

The Boston Globe

Cheesemakers in Paradise

There's socializing, music, networking, teaching, and learning, and since it's the annual American Cheese Society conference, there's tasting -- lots and lots of tasting

By Devra First, Globe Staff August 8, 2007

SHELBURNE, Vt. -- Inside the Breeding Barn at Shelburne Farms, hundreds of people mill about, hugging and kissing and shaking hands. "You are here this year!," one woman exclaims, embracing another. "It's so good to see you." It's a hot and humid evening, and the air smells like a mixture of goats, hay, and butter. This isn't the perfume of the barn -- the smell rises from the tables arrayed around the walls. They are laden with cheese: cow's milk, sheep's milk, goat's milk, and mixed milk cheese; the bloomy rinded and the hard; velvety chevres made that morning, smoked mozzarellas, cheddars old enough to attend grade school, tar-veined blues.

This is the opening reception of the American Cheese Society's annual conference -- its 24th, held last week at the Sheraton in Burlington -- a chance for artisan cheesemakers, retailers, distributors, restaurateurs, and enthusiasts to network, taste, and learn more about the object of their obsession. The event includes a competition, like the Oscars for cheesemakers, and a win brings more than glory -- it can have a substantial effect on sales. But right now a bluegrass band is launching into a tune. People lounge on the lawn outside the barn. The sun is going down, and huge clouds of bugs swarm the lights. "I'm going to Affinage," one man says of his workshop choice for the next morning. "Me too!" his friend replies with glee, as excited for this talk on the aging of cheese as a kid might be for a field trip. This isn't just business. This is summer camp for cheesemakers.

"It's like a big family," says John Eggena of Fromagerie Tournevent, whose Le Chevre Noir first won an ACS award in the '90s and is up for another this year. "There's kind of an honesty, you can't be a hokey folksy con man. We're palate people. You can't fake it."

This year, there's a particular buzz in the air. "Per Capita US Cheese Consumption Nears 32 Pounds After Big 06 Jump," trumpets the front page of the July 27 issue of the weekly Cheese Reporter. (That's up about a pound from 2005; if factored in, the average per capita cheese consumption at this conference might substantially boost the '07 figures.) Consumer interest in artisan cheese is on the rise. And more people are making cheese. "Half of the [345] cheesemakers in my book didn't exist in 2000," says Jeffrey Roberts, author of "The Atlas of American Artisan Cheese."

Some of the new cheesemakers are young people drawn to the romance of living off the land, or professionals starting second careers. But many are dairy farmers feeling the decidedly unromantic squeeze of increasing fuel and feed costs. Rising milk prices may not be enough to keep them in business; turning that milk into cheese may. Food microbiologist Catherine Donnelly, a professor at the University of Vermont and codirector of its Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese, offers an example. "One dairy farmer had 65 cows. He had to build a barn to house them, so he sold 15 cows, started making cheese, and made enough to build the barn." Fifty cows' milk would have earned him \$100,000, she says. Fifty cows' milk made into cheese would net \$1 million.

More people are also shelling out for these cheeses. Increasingly, consumers are attending cheese classes and trying to eat locally, perhaps in part because of safety concerns due to recent food scares, but also for the pure joy of terroir -- eating something so connected to the land you can taste it.

"The cheese world is changing so much," says attendee Tia Keenan, fromager at Casellula Cheese & Wine Cafe in New York. "Americans in wealthy urban markets are really interested in food in a different way. The precursor was the gourmet boom of the '80s. That started the process of making food important in one's life. It leads to: Where does my food come from? People's questions about cheese have changed, what people are willing to try has changed."

In many ways, the structure of the cheesemaking world resembles that of the art world: At the bottom of the chain, there's often a starving artist putting in long hours for little money; middlemen buy the product and sell it to well-off customers. "Distributors make money -- they dress in suits," says Mark Goldman of Formaticum, a purveyor of specialty paper in which to wrap cheese. "They buy, they sell. It's tricky to negotiate farmstead treated in a commodity fashion." (A farmstead cheese is one the farmer makes with milk from his or her own animals.)

"It's an interesting world," he says. "There are cheese nerds, like baseball card collectors. It's fetishistic. There are groupies."

