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GASTRONOMY

American Cheeses

By ARAM BAKSHIAN JR.

American Cheeses

By Clark Wolf

Simon & Schuster, 274 pages, \$25

Good cheese seems to go hand in hand with bad government. "How can you govern a country," a frustrated Charles de Gaulle famously asked, "which has 246 varieties of cheese?" Until recently, America was the reverse image of France, a stable, vibrant civil society with an abysmal selection of domestic cheese. Much of the stuff wasn't really cheese at all but amorphous, processed glop. In the words of author Clark Wolf, it was "blasted from a can or hacked from a gelatinous block or formed into iconic squares and wrapped in sheets of plastic and called American cheese." Not anymore. While American social institutions have declined, the quality of American cheese has never been better. In "American Cheeses," Mr. Wolf offers a crash course on the producing, storing and serving of fine cheese and then leads us on a fascinating tour of the U.S. covering dozens of cheesemakers, dividing them broadly into three categories: "specialty" (quality varieties made by large producers); "artisan" (limited batches of distinctive cheeses made at smaller plants using traditional methods); and "farmstead" (milk and cheese produced from scratch on-site). It's a fun trip and one that serious cheese lovers may want to imitate, one region at a time. Each cheesemaker entry includes a list of varieties produced, mail and email addresses, and a sometimes whimsical description of the premises: e.g., at Douglass Newbold's Pennsylvania farmstead "one feisty little terrier stood general guard while another rode, alert on all fours, on the back of a sleepy donkey." Dozens of imaginative recipes are included; I particularly recommend Chef Hans Burtcher's Blue Cheese Pralines, "a combination of sweet and savory that makes all of the ingredients taste better than they would on their own." Mr. Wolf's approach throughout is as laid back as it is knowledgeable. His advice on cheese trays pithily sums up his overall cheese philosophy: "Don't try to be too clever. This isn't a challenge for you or your guests. It's supposed to be a pleasure."

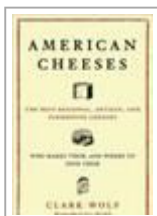
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American Cheeses: The Best Regional, Artisan, and Farmhouse Cheeses, Who Makes Them, and Where to Find Them

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