

## How 'burned-out tech guy,' event planner became cheesemakers at 150-year-old SLO County ranch



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Michelle and Jack Rudolph, creamery owners at the family owned Stepladder Ranch off of San Simeon Creek Road north of Cambria. The LaMancha dairy goats have short ears.

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At [Stepladder Ranch & Creamery](#) in Cambria, they do raise cattle and avocados — as do plenty of other San Luis Obispo County ranches.

The current owners, however, also raise goats, pigs and hundreds of varieties of citrus and subtropical fruit as they honor more than 150 years of history making butter and award-winning cheeses that get shipped across the state and beyond.

Most retrospectives of ranch properties in the area start in the days of land grants, the missions, whale and otter hunting, lumber mills, mining, ranching, farming and dairying.

That area of San Luis Obispo County's North Coast has historical links to such prominent family names as Pico, Estrada, Dana, Pujol, Van Gordon, Phelan, Leffingwell Hearst and Bianchi.

According to the Stepladder website, the Martin family bought the land in 1867, raising dairy cattle to make butter. The family traded the butter for food and household goods in San Simeon, and it was also shipped by boat to San Francisco.

Since then, a few other families have owned the ranch between the Martins and the current owners.

Dr. Archie Steele sold the ranch to Jack and Beverly Russell in the 1980s. They were responsible for planting 40 acres of avocados on the property before she died in 1991, and he died in 2005.

Today, the locked-gate ranch at 4450 San Simeon Creek Road is now owned by the Russells' three daughters: Anne Rudolph, Susan Hagen and Gail Baum.

Anne Rudolph's son, Jack Rudolph, and his wife Michelle meanwhile own the creamery operation and manage the ranch.

### **HOW RUDOLPHS REMADE STEPLADDER CREAMERY FROM HISTORICAL ROOTS**

In 2012, Jack Rudolph — a self-described “burned-out tech guy from the Bay Area” — abandoned that career and moved back to the ranch his grandfather bought more than four decades ago.

He dreamed of expanding his childhood cheese-making hobby, and returning to his roots made that happen in a big way.

The ranch was at one point a part of the Harmony Valley Creamery Association, but until Jack Rudolph's return, Stepladder hadn't been a dairy operation for more than a century.

Jack Rudolph then met Michelle, an event planner, on Match.com in 2014 — and within a year, their Stepladder Ranch had morphed into a [farmstead](#) operation that made some cheese and raised pigs to sell as pork.

Even then, the goats were the key, Michelle Rudolph said.

“We started with a small herd of 10 goats, and we made a couple of types of goat cheese,” she said.

With each season, their herd expanded, as did the variety of cheeses the creamery produces, although some are only available seasonally.

Since then, their licensed creamery operation has grown and flourished, and the historic barn and ranch are now firmly planted back on their dairying roots.

### **TODAY'S STEPLADDER RANCH IS A DIVERSE ENTERPRISE**

These days, the Rudolphins and their crew raise Black Angus cattle, several varieties of goats and pigs and an astonishing assortment of agricultural products. Most of the latter are shipped to markets in metropolitan areas in California, while they sell their meats at Bay Area markets.

The Rudolphins belong to the Rare Fruit Growers' Society, Jack Rudolph said growing exotic seasonal crops such as stone and pome fruits, cherimoya, passion fruit, dragon fruit, guavas, Hachiya persimmons, bananas and sapoche.

They also produce avocado blossom honey.

However, the creamery's core products are their European-style cultured salted butter and — depending on the season — a dozen or more varieties of trademarked cheeses made from cow milk, goat milk or a blend.

The recent popularity explosion of cheeseboards and charcuterie trays being served at everything from formal festivities and entertaining to family snacking has boosted the visibility and desirability of Stepladder's top-quality wedges, tubs and wheels, the Rudolphins said.

Of the nearly a dozen [Stepladder cheeses](#) currently available on the ranch website, one is spiced, another is marinated and one is enriched with Syrah wine. That array changes often with the seasons and supply.

Stepladder sells those dairy products locally at three [San Luis Obispo County farmers markets](#) — San Luis Obispo on Thursday nights, Cambria on Friday afternoons and Templeton on Saturday mornings — as well as several retail shops in the county. Some area restaurants also use Stepladder cheeses and butter in their special entrees.

Depending on distribution, an observant customer might find the products in stores as far away as in Hawaii, on the East Coast or in even in Ketchum, Idaho, according to a list on the Stepladder website.

