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Cheese: Le forme del latte, Slow Food International's Biennial Exhibition
Say Formaggio!
By Karen Silverston



This year's edition of Cheese, the world's largest cheese exhibition, featured well-loved and rarely seen cheeses from around the world, according to Slow Food USA Executive Director Erika Lesser, based in Brooklyn, NY.

So large that it is held only every second year, Cheese 2005 attracted 150,000 visitors to Bra, Italy, the heart of the Piedmont region, from September 16 - 19. Fine examples of cheese, including cheeses made in America, were offered in a Cheese Market, in 42 taste workshops, and at the Great Hall, where someone from every cheesemaking nation could be found.

The four-day Cheese Market held on Via Principi di Piemonte reserved a special area for 80 projects, or Presidia, accepted by the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity. Each project focuses on cheese important enough to our gastronomic heritage to be supported by the Foundation. The cheese might be made from the milk of a nearly extinct breed, for example, or by using a historic method not known outside a small region.

One of these 80 projects is the American Raw Milk Cheese Presidium. Founded in October 2003, by Slow Food USA, in support of farmstead cheesemakers who are producing aged raw milk cheese, the consortium members are preserving cheesemaking practices developed long ago, wherever man has herded goats and sheep, or cared for cows.

For its market offering, Slow Food USA chose a selection of cheeses from the South, an area of the United States not widely acknowledged for its cheesemaking, yet producing delicious examples of aged raw-milk handmade cheeses.

For these southern cheesemakers, cheese is not a sacred cow. Even when they are recreating a traditional cheese, such as Chef John Folsie's Bulgarian style Kashkaval, these cheesemakers are reinventing cheese as well as preserving historic practices.

When Slow Food USA chose to focus on the southern cheesemakers for Cheese 2005, the hurricane season had not yet begun, and though some of the shipments were delayed by Hurricane Katrina, the nine participating cheesemakers emerged safely.

"We lost power and phone lines for a few days, and many phone lines are still down. Katrina might have taken down all our trees if Camille hadn't already been here. We had to dump milk and products even though the dairy has a generator, but the animals are ok and we are, too," said Alyce Birchenough of Sweet Home Farm based in Elberta, AL. Birchenough sent Perdido, an aged raw cow's milk cheese inspired by Morbier, distinguished by its layer of ash Birchenough makes from herbs growing on the farm, and a new cheese, Fondrea, also aged raw cow's milk. "An Italian cheese maker visited our cheese guild and taught us to make Fontina last year. I named it partly for Fontina, and partly for him - his name is Andrea."

Because all raw milk cheese sold in the United States must be aged 60 days or more, cheesemakers pasteurize the milk used for making fresh cheeses. Liz Parnell, of Fromagerie Belle Chevre in Elkmont, AL, makes a variety of fresh goat cheeses from the pasteurized milk of a nearby herd that is milked just for her. "Our electricity went on and off for a day and a half," said Parnell, "and we are still waiting to hear from our younger family members in Mississippi and Louisiana." Parnell included Fromage Blanc, which won a first place in the cultured milk class at the 2005 American Cheese Society (ACS) competition, goat cheese logs, and Chevre with Sun Dried Tomatoes, which also won a first place, among the selection she sent.

Three aged raw milk cheeses made from goat's milk were offered as well. Judy Schad's Mont St. Francis is named for a monastery near Capriole, her Greenville, IN, farm. Mont St. Francis is a semi-hard washed rind cheese with a pungent aroma typical of washed rind cheeses, and also a 2005 ACS winner. Goat Lady Dairy based in Climax, NC, sent two aged raw milk cheeses, Goat Lady Gouda, which won a first prize at the 2005 ACS, and Gray's Chapel, a semi-hard washed rind cheese.

Aged raw milk cheeses from two farms in Virginia were on the United States Presidium table. From Everona Dairy in Rapidan, VA, Dr. Pat Elliott sent two aged raw milk cheeses made from the milk of her Friesian ewes: Piedmont, a semi-hard natural rinded rich buttery cheese which won first prize in the ACS 2005 farmstead sheep milk cheese category, and Cracked Pepper.