No wonder, when there are such cheeses to taste as Mettowee, from Consider Bardwell Farm in West Pawlet, Vt., the creamiest chevre ever -- it's ladled into a mold, not extruded (and not entered for an award). Or Rogue River Blue from Oregon, made only during the autumn equinox and winter solstice, and wrapped in syrah leaves macerated in pear brandy. Or an American burrata that has people talking -- "Did you taste it?" "There's something funny about it!" "I liked it." It would be easy to get nerdy about most of the more than 1,200 entries, but somehow the judges must pick their favorites, including best of show. (Can you say palate fatigue?) The judging is based on each cheese's technical and aesthetic merits.

As the competition draws closer, contestants start to get jittery. Justin Trosclair of Haystack Mountain Goat Dairy is beyond all that, however. Haystack, in Longmont, Colo., has several cheeses up for awards, but if they don't win, he says, "I'm cool. There's next year." Still, he has high hopes for a cheese called Red Cloud. It has a washed rind and "just the right amount of pungency," he says. "It's a magical combination we luckily struck upon."

The awards ceremony convenes in the Emerald Ballroom. "Everybody nervous?" asks emcee David Grotenstein. There's a collective "yes." "Me too," he says.

Trosclair, indeed, had nothing to worry about -- Haystack wins a third place ribbon for its chevre en marinade, a second place for Red Cloud, and a first in aged goat's milk cheeses for Haystack Peak. Fromagerie Tournevent wins three awards, including a first place for Chevre Noir in a cheddar category, reprising its win. (Eggena is mobbed after the ceremony. "You feel like Madonna," he says.) Rogue Creamery's Rogue River Blue and Crater Lake Blue tie for a second place. And a burrata made by BelGioioso wins a second place in fresh mozzarella (though by the time we get to taste it at Saturday afternoon's orgiastic Festival of Cheese -- 1,100-plus cheeses to sample! -- who can say whether that was the burrata everyone was talking about earlier).

Then it's time to announce the best of show winners. Third runner-up is Roth's Private Reserve, a cow's milk cheese made by Roth Käse USA Ltd. Second runner-up is Flagship Reserve, a cheddar from Beecher's Handmade Cheese. And first place goes to an aged raclette made by Leelanau Cheese Company of Michigan.

It gets a rare perfect score from the judges. Unfortunately, cheesemaker John Hoyt isn't here to collect his trophy. He just couldn't get away from the farm.

MADE IN VERMONT

Handmade Cheese Takes Center Stage

By Alison Arnett, *Globe Staff* May 31, 2006

TOWNSHEND, Vt. -- The sun and clouds are jousting as Ann and Bob Works lead the way over muddy fields to a pasture full of ewes and lambs. "The fence is electric," Ann warns as a visitor starts to reach a hand toward a woolly lamb. Peaked Mountain rises against the horizon, its trees still wearing pale spring green. A few "baas" break the silence as mother lambs chomp on grass under the vigilant guard of a white llama.

The idyllic pastoral setting represents a new commercial reality for Vermont: Ann will craft the milk from these sheep into artisanal cheeses. With fanciful names like "Vermont Dandy" and "Ewe Jersey," the cheeses are headed for the nearby Brattleboro Farmers' Market and top restaurants in Boston and New York. Peaked Mountain Farm is part of a revolution in cheesemaking. In the last five years, the number of small artisanal operations in the state has doubled, according to the Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese at the University of Vermont. The state now has 37 small cheesemaking farms, more per capita than any other state. In a confluence of consumer demand and agricultural necessity, handmade cheeses have become the state's growth industry. "Vermont is a natural place for this to occur," says Catherine Donnelly, a UVM professor of nutrition and food science and one of the institute's founders, along with Paul Kindstedt, also a nutrition and food science professor. And in a depressed dairy farming industry, says Donnelly, cheesemaking is "a bright light in sustainable agriculture."

Some cheesemakers, like the Works, who retired from jobs in New York, are relative newcomers. The couple moved to Vermont and began making cheese in 1999. Others, like Jonathan Wright, who switched from selling milk to making cheese seven years ago, grew up on the farm. Some milk cows, others goats or sheep. One cheesemaker produces yogurt and mozzarella from water buffalo milk.

Milk prices are at an all-time low, says Wright, with fluid milk selling at \$12 a hundredweight. That same amount brings Wright \$85 to \$90 from his Taylor Farm gouda, made from 44 Holsteins and Jerseys. Some farms sell everything they produce. At Consider Bardwell Farm in West Pawlet, cheesemaker Peggy Galloup has to convince the farm owner to keep aging their goat milk cheese because there's such a clamor for it in New York restaurants. "They'll want them even more when they're even better," Galloup says.

