

The Novato Historian

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Preserving Novato's History Feature Section

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French Cheese Factories in Novato

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The origins of the art of cheese making have long been obscured in history but cheese was known to exist as early as the 14th century. According to an Arab legend, cheese was first discovered by an Asian herdsman who carried milk in a canteen made of the stomach of a goat. At the end of the day he found that the milk had thickened and separated into whey and curd. Acutely hungry, he decided to eat it anyway and found to his surprise that the product was both tasty and filling. The rennet from the lining of the goat's stomach had started the process which turns milk and cream to cheese.

Cheese-making has since become a great industry with more than one billion pounds a year produced in the United States. Huge manufacturing plants turn out natural and processed cheeses of all types for domestic and exported consumption in enormous quantities.

Cheese Making an Art

Here in Novato there exists cheese factories where the making of cheese is regarded more as an art than an industry, where taste and quality are paramount to volume of production. Deliciously flavored soft cheeses of French type are prepared to delight the palates of the most discriminate connoisseurs.

One of the first cheese factories in Novato was the Novato French Cheese Factory near the Railroad Depot.

Novato French Cheese Factory

On May 10, 1888, the *Marin Journal* wrote "Mr. Louis Cantel of Petaluma has purchased lots in the new town and contemplates starting a cheese factory in this place if he can secure a sufficient supply of milk from the different dairies in the neighborhood. It is believed that cheese making is a much more profitable industry than butter making and attended with less trouble to the ranchers."

A Frenchman, Louis Cantel (1827-1905), was one of the



The Novato French Cheese Factory near Railroad Depot

first in the United States to make French cheese, as early as 1884 in Petaluma. He bought some lots in Novato in 1894, 1 and 2 B section (Rose St.) and lot 3 and 4 in J section (next door to the blacksmith shop). It is uncertain if he used these lots to build a cheese factory in Novato.

In October 1891, the *Marin Journal* reported that the new factory of the California Creamery Company was rapidly approaching completion near the Novato railroad depot. In December 1891, the new creamery was completed at an expense of \$20,000 and started up under favorable auspices. It was fitted with all the modern improvements, the machinery having been procured mainly from the East Coast. Hon. F.C. DeLong and nearly all of his neighbors were supplying the creamery with milk. The creamery was under the management of J.H. Hegler.

By April of 1892, the creamery received 27,000 gallons of milk daily from over a thousand cows. S.S. Nugent took over as chief cheese maker for Mr. Hegler. In July of 1893, the creamery was not making any cheese or getting much milk. In August of 1893, the creamery management was changed to G.W. Oliver. The California Creamery

French Cheese Factories in Novato

opened and closed a number of times through the years and closed down in February 1895, for want of patronage, the dairymen finding a better market for their milk in San Francisco.

Hermann Rudolff (1867-1940)

In October 1895 the Redmond Ranch Creamery opened under new management (Hermann Rudolff), which gave attention to the manufacture of the finer grades of cheese with the creamery paying a liberal price for milk.

On March 1896, The Novato French Cheese Factory was formed as a co-partnership with James Newlander Jr., Hermann Rudolff and George Prinz. They received great press coverage and did a great business. By June of 1898, Mr. Rudolph purchased the creamery building near the railroad tracks and carried on his cheese manufacturing business there. The French Cheese Factory produced an average of 1500 pounds of Circle X Brand daily.

By 1901 there were over twenty persons working in the factory, and the orders were so heavy it was necessary for them to work overtime.

April 8, 1911 the *Marin County Tocsin* would write:

Sixteen years ago Herman Rudolph started the first cheese factory, making, small fresh soft cheeses, better known as the "German Breakfast Cheese" and "Sierra" cheese, besides making the better known German and French cheeses. These cheeses were not made anywhere in the United States up to that time. Starting out small, this factory soon grew to a rather large concern; turning out 80,000 boxes of cheese annually. Farmers who previously received very little for milk got a much better price. In due time, other factories were established of which the New York French Cheese Company is the second largest concern. The prices paid by these cheese factories for the milk, average about \$1.50 per 100 pounds of milk; a price which could not nearly be obtained if a farmer had to make butter and using the skim milk for feeding purposes. For this reason the butter output of Novato became small.

