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FEED ME; Betting on Mac and Cheese

By ALEX WITCHEL

LIKE me, Clark Wolf grew up hating macaroni and cheese. Unlike me -- I hated it for its gagging smell and slimy texture -- he had a specific aversion to the version his mother made.

"Her idea of mac and cheese was to melt grocery store Cheddar on top of noodle kugel," he said. "The kind with cottage cheese inside."

In the annals of gross, that rates. So when he told me about his new book, "American Cheeses: The Best Regional, Artisan and Farmhouse Cheeses; Who Makes Them and Where to Find Them" (Simon & Schuster, December), I was surprised when he enthused, "It has four recipes for macaroni and cheese!"

And that made him happy?

"Once I left for college, I came to like the boxed," he said. "At least it had more salt than my mother's."

It probably makes sense that Mr. Wolf grew up to avenge a childhood of dismal eating by becoming a food and restaurant consultant. One of his many gigs before opening the Clark Wolf Company in 1986 was creating the cheese department at the iconic Oakville Grocery in the Napa Valley; in the mid-1990s he helped establish the lounge dining trend at the Grand Hotels in SoHo and TriBeCa, then brought that concept to the Loews hotel chain; and he has shepherded celebrity chefs like Bradley Ogden and Rick Moonen through the perils of opening in Vegas.

I first met Mr. Wolf in 1989 when I joined *Mirabella* magazine as an editor. I was told that part of my job would be to eat lunch with him once a month "to get ideas." Once I learned how to listen to him -- he might have been born and raised in the San Fernando Valley, but the speed of his speech is echt New York -- I got ideas aplenty.

And he, attuned as he is to the idiosyncratic and often childish reasons people have for what they'll eat and what they won't, accepted my loves and hates with solemn equanimity.

So after I read his book -- a savvy valentine to the men and women who devote their lives to the labor-intensive passion of cheesemaking -- I bet him I wouldn't like any of its mac and cheese recipes. He didn't blink. Instead, he called up John DeLucie, who is the executive chef and a partner at the Waverly Inn, and was the corporate chef at

the SoHo and TriBeCa Grand Hotels when Mr. Wolf was their food and beverage consultant.

Mr. DeLucie makes the most hyped mac and cheese in town: the one that costs \$110 for the white truffles shaved on top. That stunt aside, Mr. Wolf said, Mr. DeLucie understands the value of serving simple food in a complicated environment. "The people at a restaurant like the Waverly Inn get a lot of stimulation," he said, "so the food needs to have a straightforward delivery and be emotionally accessible."

Mr. Wolf scheduled us to have lunch in two stages, first with Mr. DeLucie, who presented the Waverly mac and cheese, sans truffles, along with his adaptation of a recipe in Mr. Wolf's book, macaroni and three peppercorn goat cheese, from Zingerman's Roadhouse in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Then we went to the SoHo Grand to taste the mac and cheese Mr. Wolf put on the menu in 1996, which is still being served. As we waited for it, Mr. Wolf cut open hunk after hunk of cheese he had brought from Murray's until the man at the next table was agog.

"Cheese is the best perishable because for a while it gets better," he said, sampling a piece of Jasper Hill Farm's Constant Bliss. He frowned. "That's more like constant foreplay," he said. "Too young."

Our mutual favorite was Pleasant Ridge Reserve, a Wisconsin raw cow's milk cheese. Once the mac and cheese arrived, though, our taste buds parted ways. Mr. Wolf loved its "balanced flavor, depth, great finish and an underlying sweetness that is not overpowering." That sweetness was precisely why I didn't love it.

But my head had already been turned. At the Waverly, we had tried Mr. DeLucie's own mac and cheese, which was fine, but his adaptation of Zingerman's was superb. He used Humboldt Fog, a high-end goat from Northern California, but instead of using black, white and green peppercorns, he used only black, and added green Tabasco. It was savory without being acrid, and creamy without being heavy -- he also halved the flour.