

Americans' love affair with artisan cheese growing stronger

By Bill Daley | Chicago Tribune

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Photo by: Bill Hogan/Chicago Tribune

said. "There's nothing 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 the Madison, Wis.-based Wisconsin Cheese Originals, which spreads the word about new cheeses and their makers.

Amid tough economic times, more people are turning to the ultimate comfort food: cheese.

And not just any cheese — original, American-made varieties.

Cheesemakers are popping up around the country. New cheese books are being published seemingly every week. The first consumer cheese magazine, a quarterly called *Culture*, debuted a year ago. And you can increasingly find and buy all sorts of cheese at farmers markets, in ambitious cheese stores, and even the dairy and deli cases of your local supermarket.

Clark Wolf, the New York City-based author of *American Cheese*, said 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.

"We re-entered the macaroni-and-cheese economy in a good way," he

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 of cheese varieties can prove 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 if your cheesemonger recommends something different, she added. "You may discover a new favorite."

While artisan, locally made cheeses are the rage, Elaine Khosrova, the editor of Culture magazine, said don't 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 a small operation doesn't guarantee the cheese will be delicious. "You have to taste your way around," Khosrova said.

WANT TO LEARN ABOUT CHEESE?

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 (Ryland Peters & Small, \$24.95)

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

In a Cheesemaker's Kitchen, by Allison Hooper (The Countryman Press, \$19.95)

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

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

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