Vermont is not new to this endeavor. The state has had cheesemaking operations for centuries. Cabot Creamery Cooperative based in Montpelier, which produces cheddars and other varieties, started in the early 20th century. Crowley Cheese in Healdville is the oldest cheesemaking operation in the country. Its Colby is made from an 1882 formula. But the craze for cheeses like those in Europe prompted this bloom of smaller operations. In 2004, with a US Department of Agriculture grant and some private grant money, the Institute for Artisan Cheese opened. Modeled after similar research bodies in Europe, the institute provides courses on milk chemistry to food safety. Cheesemaking, says Donnelly, "is a lot of art and a lot of science."

That art is being recognized. The institute has been invited to be one of two American delegations to the prestigious Cheese Art 2006 in Sicily, an international symposium. Galloup of Consider Bardwell Farm is one of the Vermonters making the trip. In the midst of the birthing season -- 37 baby goats and counting -- she took a break to talk by phone. She fell into cheesemaking after years of raising goats with her son for 4-H projects. The 300-acre Consider Bardwell, on the New York line, was once operated as a cheese cooperative in the mid-19th century by a man of that name. The property is now owned by Angela Miller, a literary agent, and Russell Glover, an architect, who work in New York part of the week and labor on the farm on weekends. Galloup makes the cheese and tastes the milk of every doe to see which is giving the best. "We pick and choose who stays in the milk line," she says.

Miller, reached by phone, praises Galloup's knack for knowing how to breed the best milkers. The herd is a Swiss breed called Oberhasli; they bought the goats five years ago. For the last two years they've been licensed to sell cheese; Murray's Cheese Shop in New York is a consistent customer.

A year-old operation at Twig Farm in West Cornwall is producing aged goat cheese. This is the domain of Michael Lee, who had been a cheese buyer for Formaggio Kitchen and South End Formaggio. With the help of his wife, Emily Sunderman, Lee raises 20 goats. "We had a condo in Jamaica Plain that we bought low and sold high," he says. They bought 20 acres near Middlebury, Vt., built a house and barn, and leased 15 additional acres so that the goats would have enough pasture. Lee makes cheese when he's milking his Alpine goats (March to January). The cheeses age for 2 1/2 to 3 months. So far the endeavor isn't making money, but Lee hopes to be profitable within two years. His wife also works for a Web-based British media company, and the couple has a 9-month-old son, Carter. Even with 80-hour work weeks, he says, "I couldn't be happier."

The work is completely unpredictable, says David Major, who milks more than 200 sheep for Vermont Shepherd cheese in Putney, Vt. "Yesterday I was finishing cheesemaking, hoping to have lunch about 2:30," Major says. His day had begun at 5:30 a.m. An employee came running in to tell him: "I can't find the yearlings [young sheep]." Major and several others spent three hours searching for the sheep, frantically combing the woods to find the sheep before predators did. By the time the sheep were rounded up and safe, Major finished milking after 9 p.m. and got around to a meal at about 10:30 p.m.

The farmer switched from meat and wool to cheesemaking 18 years ago and has had grants to train other cheesemakers, including the Works of Peaked Mountain Farm. Major grew up on this farm, and today he and his cousin, Lucy Georgeff, produce 20 to 30 wheels of cheese a week from April to November. A wheel of Vermont Shepherd, a semi-hard, full-flavored cheese, is usually about 8 pounds and retails for \$150. It's a decent living if "you work your tail off," he says.

In the Works' spacious kitchen, Ann is baking bread and Bob is cooking a pork shoulder on a grill. They'll take these, along with pates, full lunches, and cheeses, to the Brattleboro Farmers' Market. Their kitchen is inspected by the state, which offers advice. "It's like having a consultant to help you," says Bob.

The couple's cheeses are kept under Nigerian wooden baskets on their granite countertop. Vermont Dandy is nutty and sweet; WoodPeckerino, aged longer, has a sharper flavor. Another, with a paler hue, made from both sheep and goat milk, has a distinctive goat cheese flavor. The Works are experimenting with soft, fresh cheeses and with something they're tentatively calling Triple Threat, a cow, goat, and sheep cheese similar to one they once tried in Barcelona.

Despite brisk sales at the farmers' market, they have no plans to go really big. "We'd like to make more without changing," Ann says. "This is what our farm can handle, what we can handle." Her husband, offering another taste of cheese, this time the Ewe Jersey, made from both sheep and cow milk, says, "The romance is in the eating, not the making."

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