

It's Loleta Cheese Laffranchi's build a quality niche in a small town

**By Kathy Dillon
Lifestyle Editor**

LOLETA – Many commercial savvy visitors can't resist asking, "Do you have happy, contented California cows?" The staff assures them, "Yes, indeed we do!" From contented cows to happy customers, the Loleta Cheese Factory has found its culinary niche amid life in a small town.

"We know we're out of the way," says Bob Laffranchi, who co-owns the factory with his wife, Carol, "but Loleta is a wonderful place to live and a wonderful place to make cheese." Surrounded by the pastures and dairies of the Eel River Valley, the cheese factory at 252 Loleta Drive produces 24 fresh cheeses, along with a Queso Fresco Mexican cheese and four organic cheeses.

"What you see down there is the old-fashioned method," Bob says, speaking from the company's headquarters – and the Laffranchis' home – set above and back from the main building.

"We do a lot of business around the kitchen table. A lot of meetings take place here," Carol Laffranchi adds. "And we have the advantage of having our own test market right downstairs. Because we have those little vats, we can experiment."

The enterprise keeps 26 employees busy producing two million pounds of cheese per year. Seven days a week, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., visitors may watch the process, sample and buy their favorite varieties of Cheddars, Monterey Jacks, Fontinas and Havartis, and browse the newly expanded gift shop.

It's a story that began at Eureka High School some 20 years ago when Bob was an ag teacher. "A student asked the questions, 'How do you make cheese?'" Bob recalled. Despite his background – he is from a Ferndale dairy family and has a dairy science degree from Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo – Bob had yet to delve into cheese. The question intrigued him. Finding a book on cheese-making, he and his students tried making some in the high school's concession stand kitchen.

"And they made some really terrible cheese," Carol recalled with a laugh. The experience, however, got them both thinking.

"You get to a point where you're looking for something different to do," Carol said.

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— **Bob Laffranchi**
Loleta Cheese Factory

The Laffranchis began studying the subject seriously. California, they discovered, was one of the largest consumers of cheese in the nation, but it produced very little of it. They also

knew they lived in an ideal locale to start such a venture.

"Humboldt County has an excellent supply of milk to make unique cheese," Bob said. "...The grass and the clover are really key elements."

They hired a consultant. They talked to experts in the field. "It was almost like doing a graduate thesis paper," Bob recalled.

They also began touring the country, looking for an ideal location. The couple finally chose the Loleta site – a 1919-era building that once housed a lumberyard. They made the move with their two young daughters.

The buildings would be remodeled and expanded over the years, and the company would buy its own dairy on Grizzly Bluff Road. It now produces 82 percent of its own milk – an important element in the process.

CHEESE: A 20-year success story in Loleta

"We don't believe in giving hormones to our cows to make them produce more milk," Bob said. Developing precise recipes, the Laffranchi's have steadily built up their product line, which now includes Jalapeno Jack and Cheddar cheeses, Smoked Salmon Cheddar, Havarti with Herbs and Spice, and Caraway Jack, to name a few.

Outside the factory, the products can be found in Ray's Food Place, the North Coast Co-op, Wildberries Marketplace and Eureka Natural Foods.

By 1990, Loleta Cheese began finding its way outside of Humboldt County. The company now makes cheese for a variety of companies, including Amy's Kitchen, the Strauss Family Creamery, Trader Joe's, and even Fontina for Wolfgang Puck's frozen pizzas. Catalog sales also took hold.

The Loleta Cheese Factory, Bob adds, was fortunate to emerge during a time of renewed interest in quality foods.

"One of the things that has happened in America ... we're stopping the Hamburger Helper concept and we're going back to what food is about," he said. "There's a whole new venue for people to enjoy different levels of food based on different needs."

Loleta Cheese, Bob said, is made in small quantities and cooled and delivered quickly to ensure freshness. The process, he admits, continues to fascinate him.

"Cheese is alive. It's got organisms and enzymes..." he said, describing the process that blends science and art. "There's a certain magic to cheese. I've been doing it for 19 years, and it still amazes me."

It promises to continue. The Laffranchis are making expansion plans, due in 2003, that will include a restaurant, a larger gift shop, expanded cheese-making tour areas, and possibly a cheese-making school.

Thank those contented cows. "The grass and the pastures and the moderate climate do mean happy cows, even in wintertime," Bob said. "There's less stress on the animals," Carol added; "it's not just the weather."

Allowed to graze in open pastures, she explained, the herds can spread out and form their own natural social hierarchy, instead of being crowded into pens. "Feedlots create tremendous amount of stress," she said. Bob shook his head in agreement: "I always joke with people: 'If I were a cow, I would choose to live in Humboldt County.'"

Here is Carol's recipe for Chicken Enchiladas – a Laffranchi family favorite.

CHICKEN ENCHILADAS

- 4 pound whole chicken
- 1 large onion (white or yellow)
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder (or 1 garlic clove, minced)
- 1 teaspoon onion salt
- 1 teaspoon celery salt
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 2 tablespoons margarine
- 2 tablespoons shortening
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon chili powder
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- 2 cups Loleta Cheese Cheddar (sharp or mild)
- 12 corn tortillas

Chicken:

Cook chicken with onion until tender. Pull apart into small pieces. Mix chicken with spices — garlic powder, onion salt, celery salt, salt and pepper. Set aside.

Gravy:

In a 12-inch cast-iron skillet, brown the flour in the margarine and shortening to make a roux (but don't let it burn). Add broth with onions to roux and blend until thick and bubbly. Add chili powder to cumin to taste. Add salt.

Assembling enchiladas:

Soften corn tortillas over steam or place them one at a time in a heated skillet with a bit of melting butter for 1 minute, turning once. Stuff tortillas with chicken and roll. Place them in a greased 13"X9" baking pan. Pour gravy mixture over enchiladas. Sprinkle grated cheese over top. Bake at 350 F 15 to 20 minutes. Serve Hot with salsa.

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