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Miracle of Milk

Artisanal cheese-making is in full bloom in the North Bay

By Clark Wolf



Splitting his time between Guerneville and Manhattan, acclaimed consultant Clark Wolf graces these pages with the occasional diatribe from the periodic local.

The late, great international journalist-turned-benchmark-food-writer R. W. "Johnny" Apple once referred to our lovely region as "a new Normandy north of the Golden Gate." Well, we have the oysters and meadows, the dramatic coast and sparkly wines, but what he really meant was that we are major when it comes to cheese. And what better time than in the chilly grip of North Bay winter to get a little well-aged sunshine from sometime last spring—or even clovers and flowers transformed into milk and aged for a year or two, or three?

We have some seriously good cheese-making going on around here.

But unlike Vermont, where their Yankee self-reliance makes it seem like new indie cheeses are rolling to market daily, or Wisconsin, where organic, farmstead specialties fight to bring the state back to creative and qualitative relevance long after we've been Cheez-Whizzed into near oblivion, California cheese-making can seem uncharacteristically conservative.

We're not. It's just that we're lucky to have a long tradition of unique and wonderful cheeses to which we're fairly committed. Some of our favorites are national benchmarks, with their young cousins leading the way in some emerging categories and garnering major prizes from esteemed bodies all over the world.

I've blathered on about Laura Chenel's goat cheese for years, but what's not commonly known is that the very same tract house in Santa Rosa where she started was also where one of our country's other highly gifted cheese-makers, Soyoung Scanlan, made her own artisanal leap. Laura moved out to the old Stornetta's Dairy on Highway 29 (where she still tends goats), and Soyoung has now taken her talents all the way to a hillside outside of Petaluma, overlooking Nan McEvoy's languorous olive ranch that produces tony oil for better kitchens everywhere.

Soyoung's heartbreakingly delicious cheeses, from what she calls Andante Dairy, are not readily available even at restaurants (unless you hang out at the French Laundry), but are usually to be found on the menu at the very sweet, quietly accomplished and deeply unique Seaweed Cafe in Bodega Bay, ZaZu in Santa Rosa and at Cyrus in Healdsburg. She names each of them after something musical: Piccolo, Acappella, Impromptu, Metronome and Minuet, to hum a few.

Not far away, the Marin French Cheese Company has been cranking out its own versions of happily stinky, creamy and bloomy-rind cheeses since 1865. It is the oldest, continuously running operation of its kind in the country, and has lately been winning awards left, right and center. I particularly like the hair-tingling (read: slightly smelly) schloss, the triple crème blue and the soft ripened goat. All are consistently good and sometimes transporting.

And then there's Ignazio (Ig) Vella, who simply seems incapable of making anything less than world-class wonderful cheese. I have personally seen his Dry Jack for sale at London's fancy Harvey Nichols Food Halls, and I tell you, those Brits were duly, if discreetly, impressed. The last time he made a new cheese it was mezzo secco, a cheese he'd actually made 40 years before. It's nice to have an archive of excellence.

There are plenty of other good folks making nice cheese down around the 'hood: Redwood Hill in Sebastopol (love their Camellia); the Matos family in Santa Rosa (delicious St. George); those Cow Girls in West Marin (award-winning Red Hawk, Mt. Tam and some lovely fresh cheeses); and Bellwether in Petaluma. All of which goes to further prove that sometimes celebrating the known and loved is in fact the smartest way a blessed-with-goodness spot like ours can go.

The second annual California Artisanal Cheese Festival, to be held at Petaluma's Sheraton Sonoma March 7-10 gives folks a chance to broaden, deepen and swallow that celebration as hand-made cheeses for California and throughout the Pacific Northwest are tasted, sampled, talked about and turned into meals with the help of "celebrity" (and also talented, able and pleasant) chefs and a host of experts and cognoscenti. For more information, check out www.artisancheesefestival.com.

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For some fireside reading, or to bone up before racing off to ingest dairy protein, here are a few recently published books that are worth a look:

I love the tone of everything Paula Lambert writes. She has that lovely but serious Texas lilt and an infectious enthusiasm for her main passion, cheese-making and making foods with cheese. The latest addition to her collection is 'Cheese, Glorious Cheese: More than 75 Tempting Recipes for Cheese Lovers Everywhere' (Simon & Schuster; \$26.95).

Our own local pro is the very smart San Francisco Chronicle food contributor Janet Fletcher. While I am not a big fan of the whole wine-and-food-pairing thing (especially with cheese, where it's usually a case of what's left in which bottle or glass), her work is solid and her advice is easy to digest. 'Cheese & Wine: A Guide to Selecting, Pairing and Enjoying' (Chronicle Books; \$24.95).

Finally, Jeffrey Roberts does us all a favor by providing a sort of casin yellow pages in his appealing 'Atlas of American Artisan Cheese' (Chelsea Green; \$35). It may need regular updating, but at least we know we can keep our local best on speed-dial for years to come.

Clark Wolf is the president of the Clark Wolf Company, specializing in food, restaurant and hospitality consulting.

Hole Thing

(No way does) The cheese stand alone

Andante Dairy Cheeses are available at the Cheese Shop in Healdsburg (423 Center St.; 707.433.4998), Oliver's Market (now three locations, the newest at Stony Point Road and Highway 12, Santa Rosa), sometimes at the Petaluma Whole Foods (621 E. Washington St.; 707.762.9352) and always at the Mill Valley Whole Foods (414 Miller Ave.; 415.381.1200), as well as at St. Helena's Dean & Deluca (607 St. Helena Hwy. S.; 707.967.9980).

Bellwether Farms Clark writes, "Their Carmody is really a fairly perfect town cheese like the ones made all over Italy. I particularly favor the raw milk, aged Carmody Reserve, and I love their fresh and creamy Crescenza, the sheep milk Pepato and San Andreas. OK, I like everything they do." www.bellwethercheese.com.

Cowgirl Creamery This innovative cheesemonger in Pt. Reyes Station helped set the bar for the area, and it's fun to visit Cowgirl's outpost in the Tomales Bay Foods center, 80 Fourth St., Pt. Reyes Station. 415.663.9335.

Joe Matos Cheese Factory Located with a small sign on Llano Road just past Todd Road in rural Southwest Santa Rosa, Matos is so unassuming that one naturally assumes it's a hidden jewel —until the Porsches and BMWs and other city drivers come rumbly down the rutted road, eager for Matos' inimitable St. George cheese. Cash or check only; not for those who don't like to know where their cheese comes from. 707.584.5283.

The Marin French Cheese Co. The best way to taste their cheeses is to visit the factory on the Pt. Reyes/Petaluma road. Tours are currently closed to the public but will reopen in good weather; the store and picnic grounds remain open. 7500 Red Hill Road, Petaluma; 800.292.6001, ext. 12. Otherwise, they are widely available at fine markets.

Redwood Hill Farm and Creamery This sustainable goat farm is certified kosher and wins awards for the humane treatment of its animals. Farm tours are available by appointment only (707.823.8250); the cheese is widely distributed or available online at www.redwoodhill.com.

Vella Cheese This standby specializes in Jack cheeses, and Vella's "historic" store is open six days a week in downtown Sonoma, 315 Second St. E. 707.938.3232. Vella cheeses are otherwise widely available.

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