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The time is ripe for Lone Star cheeses

By Amy Culbertson

While we weren't looking, Texas cheese has come of age.

For a long time, it was just Paula -- Paula Lambert, who put Texas on the national cheese map with her Mozzarella Co. in Dallas' Deep Ellum in 1982.

But last week's "Texas Cheese Plate: A Celebration of Texas Cheese" was a revelation. Slow Food Dallas brought together a panel of 10 cheese makers from across the state for a kind of Texas cheese makers' summit in downtown Dallas at El Centro College. Many of them had never been in the same room together.

The panelists included Lambert and Amelia Sweethardt, the second-generation cheese maker of Dripping Springs' 12-year-old Pure Luck Dairy -- both of whom have served as mentors to fledgling cheese makers struggling to master a craft for which the United States offers scant established tradition.

At the table on the other side of the room was 18-year-old Chrissy Omo, who became enamored of goat cheese in her early teens in Europe, when her father worked in Germany. She invested some of her college savings to buy 10 goats; "they started having babies, and one thing led to another." Now Omo makes CKC Farms cheeses on her family's farm in Blanco, when she's not in class at San Marcos' Texas State University.

There was Lambert's neighbor in Deep Ellum, Tonia Ashworth-Kuesel of Chateau de Fromage, and John Spanogle of Clifton's La Cuesta Farm, both of whom make fresh goat cheeses. So does Fort Worth's Deborah Rogers, who recently took a little holiday after "31/2 years, seven days a week without a break," only to discover she couldn't wait to get back to milking.

There was third-generation dairyman Todd Moore of Plano, whose Guernsey and Jersey cows produce the milk Edgar Diaz uses to make Latin-style cheeses such as Oaxaca for Lucky Layla Farms. There was Dublin's Stuart Veldhuizen, who found he couldn't stay away from dairying after he left the family farm in Minnesota, having sworn he never wanted to milk another cow.

There was Desire Dunn, a Lubbock quarter-horse breeder who pickles the peppers she grows to flavor her Cou Rouge Jalapeño Goat Cheese, and her neighbor Nancy Patton of Haute Goat Creamery, who pampers her goats with wine and vanilla wafers. It doesn't affect the taste of the cheese, but it does make for contented goats.

Not at the table were Michael and Debbie Sams of Kemp -- Monday is their day to make mozzarella -- but they sent their Full Quiver Farm Cheddar.

In the sold-out audience, too, were two budding *affineurs* who call themselves the Houston Dairymaids: Kendra Scott, 26, and Lindsey Schechter, 29, who drive their cheese truck around the state to bring artisan cheeses back to Houston to sell.

Two of the cheese makers there haven't been in the business a year yet. But each of the 13 cheeses we tasted was worthy of contemplation.

Some, indeed, were extraordinary. Lucky Layla's deceptively complex 2-year-old Boyaca and Lambert's supremely cowy raw-milk Blanca Bianca linger in my mind. Veldhuizen's striking Greens Creek cow's-milk cheese offered layers of spicy, earthy flavor that made me want to grab a wedge and take it home to cook with.

But most thrilling to me was Chrissy Omo's bloomy-rinded Baby Caprino, a soft-ripened chevre whose fresh, buttery, innocent flavor belied its sophistication, revealing a peppery note of watercress. Omo, whose enthusiasm fairly radiates from her face, had said earlier that the best thing about making cheeses was watching people break into a smile after a taste. If she was looking at me when I savored that first bite of her chevre, she must have been pleased indeed.

There were no stars at this gathering -- no grandstanding, no competition. What the audience saw from the panel was a great deal of curiosity about -- and respect for -- their fellow artisans' work.

You don't expect ego, of course, from people whose chosen business requires hours feeding and milking cows or goats or sterilizing equipment. Cheese makers, after all, Patton noted wryly, "are 80 percent dishwashers."

But these folks are inspired dishwashers indeed, and those of us who love and respect food are fervently grateful for them.

Whenever I worry that our part of the world will never catch up to those areas where small organic

farms and artisanal food makers supply a growing market of restaurateurs and foodies, I will remind myself of this gathering.

In the know

Texas cheese sources

Chateau de Fromage: Metroplex Central Markets; Whole Foods Highland Park, Flavor From Afar and Roy's Natural Market, Dallas. Online: www.naturetoyourdoor.com, www.chateaufromage.com. Phone ordering: 214-744-0605.

CKC Farms: Grape Vine Market, Round Rock and Austin; P&K Grocery, Austin; Timpones Market, Dripping Springs; McCall Creek Farms and Real Foods, Blanco; Artisan's Alley Farmers Market, San Antonio. Phone ordering: 830-833-5669.

Cou Rouge: Whole Foods markets in Dallas; United Market Street in Lubbock. Online: www.courougecheese.com.

Deborah's Farmstead: Metroplex Central Markets; Roy Pope Grocery in Fort Worth. Online: www.deborahsfarm.com.

Full Quiver Farm: Whole Foods, Central Market; aged cheeses sold at the Texas Meats Supernatural stall at the Dallas Farmers Market. Phone ordering: 903-498-3884.

Haute Goat Creamy: United Market Street and Well Body Natural Foods, Lubbock; Stanley Korshak, Dallas. Online: www.hautegoatcreamery.com. Phone ordering: 806-792-6400.

La Cuesta Farm: Preston, Lomo Alto and Greenville Whole Foods in Dallas; Eatzi's in Dallas. Cheese can be ordered online and by phone but must be picked up at the farm, 6383 Farm Road 56, Clifton: www.lacuestafarm.com; 254-622-2751.

Lucky Layla Farms (Moo Cheeses): Metroplex Central Markets and Whole Foods; Sprouts in Plano, Flower Mound and Dallas; Eatzi's, Roy's Natural Market, Dallas City Market and Kuby's Sausage House in Dallas; Hirsch's Specialty Meat Sausage in Plano; Cupboard Natural Foods in Denton. Online: www.luckylayla.com.

Mozzarella Co.: Mozzarella Co. retail store, 2944 Elm St., Dallas; Centennial, Saginaw; Best Cellars, Dallas; other retail stores around the state. Online: www.mozzco.com. Phone ordering: 800-798-2954.

Pure Luck Dairy: Central Market in Fort Worth and Dallas; Highland Park and Greenville Whole Foods in Dallas; other retail stores around the state. Online: www.purelucktexas.com. Phone ordering: 512-858-7034.

Veldhuizen Family Farm: Veldhuizen Cheese Shoppe at the farm, 425 PR 1169, Dublin. Online: www.veldhuizencheese.com.