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Dairymade Pimento Cheese earns an "adult" rating with Veldhuizen's Provalone, Paragon and Texas Gold Cheddar cheeses.

KAREN WARREN: Chronicle

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TEXAS CHEESE COMES OF AGE

Big wheels of cheese

The Houston Dairymaids scour Texas for the best artisanal cheeses, then slice and share their finds

By ALISON COOK

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Houston Dairymaids

- **Products:** Texas-made artisan cheeses, specialty foods, catering and gifts.
- **Find them at:** Midtown Farmers Market, 3701 Travis, 713-524-6922, 8 a.m.-noon Saturdays, www.tafia.com; Houston Farmers Market, Rice University (entrance 9), 4-7 p.m. Tuesdays, www.houstonfarmersmarket.com.
- **Information:** www.houstondairymaids.com.

A scrum of customers knots and surges at the northeast corner of t'afia restaurant. It's a spring Saturday morning, and shoppers are here for the weekly Midtown Farmers Market, which chef Monica Pope has installed on the premises.

What's going on back there? It's hard to see past the jostling queue. Then, midway down the dining room, the aroma hits - all savor and salt and a distinctive, sharp roundness, suffused with an unmistakable funk. It's cheese saying hello.

Two young women, wearing many-pocketed aprons and hand-knitted caps straight out of an 18th-century engraving, are barely visible above the throng. Half hidden by wheels of cheese, sleekly bobbed Kendra Scott moves through their 4-foot-square space, drawing a wire cutter through slabs and hunks, wrapping, weighing and making change.

"Would you like to try some of Stuart Veldhuizen's Gruyères?" asks Lindsey Schechter, the curly-headed half of the duo, who call themselves the Houston Dairymaids.

Then she adds, almost shyly, "I think it's a rock star."

And it is — vivid, swaggery, raw-milk stuff with the expansive nuttiness that is a hallmark of the best European Gruyères. This cheese, however, is made in Dublin, Texas, a few hours southwest of Fort Worth. It is a persuasive testament to the state's brave new age of artisanal cheesemaking.

The Dairymaids and their 6-month-old business are poised to run with that new age, and so, increasingly, are the Houston cheese acolytes who arrive in a steady stream until the market's noon closing.

They cluster expectantly, sampling and savoring. They snap up every ounce of Pure Luck Dairy's Claire de Lune, a soft-ripened goat's-milk cheese with a velvety white rind and an interior that ranges from semifirm to a creamy core. They demolish the entire stock of Dallasite Tonia Ashworth-Kuesel's voluptuous fresh chèvre, a fluff of fresh young goat's-milk cheese that is laced with snippets of real black truffle from top-tier supplier Urbani.

Tales of cheese

The Dairymaids' gentle soft sell often includes a cheesemaker story. "This cheese started out as a mistake," Scott offers as she unwraps a chunk of the Mozzarella Co.'s Deep Ellum Blue, a semisoft cow's-milk cheese honeycombed on top with deep, shiny blue, as beautiful as stained glass.

"The blue mold grew on it, and Paula (Lambert, the godmother of Texas cheesemaking) liked it, so she started making it that way on purpose."

Scott's eyes light up as she relates the tale, as if she were telling a particularly delicious anecdote about a best friend. Which, in a way, she is: She and Schechter endow each of the artisanal cheeses they cull from around the state with a history, a provenance and a set of quirks that amount to a personality. They speak of "our cheesemakers" and "our farmers" in the same fashion.

A young man approaches in search of the Guernsey-milk butter the Dairymaids are holding for him (he has ordered in advance). Made by Lucky Layla Farms of Garland, it tastes of rich meadows. A woman breathlessly announces, "We had dinner here at t'afia last night and had one of your Pure Luck cheeses!" She wants some more. A man stops by to taste, and a wistful look comes over his face. He recently moved to Houston from New York City, he tells the Dairymaids, and he's been longing for handmade local cheeses of the type he purchased there.

"So nobody makes cheese in Houston?" inquires this gentleman, eying the array pulled from the Dallas/Fort Worth area and the Hill Country. "There are some hobbyists," Scott tells him, "(and) there's one woman who's setting up a goat farmstead in Sealy."

Scott is referring to Susan Holle, one of the growing tribe of Texas cheesemakers, which stands at 14 and counting. Suddenly, there's a critical mass that has put Texas at the point where California was 25 years ago, when artisan cheesemakers such as Laura Chenel galvanized the now-established craft in that state.

And right in the middle of the coalescing Texas cheese scene are the Houston Dairymaids, quietly preaching the gospel of handmade cheese to all comers.

As noon ticks by, they break down their carefully composed table display, with the glazed green ceramic label holders crafted by Kendra Scott's mother, a potter. The cheeses are papered over their cut faces and loosely wrapped, so they can breathe, "so (they have) a little bit of an environment," says Scott. Tight plastic of the sort that encases grocery-store cheeses, even the fanciest ones, can kill a cheese, even the fanciest ones, reminds Schechter.

