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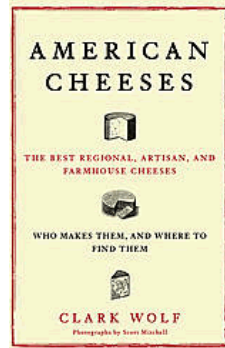
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Book Review: "American Cheeses" by Clark Wolf

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"*American Cheeses*" by Clark Wolf, restaurant food consultant and cheese expert, is a light, well-written documentation of the American cheese industry. Wolf directs his focus on a subject that is too often lost to the grandiose, Eurocentric tomes in which the US plays a bit part. The success of this book lies in its format, where a brief introduction to cheese is followed by short, anecdotal biographies of major and upcoming cheese makers throughout the US, broken down by area—Northeast and New England, The South, The Middle West and the Wild West. Recipes are included at the close of each section, and some are chosen for their inspirational artistry, rather than for their accessibility to the standard home chef. By his own admission, Wolf has wanted to write this book for decades, and "*American Cheeses*" is the product of his professional experience as well as the personal relationships forged throughout his cheese-centric travels.

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The book is not only an introduction to American cheeses, but to the author himself, as the reader is constantly getting to know Wolf with each turn of the page. Wolf is undoubtedly a major player in the culinary industry, though his authorial approach served to reacquaint, or to introduce, himself to the audience as if he were meeting each for the first time in a coffee shop. There is no pretension to Wolf's style, and he does not allow his credentials—relationships with major names like Alice Waters and James Beard, two-time official judge for the American Cheese Society, owner of the successful restaurant consulting firm Clark Wolf Company, among many, many other successes—detract from the book's focus. It's all about cheese with Wolf, and his compilation of notable cheese makers, contact information included, makes for a fun tour of the American countryside.

Wolf has great respect for the individual palate, and his discussion is meant to inspire, rather than to direct, the personal taste of his audience. His suggestion that semi-soft cheeses are capable of imbibing flavor from their surroundings will spur any kitchen scientist to action, and he does not scruple to suggest that some lower-priced "supermarket" cheeses can be acceptable to the budget shopper looking for inspiration. "if it's of good and consistent quality." He adds, "Some things are just good." Wolf seeks the goodness in cheese, and, with a little bit of travel, appears to find it everywhere in America. Bob Stetson of Westfield farms, creator of the famous Hubbardston Blue, is showcased alongside Douglass Newbold of Greystone Nubians, a locally proliferated goat cheese made by Amish women in Vermont and stored in strawberry boxes. Zingerman's of Ann Arbor, Michigan, also makes a solid appearance, though a reader is often caught off-guard with the insertion of recognizable names among those lesser-known. This egalitarian format ensures once again that cheese remains at center stage. Shameless name-dropping and its equally abhorrent sibling, product placement, are thankfully nowhere to be found in Wolf's lovely ode to cheese.

"*American Cheeses*" is a refreshing documentary of Wolf's experiences with his book's namesake. Pictures inspired by the pastoral landscape are interspersed throughout recipes calling for fresh cream, eggs, butter and, of course, cheese. Though the black-and-white photography was well-suited to illustrate rural simplicity, with portraits of both galoshes and a farmhouse terrier included, it only detracted from still-life shots of the cheese itself. One may have wished a more aesthetically pleasing presentation of the book's focal point, but this inhibits full enjoyment of the book only on a minor scale. With the help of Wolf's simple side notes and pleasing, anecdotal style, a reader is easily transported to rural America and becomes a willing participant to Wolf's travels. This book is at once a pleasing cookbook, a basic guide to the local cheese monger's shop, and an address book for the best cheese makers in America. The new kitchen factotum, "*American Cheeses*" is strongly encouraged for active use. It is best served when earmarked, stained with egg yolk and flour and heavily added to in black or blue ink.

-Natalie Fasano

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