

Locals craft cheese

BY KAREN SILVERSTON

KITCHEN SLEUTH

The cheese in my refrigerator used to be Kraft. Now it is crafted.

It used to be rindless and wrapped in plastic. Now, often, it has a rind. I might not eat the rind, but I want to know how it developed. Was it bandaged, as some fine cheddar is? Rubbed with a combination of oil and powdered dark cocoa, like aged Vella Dry Jack? Washed with white wine until friendly bacteria develop on the surface, enabling fragrant tasty flavor development in the interior paste?

How I became a cheese geek is a mystery even to me. I thought it was because my husband liked cheese. He says that has nothing to do with it.

Rind is the first thing I notice about a cheese. Then I want to know about the milk it was made from.

Goat? Cow? Sheep? Water buffalo? What kind of food did these mamas eat?

I put my cheese mania to productive use, helping organize a fundraising cheese tasting.

We know we love traditional European cheeses. How are American cheeses tasting these days?

Beginning with a list of six cheeses that won awards in the American Cheese Society annual judging, we chose exemplary small production cheeses from Fiscalini Farms and Cypress Grove Chevre in California, Rogue Creamery in Oregon, Capriole Goat Cheese in Indiana, Sweet Grass Dairy in Georgia, and Carr Valley Cheese in Wisconsin.

"How do you know a cheese is good?" we asked Sid Cook of Carr Valley. "It's easy. Do what I tell my kids: read the ingredients. If you can't pronounce it, don't eat it."

We didn't expect to find five local cheesemakers among the 5.6 million people in the Metroplex. Yet that's what happened. So we served an all-north-Texas cheese plate featuring eight luscious local cheeses followed by the six award-winners.

Who are these local cheese makers?

Claudine Martyn, Dallas native, switched careers to become a chef. Interning at a three-star restaurant in southern France, she fell in love with goat cheese. When not managing the cooking school at Central Market Fort Worth, she makes cheese. She began selling it six months ago. Some, like the triple cream chevre, is tailored to uses that would appeal to chefs. Others are intended for the table, such as the traditional ashed pyramid.

Working in Europe as an Eileen Ford model, Deborah Rogers fell in love with goat cheese. Models do eat, she says. To educate herself she visited goat farms. Eighteen months ago she bought her first two goats, ceased working as a stockbroker, and transformed her grandfather's Fort Worth farm into a working entity. Deborah brought her cheese to a local chef. The rest sold by word of mouth. Find her herbed cylinder and ash covered pyramid at Central Market. Deborah's goats are pastured. She no longer buys feed,

and she uses sustainable farming practices. At the American Cheese Society 2005 competition, McNaughton Pastures won an award.

Elizabeth Hutchins, Greenville, Texas, taught herself to make cheese two years ago by reading books on cheesemaking. Her dad raises the Rehoboth Ranch grass-fed meats, pastured poultry, and runs the Grade A goat milk dairy. Currently, all goat milk is committed, meaning, if you wish to purchase it, you ask to be on the waiting list. Only 18 years old, Elizabeth neither sells cheese, nor makes aged cheeses. She makes simple soft cheeses from raw milk and flavors them with various herbs and peppers grown on the farm, demonstrating cheese making when school groups tour. Her eleven siblings, mom, and dad are her built-in focus group.

Michael Sams learned dairy management working on large dairy farms. He and wife Debbie pursued their dream of going small. They built up their own herd of 30 cows, farming sustainably in Kemp, Texas. With four children still at home, their life is balanced, says Debbie. They've produced cheese for two and a half years, selling at the Austin and Coppell farmers markets, the Dallas Farmers Market Texas Meats kiosk, Whole Foods and Central Market. Full Quiver Farm makes a number of spreads, including the popular Jalapeno Spread, Farmstead Mozzarella, and baby Swiss.

Paula Lambert began making cheese twenty-three years ago when no one in Dallas championed cheese. She had fallen in love with cheese in Italy, and to get cheeses like those, she had to make them herself. Now nationally recognized, she still makes cheese by hand, in small batches, in the same storefront every day, from milk purchased from local farms. Nothing in the factory is automated except the pasteurizer pump. At American Cheese Society competitions, Mozzarella Company cheeses have won awards year after year, for twenty years. One of her winners in 2005 is Queso Oaxaca, a Mexican-inspired mozzarella, stretched by hand into ribbons, then rolled into a ball, with limejuice and salt. Mozzarella Company makes fresh and aged cheeses, some flavored, some spiced, using cow's milk and goat's milk.

In September 2005, in Italy, Slow Food will present a three-day cheese exhibition held every two years. The USA table will feature cheeses from the southern region. Mozzarella Company's Blanca Bianca, an unpasteurized cow's milk cheese, washed with white wine during its 60-day aging, has been invited as one of the cheeses representing United States cheesemaking.

American artisans are dedicated to making authentic delicious cheese - cheese that is connected to our land through the animals producing the milk. Discover and support these North Texas cheesemakers.

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