She corrals a last bit of glistening Crescenza, an Italian-style cream cheese made by Lambert's Mozzarella Co. The Crescenza has puddled in all its tart, liquid glory onto the marble cheese board.

Goat-farm fieldwork

On Tuesday, the Dairymaids will do it all over again at the Houston Farmers Market on the Rice University campus.

"The two markets," says Schechter, "are the best eight hours of my week."

The following day, on the western edge of Fort Worth, an unlikely parade marches through a green pasture.

In the lead is Deborah Rogers, a former Ford model and stockbroker who four years ago ditched her job to become a goat farmer. Behind her troop dozens of frolicsome goats — French Alpines, mostly, with some curly Toggs and a few white Saanens mixed in. Also in tow are five enormous white Pyrénées dogs that saunter among the goats and guard the flocks by night.

Smack in the middle of the procession are the Houston Dairymaids. They can't seem to stop smiling. A peacock screams in the near distance as Rogers shows off the 3-day-old kid she rescued after a traumatic birth, bandaging his wonky leg, sneaking him past her husband into the spare bedroom and feeding him from a bottle. He's a bit lurchy still, and inclined to follow her wherever she goes.

"I'm not very happy with his mother right now," says Rogers, but she's laughing. Her farm is in the grip of kidding season, when babies are born, the goats' milk flows and cheese can be made again. About the life of this patch of backwater paradise she says, "I never lose my sense of wonder."

The Dairymaids have arrived for the tour they consider mandatory before they begin to carry a new line of cheeses. They need to see and taste and smell. Scott photographs; Schechter takes notes. They want to bridge the gap between producer and consumer, they explain, to open a window on the whole painstaking cheesemaking process. And they can't do it from a distance.

Until now, neither has quit her day job to become a full-time Dairymaid. Scott keeps flexible hours doing books in the office of her family's used-car dealership and acts as a "third-string" car salesman. But Schechter recently gave notice at the cheese importing company where she works, selling to restaurants and wine bars.

That's how she met Scott, who was then working at the Corkscrew on Houston's Washington Avenue, where she had put together the cheese program. Coincidentally, both had broken up with their boyfriends and moved back to Houston early last year.

Schechter, 29, is a Miami-born Rice grad who was chef at a small bistro in Camden, Maine, later working at the renowned London cheesemongers Neal's Yard Dairy.

Native Houstonian Scott, 26, fell in love with cheese during a stint as buyer for a European-style deli in Lexington, Ky.

More than middlemen

It didn't take long for the two to realize that "we both had a vision of running a small cheese shop," says Scott.

Texas cheese wasn't on their radar screens back then. But when they started selling at farmers markets, with their emphasis on regionally produced foods, "we had to go local." A passion was born. They discovered that cheesemakers around the state tended to be isolated, often without the means or the time to market their products in larger markets. They began to think of the Dairymaids as facilitators, establishing networks among the cheesemakers, promoting their products and serving as an information resource.

All of which has brought them, on this mild March Sunday, from the small, neat dairy room at Deborah Rogers' farmstead into her rambling pink-stuccoed villa. They sit talking cheese in the living room while the 3-day-old goat slumbers on an Oriental rug and music by Philip Glass plays in the background.

Rogers regales the Dairymaids with tales of cheese-shipping misadventures and the bureaucratic struggles she endured to get her "funky little German pasteurizer" approved by inspectors. She outlines

her latest project, a raw-milk, washed-rind cheese that she will model on raclette, the Swiss cheese that traditionally is roasted over an open fire.

Schechter's eyes widen. She has organized "Raclette Nights" at the invitation of Pope at t'afia, and you can almost hear the gears whirring inside her head. Texas Goat-Cheese Raclette Night! Why not?

On to downtown Dallas, where the next afternoon finds the Dairymaids helping to compose 50-odd cheese plates in the vast white kitchen of El Centro College. "There's some cheese I've never seen," Schechter reports excitedly, pointing out a chunk of aged goat cheese on a plate that is a serene study in shades of white, buff and yellow.

Schechter and Scott are assisting at a sold-out Texas cheese event hosted by the Dallas chapter of Slow Food USA, an organization that champions local, traditional foods.

Nobody can quite get over the fact that 14 Texas cheesemakers have been identified, and that 10 of them will be in the tasting room tonight, introducing their products and taking questions on a panel. The words "historic event" keep popping up as the evening gets under way. At the first Slow Food Dallas raw-milk cheese event some years back, there were all of two cheeses to taste.

Tonight there are 13, and as the tasting proceeds, some surprises unfold.

A fluffed, creamy blob of fresh chèvre, made the day before at La Cuesta Farm in Clifton, startles with its disciplined pop of salt and its immediacy. Colombian-style Boyacá, a crumbly wedge of aged Guernsey cow's-milk cheese from Lucky Layla Farms, has a piquant finish that lasts for minutes.

