

Supporting Orb Weaver Farm . . .

cont'd from front page

molds, hand-turning the cheeses once a day for a week. The milder cheeses are then dipped in wax and set in a walk-in cooler behind the cheese room.

The cave-aged cheeses are not waxed, but brushed with vinegar and turned every other day for months, which forms a natural rind.

Everything is clean-clean when we tour the cheese room and the cave: white walls, turquoise floor. Those blank white walls are one reason Marjorie doesn't think the cheese attack was motivated by anti-gay bigotry. "Usually if it's a hate crime, they want you to know it's a hate crime," Marjorie reasons. There were no messages scrawled on those pristine white walls. "Maybe if it had been four years ago, I would've thought so," Marian adds, referring to the fact that they were interviewed on national tv during the hubbub over civil unions and the heightened evidence of anti-gay bigotry we all experienced.

The other obvious explanation – another cheesemaker eliminating a competitor – doesn't really make sense, either, but then, little about either attack does. "We make 8,000 pounds of cheese a year. That's tiny," says Marian. Marjorie thinks maybe someone who might be just beginning a cheesemaking operation, envious of their success, someone who had come for a tour and knew where the cave was, could perhaps have done such a thing.

It is unclear whether the two attacks are related. Regardless, the outpouring of support that began with the spoiling of the cheese has continued.

Community Support

"The community has just been incredible," Marjorie declares. And by "community" she means mostly the farming and Middlebury Food Coop communities of Addison County, although others have become involved, too. Behind her on the sideboard sits a gingerbread barn sporting a white-frosting "Orb Weaver Farm" legend that someone sent them. They've received a waterfall ("tons") of cards and letters and supportive phone calls, including from R.U.I.2? Queer Community Center, the Samara Foundation, and SafeSpace. Former Governor Madeleine Kunin called and left a message. Marian remembers it this way: "She kind of laughed and said, 'You got 'em!'"

The community's response has amazed Marjorie and Marian. The farm community's support they can understand. Marian: "We're hard workers." Marjorie: "We shipped milk for

15 years. We almost didn't take this house because it was in such sad shape, and we've slowly fixed it up."

It's the hugs on the street from people who are virtual strangers, the cards and letters, the phone calls and flowers and checks that they have a harder time explaining. Some are from out-of-staters who toured the farm. "I'm sure you don't remember me, but my husband and I stopped by, we had been blueberry picking ..." read one note. "We had no idea that people thought of us that way," says Marjorie, "that they cared."

At first, they intended to return the checks with their thanks. But then they put the money aside in a special account that might go toward a reward fund for the capture and conviction of the cheese vandal.

They've had multiple offers to stay with them in case there was another try, but those died down with the capture of two suspects in the physical assault. The mallet Marian used to defend herself went with the police as evidence, so one neighbor brought over a big, short-handled mallet for them – I saw it in the corner as I came out of the bathroom and had to ask.

And American Flatbread restaurants in Middlebury and Burlington held a benefit on a Friday night in late January, donating \$4 per flatbread sold. The total raised for Orb Weaver Farm was not available at press time.

Both women think the support may have something to do with their role as food producers. Food is an intimate and nurturing thing.

One man, whom they had known for years, was at the house repairing their computer, and he said he'd seen them on tv. Marjorie relates, "He had been estranged from his gay daughter, and he said that because of us and the respect that he has for us, he was going to get in touch with her," Marjorie says, her eyes wide.

What ifs

"Everyone has a story to tell, of something that happened to them," Marian adds, a collective sharing of traumatic events. And the middle-aged farmers have heard many of those stories. "It's hard to see the fear well up in people's eyes. People say, 'Don't you wish you'd killed him?' No. But I would've liked to hit him again."

They've thought a lot about the 'what ifs': what if Marjorie had been in the shower, as usual? What if the second man came in? What if the Perkinses (the retired state police neighbors)



weren't home? What if the two men hadn't been caught?

Marjorie: "We fought back. Girls and women are told not to fight. The guy was going to hit me, and I told him, 'You can't hit me – I've never been hit before.' And in the absurdity of the moment, that weird logic worked. I don't think a gun would've helped us." She stops and realizes she's wearing the same jeans as during the attack, and they have little holes in the knee where their half-grown dog tried to help and bit the wrong person.

"We'd kind of like to go back to being anonymous," says Marjorie "Toiling away in oblivion," Marian chimes in.

Though they've been together since 1976, they have not had a civil union. Marjorie: "We never thought about it." Marian: "To me it was just something from the patriarchy, so we haven't done it." Marjorie: "We've done all the

legal papers." Marian: "She can pull the plug."

The two women set up the farm to take advantage of its natural cycles and so they could run it themselves. From May to October, they raise vegetables for market, and the seven Jersey cows graze organic hay. In November they calve and cheesemaking begins and runs through April. Marjorie: "I love what we do."

And now they know just how much they are loved and respected in their communities. These two cheesemakers don't stand alone. ▼