In 1910 the local cheese factories received about 590,000 gallons of milk. The Novato Cheese factory alone received 320,000 gallons. Besides this, about 515,000 gallons of fresh milk was shipped in 1910 to San Francisco. This makes the total amount of milk that was consumed and shipped from Novato about 1,956,000 gallons in one year. About 5,000 gallons of cream were also shipped to San Francisco.

After Hermann Rudolff became judge, his son Wilhelm would run the business until 1950. When he tried to have the



The New York French Cheese Factory

old Novato French Cheese Factory rebuilt the neighbors, who did not like the smell coming from the factory, protested and the building was torn down in 1950.

New York French Cheese Factory

This building was built in 1890 in the area of 761 Franklin Street.

In February 1890, the news story appeared "The House and Farm Company are working along assiduously for the town of Novato. A De Laval separator will soon be put in place in the cheese factory and work commenced. The machinery will be driven by a ten horse-power engine and boiler."

In September "The Home and Farm Company of Novato have issued orders for the firms of F. Louis and Louis Bros. to vacate their dairies, which will be done by the first of October. These two dairies together with the new dairy of the Company will be combined into one and will be operated as a cheese factory as well as a dairy, to be conducted by Julius Kaupisch."

November; "Mr. Kaupisch, lessee of the Black Point ranch, has a dairy of 300 cows, and will give his attention to the manufacture of butter and cheese. Over 600 gallons of milk are shipped daily from Novato to S. F."

May 1891 "A number of our dairymen are now selling milk to the California Creamery Company, of which Kaupisch Bros. are managers. Cheese and butter of the finest quality is made and shipped daily to San Francisco, where a ready market is found, Hegler, Johnson & Co. being the agents"

Joseph Alonzo Becksted (Beckstead) (1866-1912)

J.L. Becksted would come to Novato in 1897 and work at the Novato French Cheese Factory for Mr. Rudolff. Beckstead while becoming an expert on French cheeses, obtained connections with a rival delica-

tessen in San Francisco and went into business for himself. He would open the New York French Cheese Factory in the older cheese factory down the railroad track from the Novato French Cheese Factory.

The 1900 U.S. census showed that Joseph L. Becksted was a "Cheese Manufacturer," so he was already running the New York French Cheese Factory at this time.

A 1901 story; "The wagon belonging to the New York Cheese Factory got sadly so demoralized last Saturday. The horse ran away; fortunately Mr. L. Beckstead, who held the ribbons, escaped injury."

Story in 1907; "J. L. Becksted of the New York French Cheese Factory received word from Sacramento that his factory had received first prize and the gold medal for the best display of American, French and Italian cheese in the state."

"The cheese factories in the town employ a number of hands, and make cheeses of various kinds, the Rudolph some twelve different brands, while the establishment of J. L. Becksted makes the famous Eagle Breakfast cheeses that everyone in California knows, who is anything of an epicure."

Fire Burns Down Cheese Factory

May 10, 1910 *Marin Journal*; "The New York French Cheese Factory in Novato was totally destroyed by fire at 11 o'clock on Tuesday evening, the cause of the fire being unknown. The factory had closed down for the night and there had been no fire therein since early in the day.

The factory was situated just south of Novato along the railroad tracks and south of the big Rudolph factory. It was owned and conducted by Alonzo Becksted who with his family occupied rooms in the upper story of the large two-story frame structure. They lost all of their clothing and household effects as well as the factory and its contents.

In the factory there was manufactured cheese to the value of over \$2,000, besides much valuable machinery. The whole loss is reported at \$5000. The factory turned out both French and American cheese.

By July the New York French Cheese Factory would be rebuilt.