Lambert has brought her smooth, pungent Blanca Bianco, a proudly stinky aged cheese made with raw cow's milk, its rind hand-rubbed daily in white wine.

Chrissy Omo, an 18-year old Blanco cheesemaker who's a freshman in college, causes a buzz with her CKC Farms Baby Caprino, a soft-ripened goat cheese with a white rind like velvet, its creaminess underlain by a fascinating tang of watercress.

The pinnacle of the evening is the cylinder of Ste. Maure goat's cheese from Pure Luck in Dripping Springs, made by Amelia Sweethardt. It's a gorgeous, sophisticated cheese that could pass muster on the snobbiest French table, its slightly chalky exterior giving way to a near-liquid core. Sweethardt makes 48 of these prizes per week, period.

Tonight Schechter and Scott are making connections with several new producers and talking up their idea of a Texas cheesemakers guild. A visit to Omo goes onto the schedule. La Cuesta's fresh chèvre will join the Dairymaids' stable, as will goat cheese from Deborah's Farmstead.

Into the future

Schechter and Scott aren't sure exactly what comes next. Perhaps a cheese truck to make pickups at far-flung farmsteads. Maybe a retail shop?

For now, they'll keep working the farmers markets, catering cheese events and supplying some of Houston's top chefs and wine bars. Randy Evans at Brennan's, Chris Shepherd at Catalan, Jonathan Jones at Max's Wine Dive and Monsterville Horton at Cova are just a few of their prominent clients.

"What we really want to do is raise the bar, to give Texas cheesemaking a reputation and a credibility," says Scott.

"And," adds Schechter, "we'd like to help people grow their own businesses while we grow ours."

The Houston Dairymaids are off to a flying start on both counts.

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WARM HOJA SANTA-WRAPPED GOAT-CHEESE APPETIZER

From the Mozzarella Co., www.mozzco.com

- 12 sun-dried tomatoes, dried rather than oil-packed
- 1 Hoja Santa Goat Cheese Bundle, about 5 ounces
- 1 baguette
- 1 garlic clove
- 4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- Place the tomatoes in a small bowl, cover with hot water, and allow to plump for 30 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.

Place the goat cheese on a small, nonstick baking pan. Transfer to the oven, and bake for 7 to 10 minutes, until the goat cheese begins to bulge inside the leaf at the bottom. Place the baguette in the oven to warm while the goat cheese is heating.

In the meantime, drain the soaking liquid from the tomatoes using a strainer and discard it. Place the tomatoes, garlic and olive oil in the bowl of a food processor. Process until the tomatoes are finely chopped. You may need to stop the food processor and scrape the walls with a rubber spatula so that the tomato is chopped uniformly.

Pour the tomatoes onto a small serving plate, and spread the mixture out to cover the plate. Remove the goat cheese from the pan using a flat, metal spatula, and place it in the center of the plate atop the tomatoes.

Remove the baguette from the oven and slice thinly. Place the bread in a separate bowl or basket. Just before serving, cut open the goat cheese by slicing through the leaf in a wedge and folding it back to reveal the molten goat cheese inside. Serve immediately with the sliced baguette.

Makes 4 servings.

DAIRYMADE PIMENTO CHEESE

From Houston Dairymaids

- ½ pound Veldhuizen Provolone, coarsely grated, at room temperature
- ½ pound Veldhuizen Paragon, coarsely grated, at room temperature
- ¼ pound Veldhuizen Texas Gold Cheddar, coarsely grated, at room temperature
- 1 (7-ounce) jar pimentos, drained and chopped fine; reserve liquid
- 2/3 cup mayonnaise

- 1 tiny garlic clove, minced to a paste
- Freshly ground black pepper and cayenne pepper to taste

Mix all ingredients. If the spread seems too dry, add some reserved pimento juice to achieve the desired consistency.

DAIRYMADE TEXAS CHÈVRE CHEESECAKE

From Houston Dairymaids

For the crust:

- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup graham cracker crumbs
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup ground toasted pecans
- 3 tablespoons melted Lucky Layla Golden Brick Butter

For the cake:

- 1 pound Château de Fromage Chèvre, at room temperature
- $\frac{1}{2}$ pound cream cheese, at room temperature
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 3 large eggs

For the topping:

- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups Lucky Layla crème fraîche, drained of excess liquid
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Combine the crumbs, pecans and butter; press into the bottom of a 9-inch springform pan.

With an electric mixer, beat the chèvre and cream cheese for 30 seconds, until smooth. Add the sugar, and beat an additional 30 seconds. Beat in the vanilla.

Add the eggs 1 at a time, beating to incorporate after each addition.

Bake 50 to 60 minutes, until set. Remove from oven and let rest for 15 minutes.

Mix crème fraîche, sugar and vanilla. Spread over the cake, and bake an additional 5 minutes. Cool on a rack. Cover and refrigerate 2 to 3 hours, or up to 2 days.

Serve with Lucky Layla cajeta, a Mexican caramel syrup made with goat's milk.