Much of Stepladder's trade, however, comes from customers who [order online](#).

The Rudolphins also manage a five-bedroom, four-bath [vacation rental](#) on the ranch, offer two types of [creamery tours](#), participate in off-site tasting and wine pairing events, manage a quarterly [cheese club](#), sell cheese "bundles," run 20 head of cow-calf cattle pairs and 80 goats and juggle the schedules of about 40 employees.

Some of the staffers work part time, but the size of the workforce allows the owners and their employees "to have a better lifestyle, a balance of work and home," Michelle Rudolph said.

"We want our employees to be able to take time off, too, and still have enough time for the animals," she said.

The crew helps run the farming and dairying operations and sells the firm's goods at 39 California farmers markets from San Diego to the Bay Area.

Staff also helps the ranch to be as sustainable as possible, with a 50KW solar array that produces roughly 90% of the energy used there, according to the website.

Spring water and rain catchment provide the water source, and natural waste from the goats fertilizes the orchards.

### **MODERN RANCH STILL SHARES FEATURES WITH ORIGINAL FARM**

Though things have certainly changed at the Cambria-area ranch in the 150 years it has been open, some things are remarkably similar.

The creamery, founded in 2015 and now run by Jack and Michelle Rudolph, is an updated reincarnation of ranch operations there in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Michelle Rudolph noted that "to this day, most of our 750-acre property is still free-range grazing land," while the rest is devoted to dairy and fruit products while honoring and preserving the vibe, history and architecture of the ranch.

Part of that architectural provenance is a big, iconic red barn that's more than a century old and was built by Danish shipbuilders.

According to Stepladder's website, the hull-like structure's builders "used steam to make the beams malleable, horses to levy the beams into place and wooden pegs to hold it all together."

The striking structure is the heart of [Stepladder Creamery's cheese production](#) now, from milking through aging the wheels.

Because the ranch site is in a frost-protected area, the original owners were also able to have a large garden with the citrus and avocado trees, much like the ranch features today.

A few of the giant avocado trees at the property, probably more than 100 feet tall and 5 feet around, may even date back that far — but Jack Rudolph isn't sure.

"They've been as big as they are now ever since I've been alive," he told The Tribune.

### **NORTH COAST CREAMERY RACKS UP AWARDS AND GRANTS**

The quality of [Stepladder cheese](#) has drawn kudos and grants, plus state and national awards that they've been accumulating since 2017.

That first honor was for their Ragged Point triple-cream cow's milk cheese with its peppery rind, consistently one of their most popular products.

Last year "was the first time we'd entered the California State Fair competition," Michelle Rudolph said. "We entered six cheeses and got seven awards." That included gold and "Best of California" for their Cabrillo Reserve, the still-amazed entrepreneur said of their Manchego/Spanish-style cheese created from a blend of milk from goats and cows.

Some accolades come with funds attached.

"The Pacific Coast Coalition Business and Innovation grant has been super helpful," Jack Rudolph said of the award given earlier this year. "It's been a game changer for us, makes us more efficient. We're growing, but the equipment is quite expensive, and we haven't been able to make those capital outlays on our own."

The operation recently received a \$226,000 Pacific Coast Coalition Business and Innovation grant to help purchase some of that much-needed equipment.

"We bought a butter pump, to get more water and buttermilk out, a draining table, a couple of cheese presses and an automatic cutting machine, which cuts 5- and 6-pound wheels of cheese into wedges," Jack Rudolph said.

They hope to add a cheese wheel washing and brushing machine, due before May from another \$50,000 round of coalition funding.

In 2019, Stepladder received a \$10,000 [Jennifer Bice](#) Artisan Dairy and Cheesemaker Grant toward building a 1,200-square-foot loafing barn for the goats, giving each of the ruminants shelter from the elements and more safe space in which to flourish.

Funds from people [sponsoring specific Stepladder goats](#) allowed the Rudolphs to add roll-down tarps to the open front of the barn, giving the goats more cozy protection from rain and wind.

"The goats work so tirelessly for us," Michelle Rudolph told Culture magazine after the award was announced. "So, it means the world to us to be able to repay the favor and improve their home. They are the perfect animals to make the most of that forage and convert it into delicious milk that represents our terroir."

Find Stepladder at the creamery [website](#), on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#). There is no number for public phone access.

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