December 1912: *J. L. BECKSTED DIES AT NOVATO*

J. L. Becksted a highly respected resident and manager of the New York French Cheese Factory at Novato, passed away at the Novato Sanitarium last Saturday, after an illness of several weeks. Mr. Becksted had resided in Novato for the past fifteen years and was universally respected and beloved. He was 46 years of age, and is survived by a widow, one son, Marvin, and one sister living at Reno, Nevada, another sister Mrs. A. G.. Scown of Novato, and several brothers, in various parts of the state. Mr. Becksted was a native of California, a member of the Portuguese Lodge, also Fraternal Order of Eagles, under whose auspices the funeral was held Monday at 2 o'clock.



The black arrow shows the location of the New York French Cheese Factory and the white arrow shows the Novato French Cheese Factory

Parisian French Cheese

In late 1910, Capt. Leon Hiribarren's son, Augere, would erect a cheese factory on a lot leased from J.W. Atherton, behind what would become Joe's Crossroads Tavern and now an office complete called the Crossroads.

April 1911 story; The Parisian French Cheese factory received a large consignment of hogs last week. Although this factory was only started last fall, it is doing a good business. About 4000 pounds of milk are received daily. The factory is conducted by Hosea Harribarren who formerly had charge of the cheese factory on the old Taylor ranch near Burdells.

On July 20, 1915 the Hiribarren cheese factory at Novato was destroyed by fire late afternoon along with a great quantity of cheese which the firefighters were unable to save from the burning building. The fire started sometime after the place had been closed for the day, and when the flames were discovered the blaze had so great a start that it was impossible to determine in which part of the building the fire started. The factory was the oldest of its kind in Novato. According to an old resident here, there have been three structures on the same site that have been destroyed or partially destroyed, by fire in the past 30 years.

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On October 1921, A. Hiribarren would build another cheese factory, this one a modern concrete building behind his father's home on Railroad Avenue.

Marin French Cheese Factory

A story in the *Petaluma Argus* dated July 1878 reads:

“In this city, died Mrs. Tomasa Martin, widow of John Martin (1861). She died at the advanced age of 85 years. John Martin was an Englishman and a sailor. In early life he landed in the then Mexican State, and not long afterwards received a grant of two leagues of land (about 9,000 acres, Corte Madera de Novato). This grant covered lands now occupied and owned by J. McBrown, Jeff Thompson, Mr. Davidson and others, in Hick's Valley. Mr. Martin was an enterprising man, and as early as 1842 erected the first flouring mill in Marin County. Its site was near the present residence of Mr. Thompson, and the foundation walls are still visible, though the mill has for many years been in disuse, the adobes that formed its sides now forming the walls of two or three dairy houses in the vicinity.”

Mr. Martin sold the western part of the Corte Madera de Novato to William Hicks in August 1855 for \$5,000. Mr. Jefferson Thompson bought 700 acres in 1860, which included Mr. Martin's home. Jefferson Thompson moved his family to a house in Petaluma, where his children could go to school. Their neighbor was Louis Cantel. Mr. Thompson's son Jeff studied under the French-born Camembert maker, but Cantel would never reveal his ultimate secrets to making the Camembert cheese. Jeff eventually enrolled in the University of Connecticut at Storrs to study cheese making.

Per 1960 picture of the Marin French Cheese Factory



White arrow shows the location of the 1921 Parisian French Cheese Factory across from the train depot.

Marin Dairymen Branching Out

Marin Journal, March 9, 1911

“Thompson Bros. (Jeff and Rudolph), the well-known dairymen of Hicks Valley west of Petaluma, have ventured on a new departure—the manufacture of fine grades of French cheese. They began this branch several weeks ago and it is proving very successful as San Francisco houses are taking all they can turn out and are asking for more. Jeff Thompson of the firm, it will be remembered, some time ago went back to New York and took a complete course of instruction in the business and is now in charge of manufacturing. They have adopted an attractive label which is a good ad for the city. They are making a specialty of Camembert cheese. They are manufacturing under the name of the Marin French Cheese Factory and the brand name is “Rouge et Noir.”

It remained owned and managed by the Thompson Family until the 1990s under the brand name “Rouge et Noir,” making French style Camembert, Brie and neufchatels.”

The company was sold in 1995 to rancher Jim Boyce, who modernized the cheese plant.

After Boyce passed away, his estate sold the business to the French Rians Group in 2011.