Also from Virginia, Rick and Helen Feete of Meadow Creek Dairy, a sustainable family farm in Galax with only Jersey cows, sent two aged raw milk farmstead cheeses, Mountaineer, aged a minimum of six months, and Grayson, a semi-soft, creamy and supple washed rind cheese.

Like Rick and Helen Feete, Desiree and Al Wehner of Sweet Grass Dairy in Thomasville, GA, use sustainable practices and not only raise Jersey cows, but also

goats. They produce aged raw milk cheeses and younger cheeses from pasteurized milk of the cows and the goats. They've trained son-in-law Jeremy Little to make the cheese. Sweet Grass sent Myrtlewood, a raw cow's milk hard cheese aged 120 days, inspired by a French Pyrenees cheese. Myrtlewood's dark greenish, brownish natural rind develops from being washed with a mixture of olive oil, balsamic vinegar, salt and the leaves of the wax myrtle, an aromatic native plant.

Last, from Dallas, Texas, came Blanca Bianca, the aged raw milk cow's milk cheese that Paula Lambert of Mozzarella Company created in August 2003 to help Slow Food Dallas raise funds for the newly founded Raw Milk Farmstead Cheese consortium. Unnamed at its October 2003 debut, Blanca Bianca is becoming known as a delicious defender of tradition. Washed with white wine daily during maturation, Blanca Bianca develops a reddish rind with a pungent aroma. The rind protects the creamy soft paste and contributes to the elegant tangy flavor.

Beyond the Slow Food USA Presidium table, other American-made cheeses made appearances in workshops such as Sunday's West Coast Goat Cheeses and Monday's Goats of the World, Unite!

Workshop participants tasted cheese from Jan and Chris Twohy of Yerba Santa Dairy, based in Lakeport, CA; Soyoung Scanlon of Andante Dairy, based in Santa Rosa, CA; Mary Keehn of Cypress Grove Chevre, based in Arcata, CA; Pierre Kolisch of Juniper Grove Farm, based in Redmond, OR; and Sally Jackson, of Sally Jackson Cheeses based in Oroville, WA.

Friday's Tasting The Blues workshop featuring blue cheeses presented with passito and sweet wines included Rogue River Blue, from David Gremmels of Rogue Creamery, based in Central Point, OR, along with Stilton, Cabrales, Verde di Frabosa, and Persillé du Malzieu. Rogue River Blue, semi-soft, creamy, and natural rinded, is made in late spring from raw cow's milk and aged until mid-July to mid-August, when it is wrapped in pear brandy soaked grape leaves and further aged, then released at a minimum of one year.

The public met goat cheese makers in the House of Goat Cheeses at Piazza XX Settembre, and sheep's milk cheesemakers lined the Street of the Shepherds. Visitors also meandered the Great Hall, trying examples of certified organic cheeses, and booked dinners featuring local and regional fare. Diners experienced a careful selection of fresh ingredients, appropriate wines to accompany the dishes, and a convivial table - whether a 35Euro dinner at the Osteria or a 120Euro dinner in a castle.

Some taste workshops were led by English speaking affineurs, cheesemongers and cheese authorities. Kevin Sheridan, of Sheridan's Cheesemongers, Dublin, Ireland guided the Irish Raw Milk Cheeses workshop where cheeses from all eight producers in the Irish Raw Milk Presidium were available for tasting, including the washed rind Durrus. Juliet Harbutt, cheese authority, creator of the British Cheese Awards, and author, led the Cheeses of the Scottish Highlands and Islands workshop, in which some of the cheeses were made from milk of the rare Ayrshire breed. Randolph Hodgson of Neal's Yard Dairy in London guided the British PDO Blue Cheeses workshop that

included a tasting of Stilton in the various stages of its evolution, Dovedale, Buxton Blue, and Dorset Blue.

Finally, in the Great Hall of Cheese, among the cheeses offered from every nation, visitors tasted Texas Star, a raw cow's milk cheese from Veldhuizen Family Farm in Dublin, Texas.

In fostering an appreciation of cheeses so they are neither lost, forgotten nor bullied out of the market, Cheese 2005 succeeded in inspiring awareness of food and of the connection between the land, the animal, and the producer -- no matter what language was spoken.

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