

FOOD

New cheeses sweep U.S.

Food media helps to boost specialty market

BY PERVAIZ SHALLWANI
For The Associated Press

It's a strange turn for a nation that for years judged its cheeses by how well they melt in the microwave.

But suddenly the nation is being inundated by high-end cheeses that challenge the palate in ways industrial cheese couldn't dream, cheeses that for once have Europeans looking west with envy.

Welcome to the world of America's cutting edge curds, where obscure cheeses can attain cult status and massive grocery chains tout cheeses that once wouldn't have made it in the door.

Mainstream retailers are jumping into the specialty cheese market like never before, says cheese expert Laura Werlin, author of "Laura Werlin's Cheese Essentials."

"Everybody is going to have more exposure and the ability to buy these cheeses," she says.

Why the sudden cheese surge? In some ways, it's a case of money talking.

Artisanal cheese is one of the fastest growing segments of the \$59 billion gourmet food industry, with cheese and dairy expected to see double digit growth through 2012, according to consumer research firm Packaged Facts. Much of that growth will come from speciality and artisanal cheeses.

That demand has translated into retailers clamoring for the product. But it also goes deeper.

The collective American palate has become increasingly adventurous and sophisticated, thanks in part to a pervasive food media that has helped turn the U.S. into a nation of would-be foodies.

Here are some of the more significant recent trends and changes

to the cheese world:

Mainstreaming

No longer are fine cheeses the provenance of specialty shops, or even the Trader Joe's, Wegman's and Whole Foods of the world. Demand has sent the typical grocer scurrying to get in on the artisanal cheese scene.

The Kroger Co. grocery chain, for example, recently spent three years wooing one of New York's pre-eminent cheese shops, Murray's Cheese, to lend its name and expertise to the chain's cheese offerings.

The effort may pay off.

Later this year, mini Murray's Cheese shops will open at an undisclosed number of Kroger stores. Murray's owner Rob Kaufelt says it's a worthwhile experiment in brand extension.

Meanwhile, Murray's chief competitor, New York's Artisanal Premium Cheese Inc., sold its operation to American Home Food Products, a former building supply company that is switching to food manufacturing.

The move should give Artisanal the money and exposure to become a stronger national brand.

Even without the backing of cheese world eminents, grocers nationwide have begun offering robust cheese selections that put their offerings of even five years ago to shame.

France comes wooing

All the attention on American cheeses has the French toiling to hold on to their share of the U.S. market.

In July, the French government formed the Cheeses of France Marketing Council and launched a campaign to remind American consumers to "remember that the original is France," says Phillippe Jachnik, the group's chairman.

"We have witnessed an incredi-

ble increase of French cheese in the United States," says Jachnik. "The biggest beneficiaries of that has been the cheese producers in the United States."

As more Americans have acquired a taste for good cheese — no doubt fueled by the 22,000 tons of French farmstead cheeses imported last year alone — more U.S. cheesemakers have angled to produce it.

"It's putting European producers on their toes," says Werlin.

And the realities of the market work against European cheeses, says Jachnik. The French are challenged to produce cheese in sufficient quantities for the U.S., never mind the logistics of exporting a highly perishable food.

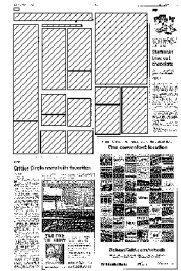
Aging gracefully

The switch from American processed cheese food to small-batch artisanal goat cheese was fast. And now the American appetite — ever hungry for something new — is changing again.

Hand-crafted and small-batch simply isn't enough anymore. To have curd cachet now requires a cave.

A tremendous focus now is being given to the aging of cheeses, and high-tech caves where that can happen are starting to show up around the country.

Jasper Hill Farm in Greensboro, Vt., for example, recently opened an ultramodern 22,000-square-foot aging cellar that is the buzz of the cheese world.



UP-AND-COMING CHEESES

Ready to move beyond the obvious at the cheese counter? Here are some up-and-coming cheeses that are all the chatter on the cheese scene. You may not find them everywhere, but they are worth the hunt:

California Crottin from Redwood Hill Farm (Sebastopol)

This goat farm has been making award-winning cheeses since the 1960s. The real gem is their California Crottin, a creamy cheese that has twice won the American Cheese Society's Best in Show award. These mini wheels form a blonde wrinkly texture with age while developing an earthy robustness on par with their French counterparts.

www.redwoodhill.com

Oregonzola from Rogue Creamery (Central Point, Ore.)

