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"Pittsburgh's Cheese" Going Big

The Progress Fund's commitment to local agriculture helps Emerald Valley Farm Artisan Cheese to grow

Greensburg, PA – March 22, 2010 – Emerald Valley Farm Artisan Cheese, one of southwestern Pennsylvania's growth-oriented local food producers, will exhibit its wares at this weekend's 2010 Farm to Table Conference at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center.

Emerald Valley Farm Artisan Cheese is in the process of expanding its offerings, production, distribution and marketing as it participates in the delicious and sustainable local food movement. "We want people to know that we are Pittsburgh's cheese," said Alisa Fava-Fasnacht, a lifelong dairy farmer who began producing cheese as a hobby five years ago, built a business, and is now increasing her penetration of the grocery market.

Her mission is not just to sell cheese, but to educate the consumer on how it is made. "I want people to really understand this system," she says, "and I want them to understand that based on facts."

The facts on Alisa start with her family's ownership, since 1954, of a dairy farm located between Scenery Hill and Cokeburg in Washington County. Five years ago, on a Saturday lark, she decided to turn some extra milk into ricotta cheese – and made far too much. "So I shared it with friends," Alisa says. "Everybody was having a pretty big reaction to it, saying, 'This is really good.'"

With advice from state agricultural officials, she and her husband Alan Fasnacht began making and selling cheese, and Emerald Valley Farm Artisan Cheese grew from a hobby to a sideline to a way of life. "It was just a fluke," says Alisa. "It was never meant to be a business."

When it came time to increase Emerald Valley's penetration of the grocery store market, Alisa got helpful advice from the University of Pittsburgh's Small Business Development Center. Banks, though, weren't jumping at the prospect of lending to back her planned marketing, packaging and product diversification push.

Representatives of The Progress Fund, however, kept turning up wherever local food was featured. Since 2008, The Progress Fund's Produce Grown Here project has helped bring the wares of Southwestern Pennsylvania farmers to stores, restaurants and tables.

Alisa presented an \$80,709 plan to retain a marketing consultant, revamp packaging to include nutritional information and universal bar coding, and – most deliciously – set aside some inventory to create a new line of proprietary, premium aged cheeses. The Progress Fund loaned \$78,209.

Alisa said dealing with The Progress Fund was like “a marriage. It’s a relationship. ... Time has elapsed and things have occurred. I feel really good about how this has worked out.”

The Farm to Table Conference holds exhibit hours from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Friday, March 26, and Saturday, March 27. A food tasting is set for 5 p.m. Friday, and a networking breakfast for 8 a.m. Saturday. For more information, visit www.pathwayswellnessprogram.com/farm_to_table_conference.html.

For more information on Emerald Valley Artisan Cheese, call (724) 323-3324, or visit www.emeraldvalleyfarm.com.

For further information on The Progress Fund, call (724) 216-9160, or visit www.progressfund.org.

The Progress Fund is a vigorous non-profit loan fund that creates jobs and improves communities by providing entrepreneurial coaching and capital to small businesses in the travel & tourism industry. The Progress Fund serves 39 counties in Pennsylvania, Appalachian Ohio and West Virginia. The Progress Fund was founded in 1997, and has made 327 loans totaling more than \$32.2 million to 189 enterprises, creating or preserving more than 2,163 jobs.

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