

Small cheese factory must-haves

If you are new to the cheesemaking game, choosing the right equipment for your start-up can be a confusing – and expensive – undertaking. Cheese Kettle's Lukasz Klekowski offers advice on small factory essentials as well as equipment (and business) pitfalls to avoid.

Over the past few years, there has been a surge of micro cheese factories starting up across Australia. Some aspiring cheesemakers are escaping the corporate 'rat race' and seeking a simpler, greener lifestyle. Others are dairy farmers wanting to add value to their milk by producing local, artisan dairy products.

If you are setting up a cheese factory, there are some important things you must consider before the you get swept up in the excitement of ordering equipment.

What's your product range?

Firstly, decide on what sort of products you will make. Will it be soft cheese, hard cheese, yoghurt, or perhaps all three?

Focusing on two or three, but no more than four, products to start with is a great idea. This will help you streamline



Lukasz Klekowski
Owner, Cheese Kettle

production and keep your marketing costs under control. You can always increase your product range down the track.

How much do you expect to sell?

Estimate your sales for the first three, six and 12 months. This is crucial! You will have to do your best to predict your initial turnover to keep the profit and loss in good shape and your accountant off your back.

It's always best to prepare for the worst case scenario. My rule of thumbs is to reduce the first year's forecast sales by 30-40%. Sometimes not meeting initial business plan targets is not directly related to your business performance. There are plenty of things you cannot control, for example extreme weather events or the 'overnight' price drop of your best-selling product by retailers.

Where will you get your milk?

Where your milk comes from is important. Sourcing raw milk directly from dairy farmers would give you the advantages of better milk quality control and slightly better pricing as compared to buying bulk pasteurised milk.

Unfortunately, raw milk comes with its own requirements, such as transporting it from



Image: Otero via iStock

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the farm to your factory and pasteurising it on-site to meet strict government regulations.

How much space is available?

Factory layout is important to create the best product flow possible. Plan where to position doors, drainage, etc. with great care, as it is very expensive to change the layout once equipment is in place.

Three-phase power will give you a wider range of options compared with single-phase power. If you are using tank water, plan for extra filtration and bacteriological controls to ensure product consistency.



Image: Supplied

A good business plan, backed by a feasibility study, would help you overcome the pitfalls of 'guess-timating.'

Feasibility studies cover issues such as where your products may be sold, in what quantity and for what price. They also evaluate your potential client base and their expectations of your product.

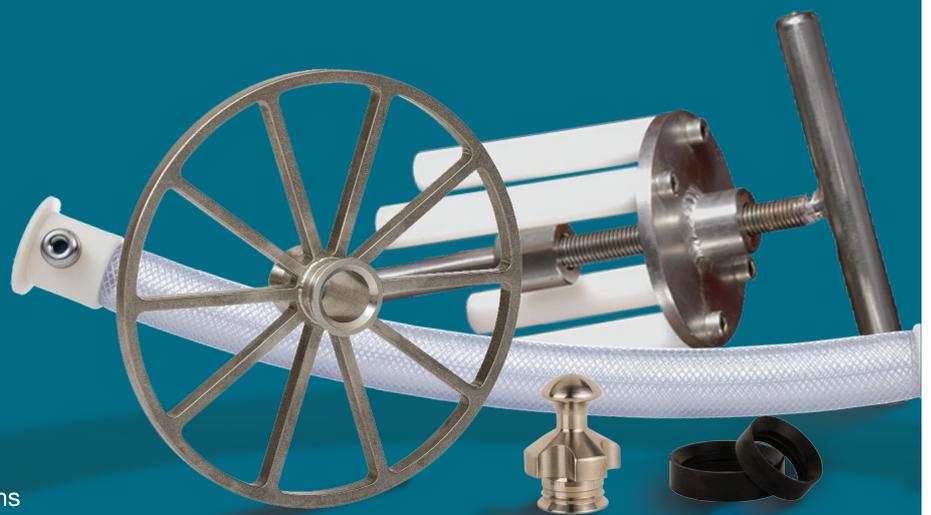
It is a good idea to hire a consultant to help you get your head around all the potential issues. I recommend the DIAA's *Australian Dairy Listing* directory as the best place to start your search. ➤

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Equipment essentials

Every cheese factory, no matter how small, needs some essential, 'bare bones' equipment to get started.

My suggestions below take into account some common considerations facing newcomers to the industry – limited budget (but big aspirations), limited production space (often the size of a single garage), and tight production deadlines.

Cheese kettle/batch pasteuriser

This will undoubtedly be the centrepiece of your new factory – a shiny kettle, beside which you will spend most of your working day. If you source raw milk for your cheesemaking, you would likely pasteurise it here as well.

A good-sized kettle ranges in size from 50 litres to 500 litres. Based on my experience, in the early stage of your business, you will make small batches of different products, whether for testing the market, mastering your craft or working to get the best shelf life for your products.

Once your business grows, you would narrow down your best-sellers and upgrade to a larger kettle, making setup much easier.

Work/drainage table

Invest in the largest table that can comfortably fit into your workspace. You will be using this piece of equipment day and night to press or drain the cheese.

The table must be on wheels and preferably have two shelves. The bottom shelving is handy to store equipment you need to have on hand (very important when you work alone) and for extra storage for off-peak time.

Simple gravity/pneumatic cheese press

If you plan to make semi-hard or hard cheeses, you will need a cheese press. Too much or too little pressure, or pressure that's uneven, are the most common problems giving cheesemakers headaches for long-maturing cheeses, so make sure you invest in a good one.

About the author

Lukasz' company, Cheese Kettle, offers consultancy and engineering services, and supplies dairy processing equipment including milk cooling tanks, cheese kettles, filling machines, packaging machines, cheese and butter processing machines to customers worldwide. For more, visit www.cheesekettle.com.au



Cheese Kettle

Product-specific equipment

Nowadays, we are spoiled for options when it comes to smaller add-on equipment. If you are planning to make soft cheeses or washed rinds, look for multi-moulds to save time on cleaning and labour costs in the long run. If you plan to make blue vein cheeses, consider investing in a piercing machine to save time and effort.



Properly equipped maturing rooms can save you much in lost sales, quality problems and grey hair.

Maturation room (cheese cave)

This is by far the most overlooked item on the list. Properly designed and sized cooling equipment will save you a lot – in lost sales, product quality problems and grey hair!

Talk to an expert to get professional advice on how your needs may best be met. Here is a tip – your local refrigeration business is not always the best source of advice, unless it has specific experience in building cheese maturation rooms.

Where rubber meets the road

Like with anything else in life, it pays to do your research before you open your wallet. Read as many books as you can, talk with other cheesemakers, search the web and watch YouTube videos.

Call suppliers and ask as many questions as you can about your dream equipment. Find out about estimated delivery times and what happens should things go pear-shaped – who will cover the warranty work (if your supplier is based overseas

and does not have an office in Australia, this may not be as simple as you think) and who will cover the service afterwards. Note how long it takes a supplier to answer your queries – if you have to wait for a reply for a few days before you buy, their after-sales service may not impress either.

Many cheesemakers before you have succeeded in starting their own dairy business, and most started very small. I am confident that with a lot of research, support and a bit of good luck you will succeed as well. ■

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