

MEET THE CHEESEMAKER FROM SHILLONG

Melvin Manners is the force behind the first creamery in Meghalaya

Bhairavi Jani



making and creating one thing or the other. When I stumbled upon Cheese-making, it just stuck with me. I basically self-taught myself everything. It turned into a hobby in no time, and then into a small business in a few years.'

Being the force behind the first creamery in Meghalaya is already a matter of pride for young Manners. But Melvin is not just the first cheesemaker in the state, he is also the only artisanal cheesemaker in Meghalaya. Quietly, with a mischievous smile he says, 'I love it. I love the idea of making something that people can love and appreciate.' His products have gone beyond the local market and well-travelled people from metros as far and wide as Mumbai and Delhi have tried his products, and swear by the quality and taste that Pine Hills creamery has to offer. His product range is wide too, he makes cream cheese, gouda and cheddar to name a few. For someone who is so young and full of ideas, here is something fresh that we also hear from him, 'I love the feedback.'

The Pathfinder

One of the things that marketing gurus swear by, and entrepreneurs most often skip, is taking feedback to map their market continuously. Melvin is a shining example of the enterprising nature of several self-funded entrepreneurial

stories emerging from small-town India, especially in the Northeast. He is not only enterprising, but also patient, open-minded, self-starting, creative, determined, and passionate. He is now focused on scaling his business further and adds, 'Cheese will most probably be my only product, except varieties and varieties of it.' He runs Pine Hills Creamery on his own currently with a little help from two friends on a part-time basis. Plans for expansion also include hiring more people and creating a more formal full-time team. He also contemplates selling his products online in the near future.

Although Melvin's journey until now is solo, he sure had support. The Meghalaya Institute of Entrepreneurship (MIE), a Government of Meghalaya initiative helped Manners make the transition from pursuing cheese-making as a mere hobby, into creating a small profit-making business. The Institute collaborates with the IEF Entrepreneurship Foundation (IEF) to offer Masterclasses in entrepreneurship. Melvin was among one of the early batches of fellows who enrolled and benefited from the course. About the Masterclass, Melvin says, '(it) pushed and motivated me to take that next step.'

Another challenge that you



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have to face as an entrepreneur is that there are more deterrents than encouragement, what drives young Manners? 'The thing that constantly motivates and keeps me going is the idea that I can create a legacy with Pine Hills Creamery and be a pioneer in Artisanal Cheese-making in not only the region, but the whole country.' The independence of being able to eke out his own living in Shillong, is something Melvin prizes over the security of being employed. He sees Pine Hills Creamery growing, and himself growing with it.

The Artist

There is a huge opportunity for many young people in Meghalaya and across the Northeast states to follow in Manner's footsteps.

From designing products, creating websites, working with e-gaming, doing fashion designing, growing flowers and bee keeping to making cakes and bakery products – the opportunities are limitless for them to transform their hobbies into micro and small ventures. What they lack is basic business skills which can be provided by several public and private organisations in the same manner as MIE and IEF have done for Melvin and many like him.

A sole proprietorship comes with the crushing feeling of never having enough time. 'I like doing a lot of things during my free time. Only, there isn't enough of it.' Therefore, Melvin considers time spent with his friends and family priceless.

Even though you can't expect an artist to play favourites with his art, we still goad Melvin to tell us which cheese he prefers most from the Pine Hills Creamery line of cheeses. He responds after some thought, 'That's a hard one. I shouldn't be biased towards one or the other. But I definitely think the Pine Hills Creamery Cream Cheese is pretty special!' That's an honest answer from a passionate, creative, hardworking young entrepreneur and the only artisanal cheesemaker of Meghalaya. 

The writer is Chairperson, IEF Entrepreneurship Foundation