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## From A Small Family Business to the Largest And Well Advanced Cheese Plant in the Caucasus

The region Tashir is traditionally specialized in high-quality cheese production. One of the dairy plants operating in this region is Dustr Melania LLC which started its operation in 1995 by processing 80 liters of milk a day and produced only two types of cheese about 3.5 tons of cheese a year.

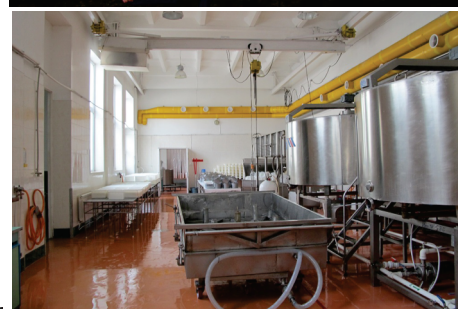
Ruben Harutyunyan, his wife and brother started this business, when one of the largest cheese plants was privatized to the director and many employees left the company to find another job or start something new. They started to buy milk from about 15 neighboring farmers. At that time, it was a two-room operation, about 80 sq. meters. Now, more than 200 farmers from about 10 villages supply milk to the plant. The company produces 8 types of cheese (300 tons), processing more than 20,000 liters of milk a day, which are sold in major supermarkets and exported to the US and Russia.

USDA's financial and technical support to Dustr Melania LLC throughout these years includes: improved cheese production technology; introduction of milk processing and milk cooling equipment; introduction of high quality dairy ingredients; development of new cheeses; introduction of cheeses in different international exhibitions; support in exporting 5 containers of cheeses to USA and Russia. Through USDA/CARD partnership and support, Dustr Melania LLC set up a Master Cheese Makers' School and many start-up processors, Agrarian University students and Georgia cheese makers received intensive theoretical and practical training.

Dustr Melania LLC is the first dairy in Armenia which operates according to HACCP standards developed by CARD Food Safety team. It all started when, in collaboration with Louisiana State University (LSU) and International Institute for Food Safety and Quality (IIFSQ), Food Safety specialists of CARD developed and launched a "Technical Training Assistance" project (TTA) as a part of USDA Food Safety Initiative in Armenia to develop a model enabling the Armenian industry to become import/export ready, and apply the principles of proper food safety practices to positively impact business profit, expand markets, and establish a reputation for providing a safe product to the consumer.

Within the project, a new design for Dustr Melania's facility was developed. It ensured the new facility's functionality, hygienic design and construction requirements. With all the changes and improvements that have taken place at Dustr Melania since the implementation of the HACCP system, it is ready for the certification against ISO 22000 requirements.

Furthermore, this marks the first time in Armenia that the concept of Somatic Cell Counting systems was introduced at Dustr Melania LLC as a new method to check milk quality and safety.



*As the owner Mr. Harutyunyan mentioned, "The investment will have its reward. Now I am sure that we provide safe products to the populace, and this helps the company to strengthen its position in the external markets, especially in the US and Russian markets, where we exported for the first time, about 10 years ago".*