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SAY CHEESE

Demand is on the rise for artisan cheeses

Consumer demand is fueling the boom in the American artisan cheese production

By BILL DALEY

Chicago Tribune

Published Wednesday, January 6, 2010

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CHEESY READS

Books about cheese are as hot as cheese itself these days. The focus ranges from basic how-tos to quasi-memoirs to artisan cheese guides to cheese cookbooks to advanced tutorials in cheesemaking and appreciation. Here are some recent titles:

"Fiona Beckett's Cheese Course: Styles, Wine Pairings, Plates & Boards, Recipes," by Fiona Beckett (\$24.95)

"World Cheese Book," Juliet Harbutt, editor-in-chief (\$25)

"In a Cheesemaker's Kitchen," by Allison Hooper (\$19.95)

"Mastering Cheese: Lessons for Connoisseurship From a Maitre Fromager," by Max McCalman and David Gibbons (\$40)

"The Cheese Chronicles: A Journey Through the Making and Selling of Cheese in America, From Field to Farm to Table," by Liz Thorpe (\$15.99)

Ring in a new year and (unofficially) a new decade with an ancient foodstuff. Celebrate with cheese

More and more people are getting turned on to cheese. Cheesemakers are popping up around country. New cheese books are being published seemingly every week. The first consumer cheese magazine, a quarterly called Culture, debuted a year ago. And shoppers can increasingly find and buy all sorts of cheese at area farmers markets and in ambitious cheese stores and even the deli and deli cases of their local supermarkets.

Clark Wolf, the author of "American Cheese," says people turn to ages-old basics when life gets complicated. That's why cheese, particularly American-made cheese, is surging in popularity during these hard economic times.

"American Cheeses: The Best Regional, Artisan and Farmhouse Cheese, Who Makes Them, and Where to Find Them," by Clark Wolf (\$25)

"We re-entered the macaroni-and-cheese economy in a good way," he said. "There's no kitschy about this stuff. It's heartfelt and real.

They're using ancient wisdom and new ways, and that's just good."

Consumer demand is fueling the boom in the American artisan cheese production, said Jeanne Carpenter, founder of Wisconsin Cheese Originals in Madison, Wis., which spreads the word about new cheeses and their makers.

Only 20 of the state's dairies produced a specialty cheese in 2004, she said. Now 88 of 127 cheese plants are making at least one type of specialty cheese.

"Many cheesemakers are developing innovative American originals, which are rivaling the great European cheeses in flavor, quality and popularity," Carpenter said.

Yet this burgeoning supply can be daunting to the average consumer. Here are some ways to grapple with the choices.

"View it as an adventure," Carpenter said. "Visit a cut-to-order cheese shop so you can taste any cheese before you buy it. If you're not sure where to begin, tell the cheesemonger some of your favorite foods. This will give him or her a direction for your palate, and you can start with flavor profiles you know you'll like."

Be willing to go outside your comfort zone, she added. "You may discover a new favorite."

While artisan, locally made cheeses are the rage, Elaine Khosrova, the editor of Culture magazine, said do not give a cold shoulder to cheese made by big companies. "Just because they're big doesn't mean they aren't high quality," she said.

Conversely, just because a cheesemaker is small doesn't guarantee the cheese will be delicious. "You have to taste your way around," Khosrova said.

When you do bring the cheese home, take steps to make it accessible to guests.

Allison Hooper, co-founder of the Vermont Butter & Cheese Creamery in Websterville, Vt., said some cheese boards can look scary all festooned with big hunks of cheese that people are reluctant to cut into.

"Get a cheese started," said Hooper. "I think it's OK to cut up some of the cheese so it's a little more inviting. And don't put out too much.

"Even for a party of 15 people, two signature cheeses are plenty," Khosrova said. "Go for something special. These days, that's easier to do than ever.

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Man do I love cheese.

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