This Gorgonzola-style cheese is aged 120 days in the caves of this southern Oregon farm, giving the creamy textured cow's milk curd deep blue veins and flavors that span sharp, tangy and fruity.

www.roguecreamery.com/pilot.asp

San Andreas from Bellwether Farms (Sonoma County)

This aged sheep's milk cheese has none of the mustiness sometimes associated with this style cheese. Made from raw milk, San Andreas is a smooth, lightly sharp table cheese that pairs nicely with red wine. The cheese placed second in farmstead sheep category at the 2005 American Cheese Society national competition.

www.bellwethercheese.com/home/

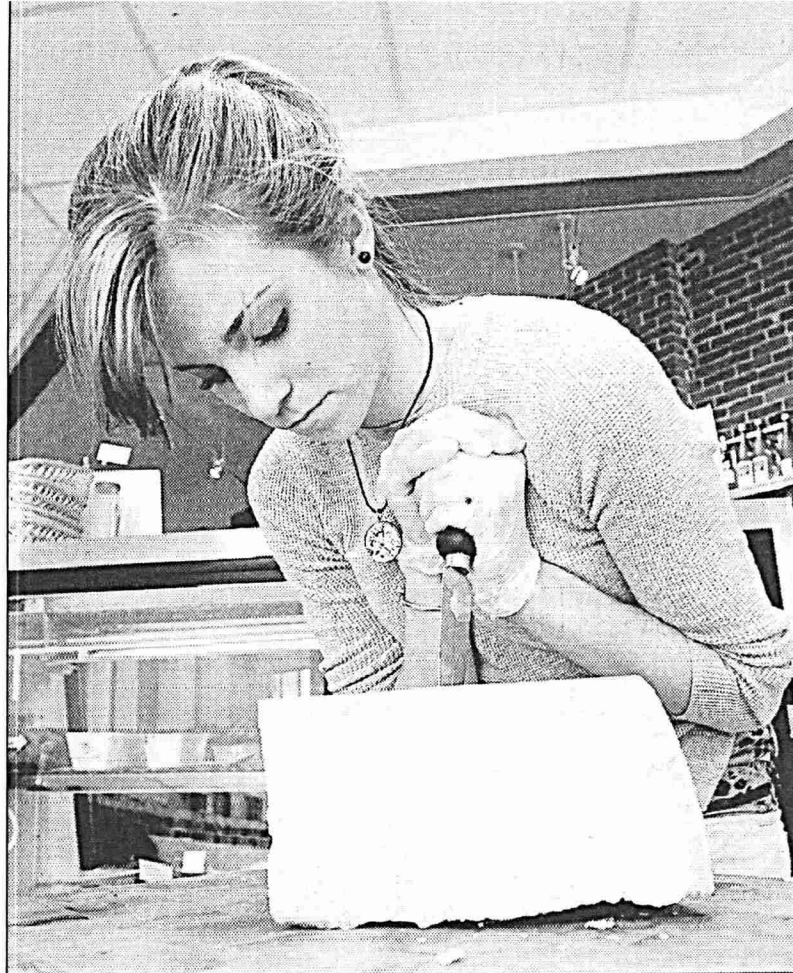
Truffle Tremor from Cypress Grove Chevre (Arcata)

The newest goat cheese from this award-winning dairy sports flecks of earthy black truffle studded throughout the velvety cheese.

www.cypressgrovechevre.com

Tumalo Farms Classico from Tumalo Farms (Bend, Ore.)

This semi-hard goat's milk



LARRY CROWE / AP

Katie Foy cuts into a wheel of parmesan at Butter's Fine Food and Wine in Concord, N.H. Artisanal cheeses are one of the fastest growing segments in the gourmet food industry.

cheese is produced from goats fed grain, grass and alfalfa while only drinking well water. It is aged between two and three months in a cave built into the side of hill, which imparts this Gouda-like cheese with a sharp, earthy quality.

www.tumalofarms.com/index.asp

— *The Associated Press*

RECIPE

GNOCCHI ALLA OREGONZOLA

Start to finish 20 minutes

Servings: 4

1 pound gnocchi pasta

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1/4 cup dry white wine

2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh Italian parsley

Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

6 ounces finely crumbled Gorgonzola-style blue cheese (such as Rogue Creamery's Oregonzola)

Bring a large saucepan of lightly salted water to a boil. Add the gnocchi and cook according to package directions (generally, just until they float). Drain and return the gnocchi to the saucepan.

Add the olive oil and wine and toss to coat. Add the parsley and black pepper and toss again. Add half of the cheese and toss until the cheese has mostly melted.

Divide the pasta between serving bowls, topping each with a bit of the remaining cheese.

Recipe adapted from Rogue Creamery