

Australian Specialist Cheese Industry Innovation In Niche Marketing



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Executive Summary

The aim of this Fellowship was to study first hand, the skills, knowledge and insights needing to be undertaken by specialist cheesemakers in Australia to become more competitive with their marketing in existing and new markets. In the past twenty years several small cheesemakers have emerged in Australia, producing a range of good quality cheeses, which provide the market with an alternative to mass-produced cheeses.

The challenge facing these traditional cheesemakers in Australia could be described as one of culture – we do not have the benefit of centuries of small-scale cheese making in this country. Until recently, most of the cheese made in Australia came from big factories and fell under two categories: 'tasty' and 'vintage'.

However, in both the local and the international marketplace, Australian cheeses compete with hundreds of other traditional cheesemakers from countries such as France and Italy – many of whom have the benefit of a long established reputation for producing quality cheese.

The overseas Fellowship program was purposely designed to explore the skills and knowledge deficiencies and to obtain the information necessary to enable the Fellow to advise, instruct, promote and improve the specialist cheese industry's marketing strategy in Australia.

Distributors and retailers in the USA and Asian markets are looking for products that offer something new and a point of difference to the traditional varieties of cheese available. However both economies are quality driven and any new product needs to be of very high standard in order to compete with the excellent European cheeses available.

In addition to this, it is largely perceived that premium quality is strongly linked with cheese made from raw milk. There was a definite perception that if the cheese was not made from raw milk then it was not a 'serious' cheese. The Australian food authorities are behind the rest of the world on this matter. Under current regulations, our inability to produce and market raw milk cheese means that we will always remain uncompetitive at the top end of the market. Changes to existing regulations to allow for the manufacture of raw milk cheese in Australia would resolve this situation.

Having seen the quality of both locally made cheeses and the imported European cheeses in the USA market it is difficult to see how the current product range from Australia could make inroads in the immediate future. More needs to be done to encourage our cheesemakers to be making the highest quality cheeses possible – artisan but high quality. This seems to be the only door open to new products. The best way to develop this trend is to encourage exposure to the types of cheeses which currently exist in these markets – these are cheeses which are generally not allowed in Australia as they are made from raw milk.

Although in the USA not much is known about Australian cheese, the perception is that we do have some good Australian cheesemakers and that our products will probably be of a high quality. More could be done by industry and government agencies to link our specialist cheesemakers directly to specialist cheese distributors.

Cheesemakers should be aware of the market gaps and logistical problems before determining which products would be suitable for Asian and USA export markets. Hard cheeses which can be surface freighted will be more successful than air-freighted soft, perishable cheeses.

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Communication of the product's value is essential. Sales need to be supported with clear information on the product and the producer. This can be further enhanced by maintaining quality websites for consumer education, allowing the producer to directly communicate his/her message and story.

Our cheeses in Australia are good enough to compete overseas. Creating inroads into these markets is inevitable as the search for new products grows to include producers outside of traditional cheese making countries in Europe. Haddow predicts that more and more specialist cheesemakers in Australia will look overseas to reach appreciative markets for their products. However, this will take several years and the potential will need to be realised and supported by government agencies to assist this process. Due to the nature of these high quality products, they are most commonly made by very small businesses that do not have the time, the skills or the resources to dedicate to developing overseas markets. Although agencies such as Austrade currently offer attractive grants and subsidies to new exporters, they are still aiming at high volume results. We need to understand these will be low volume products, but ones which will importantly deliver a great deal of profile and publicity, which may in turn benefit other export sectors.