

Chenel moving cheese production to new plant

French-owned company planning to expand its line of artisan goat cheese

By [ROBERT DIGITALE](#)
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Saturday, January 15, 2011 at 4:01 a.m.

Laura Chenel's Chevre, one of America's top goat cheese producers, is ready to pull back the curtain today on a new Sonoma creamery designed to expand its artisan offerings.

"The target is to be able to make new cheeses as soon as possible," said general manager Marie Lesoudier. "So we're going to start playing with that new creamery."

The grand opening of the 30,000-square-foot plant takes place today, followed by a luncheon with 150 food professionals who have converged on the Bay Area for an annual food show.

The company's 25 employees are scheduled to begin limited operations at the new creamery next month with all operations to start there by April. The first new products should be available sometime in 2012, Lesoudier said.

Laura Chenel began making artisan goat cheese in Sonoma County three decades ago and is considered a U.S. pioneer in the craft. In 2006 she sold her company to Laiteries H. Triballat, a family owned, French artisan cheese company. When Chenel sold the business, she at first retained her herd of 500 goats and continued to sell milk to the new owners. She has since sold the herd and retired.

For the past 16 years, the company has been making cheese several miles outside Sonoma in the historic Stornetta dairy along Highway 12 near the Napa County line. The company has run out of room in the old plant, Lesoudier said, and it needs its own aging rooms in order to develop new cheeses.

The new creamery is closer to town, in the Carneros Business Park off Eighth Street East. It features two aging rooms.

"We want to be able to age cheeses at different temperatures and different humidity," Lesoudier said. The facility will even allow workers to change those conditions on the same cheese during the aging process.

The new facility will allow Laura Chenel's Chevre to "innovate and create new cheeses," Lesoudier said. Exactly what new items will spring forth remains to be seen, but "I'm going to be looking for creamy cheeses, that's for sure."

The company's goat milk comes from 16 producers in Northern California and Nevada.



Jeff Kan Lee / PD

Electricians wire up some of the 1,008 solar panels that will supply 80 percent of the needs of the new Laura Chenel Chevre plant in Sonoma.

Lesoudier declined to release the cost of the new facility.

The creamery also features solar panels on the roof that will provide nearly all the plant's electric needs, Lesoudier said. The company is in the process of seeking LEED certification for the building's green design and construction.

County Supervisor Valerie Brown, who represents the Sonoma Valley area, called it "a real plus" to have the company build its new creamery here and stay in the county.

"I just think Laura Chenel has a lot of ties to Sonoma," Brown said.

Lesoudier suggested that both Laura Chenel's Chevre and the county benefit from the relationship.

"We are bringing the name of Sonoma everywhere in the U.S.," she said.

You can reach Staff Writer Robert Digitale at 521-5285 or robert.digitale@pressdemocrat.com.

Copyright © 2011 PressDemocrat.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.