Internship Report: Chèverie de l’Ecaillon

Overview

For seven weeks I interned on a dairy goat and cheese operation in a small village in northern France, Vendegies-sur-Ecaillon. I worked both sides of the operation and was exposed to the procedures in producing fourteen types of cheese and the practices required for running a herd of 200 head, including but not limited to: feeding and proper alimentation, cleaning, milking, vaccination administration, general herd management, birthing, selection, fermentation, cheese fabrication, washing, aging, coloring, order preparation, packaging, and order distribution. The overall experience was an extensive indication of the necessary requirements to run a large goat cheese operation from all stages of production. The owners of the farm spoke English, but communication mostly took place in French. This internship also provided the opportunity to live directly with a French family for this period of time directly on the farm.

Job Requirement Summary

My internship took place during mid July until the beginning of September. This is the period of lowest production on the farm, affecting the type of work normally conducted and the hours worked. In the beginning, the workload was less than normal, but towards the end of the internship, however, the workload increased to its usual amount. The workday begins early, and on average I began working around 5:30 am. This time, however, varied and I woke up as early as 4:30 am some days and as late as 6:00 am other days. It is also important to note that I worked seven days a week and I did not have the weekends off.
Each morning, work began in the fromagerie. Cheese fabrication, demolding, and washing took place at this time. After, work began in the chèverie where the goats were milked for the morning milking and given their morning ration. This also included feeding the other goats in another barn, and later into the internship, giving the newborn kids their ration of milk. After the morning milking, a short break was taken for breakfast. Packaging cheese orders and other general work in the fromagerie commenced afterwards until noon when lunch was taken. I normally had a break until 3:30 pm when I fed the goats again and then went back into the fromagerie to turn cheese in their molds and continue washing materials. The evening milking and feeding began at 5:00 pm each evening. Finally, after another break for dinner, I was required to close up the barn and feed the goats one last time at 9:00 pm.

Other varied work included meeting and interacting with customers on the store farm or when they stopped by to pick up a small order outside of normal store hours. Two group tours were also conducted in the middle of the internship, requiring the ability to lead groups through the daily operation of the farm.

Recommendations

I gained some extremely valuable knowledge from my time during this internship. First and foremost, I feel that my French language skills improved vastly as well as my understanding of French culture. I also learned what it is like to run a large cheese operation from all aspects of production. As an American student, I found these two things to be of particular interest and an asset to my studies. However, for future students, exchange or otherwise, it is important to be aware of the extremely busy hours on the farm and the hard, physical labor required. Normal workdays run from 10 to 12 hours and it is necessary to be flexible when it comes to breaks because they vary. Jean-Philippe, the owner and overseer of the farm, does give his interns a one
week vacation in the middle of the internship to make up for the lost breaks on the weekends, which I found to be a restful time. It is possible to do this internship without any prior French knowledge, but I found that knowing French was extremely helpful and made an already overwhelming and, at times, stressful job less so.

Overall, this internship is ideal for a student who is willing to take a lot of initiative, is physically fit, able to begin work early, can work long hours with few breaks, and has some prior knowledge of French.