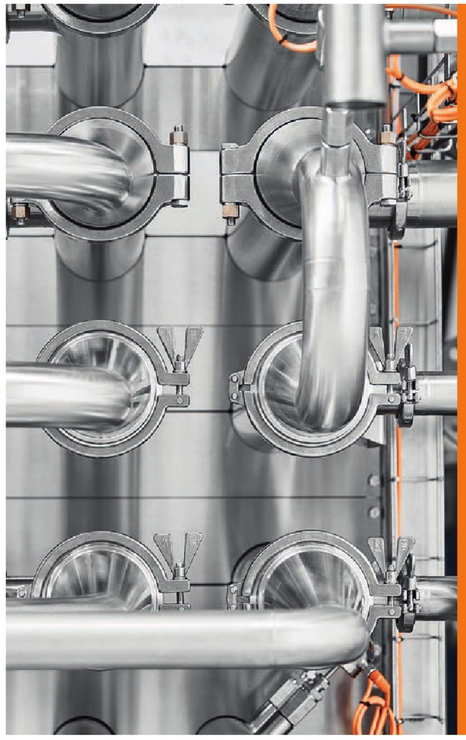
As Larcher indicated, the Long Paddock range is large, and substantially different to many other small-batch producers, spanning both freshly made soft cheese and cooked-curd cheeses that age for up to a year. Most are made to French specifications, adapting the classic farmhouse style to the particulars of Victorian milk.

Banksia, for instance, is what the French would recognise as a raclette cheese, aged for six months, extremely melty, full of barnyard flavours, but with a sweetness making it easy-eating.

Driftwood is moister than camembert and wrapped in a spruce-bark belt. It is designed to be eaten warm with a spoon.

Granite is a cooked-curd cheese made in the style of a traditional English cheddar. After pasteurisation, the curd is pressed into a distinctive truckle shape, which is taller than it is wide. Afterwards, it's wrapped in muslin and slathered with lard, which is sourced from a nearby organic pig-farmer. From there, the truckle makes its way into the cheddar cave, where it's coddled and turned for a year. It's during this long period of waiting in the dark that cheese wizardry really starts to happen. But it's also when a slight change in conditions can make things go

ABOVE & LEFT: Long Paddock produces a large range of cheeses, spanning fresh soft cheese and cooked-curd cheeses that age for up to 12 months.



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horribly, expensively wrong.

“It’s very easy to achieve cold in a room, but making it cold and humid is very complicated,” explains Larcher.

“Most of the time in Australia, cheesemakers are using simple cooling equipment that’s retrofitted to try to maintain high humidity, but they’re not adapted to the very aggressive environment we have in the ageing room, with such high levels of ammonia.

“Standard cooling systems get corroded very early, so after a couple of years you have renew everything: they’re good for fridges, but they’re not suitable for ageing.

“So the ageing equipment was something we imported from Europe, which is a lot of investment at the beginning, but everyday it’s saving the quality of the cheese,” he says.

With four different ageing rooms as well as a dispatch chill coolroom, each of which is set at different parameters, managing the cold chain is a daunting prospect. But, Long Paddock uses an ice-water loop system that allows for precise temperature control without blowing out costs on either water or energy.

“What we have now is one big ice chiller outside that makes sure that we always have about 300 litres of ice water at about minus three degrees. And then, we’ve got an ice water loop on the roof, which every room is picking up with solenoid valves,” Larcher explains.

“When we need to cool them, we open the valves and let the ice water circulate into the equipment, and then it goes back into the loop to be temperature controlled.

“Every room is individually temperature controlled, but it uses the same ice-water loop. The running costs are much lower than having a classic cooling unit for every room.”

Each of the rooms is maintained at positive pressure, with HEPA filters blowing air into the corridor to ensure there’s no cross-contamination – nobody wants their cheddar to taste like Roquefort. And, all of the electricity this substantial operation requires is generated by the solar array on-site at The Mill, which on-sells energy to its tenants.

“Being part of The Mill is very important to us,” says Larcher.

“It’s already 100 per cent off-grid, and it’s working to being completely autonomous. Being able to use energy in the same spot it’s generated, that’s perfect for us.”

ABOVE: Long Paddock Cheese founder Alison Lansley.

LEFT: The fromagerie has artisanal equipment that allows the cheesemakers to produce at volume but still touch and feel the milk and curds.

Although Long Paddock is only two years into its journey, the fromagerie is almost at capacity already.

With national distribution at about 200 outlets, the team is churning through 4000 litres of milk each week, making 600-900 kilograms of cheese.

“We can’t make more than 6000 litres per week, but we don’t want to. we have a lot of work with the school, and processing any more than that means that we’d put a lot of stress on the equipment and the staff, and that’s where problems start to appear,” says Larcher.

“So, on average, about 5000 a week is where we want to be, but initially this volume was the target after four or five years of production, and it’s only been two years and we’re already at almost the production capacity.”

Beyond their tenacious commitment to doing things a bit differently, Larcher and Lansley are committed to advocating for culinary education and the industry. Their goal is to further both the culture of cheesemaking and its appreciation.

At present, the cheese school holds monthly classes at the professional level and will soon introduce more casual workshops for the ‘fromage curious’, in which students will learn the fundamentals of cheesemaking.

“I’m all about the rising tide of cheese,” Lansley laughs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Grey is a writer and photographer from Central Victoria. Beginning his career at Yaffa Media in 2006, Tim has written widely for publications such as Broadsheet, GoodFood and Luxury Travel. Visit timothygrey.com.au