

TASTE FOR CHEESE

SERVES HER WELL

Expert's passion leads local diners to world of flavor

By W.J. HENNIGAN

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Had someone told Carolyn Stromberg six years ago she was destined to become a cheese expert, she might have outwardly scoffed at the notion — while harboring a secret passion for Camembert.

Now, however, the 28-year-old from Buffalo, N.Y., is a full-time maitre d'fromage at the Old Hickory Steakhouse Restaurant in the Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center. She is in charge of purchasing, storing and aging the restaurant's \$10,000 stockpile of specialty cheeses.

"There is a lot of care that goes into working with cheese," she says. "It isn't something to be overlooked."

Ms. Stromberg loves the look on people's faces when they find a cheese they like, and she goes out of her way to find new cheeses to impress patrons.

"They are some of the most flavorful cheeses you'll ever taste," Ms. Stromberg says. "Every time I get a new one, it's like it's my birthday."

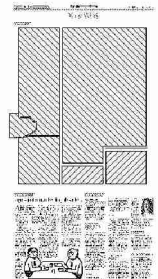
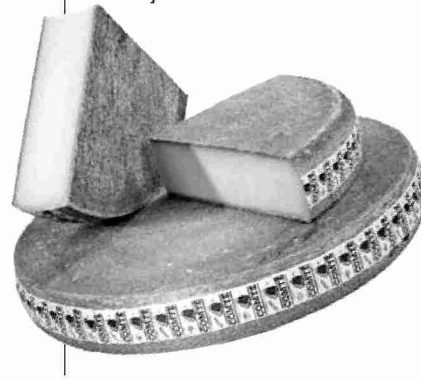
She gets them from all over the world — France, Spain and Holland. (She even has one from a local farm in Virginia.)

Each night, Ms. Stromberg prepares a glass cart containing 15 cheeses from around the globe. If restaurant patrons are interested in sampling, she wheels her cart over and gives them a table-side presentation.

Packed tightly, yet artfully presented, the curds are all manner of shades, shapes and tints. When Ms. Stromberg describes each cheese, she uses an arsenal of adjectives — picked up as a creative-writing major at George Washington University. She uses such terms as "velvety" and "earthy" to fill in customers looking curiously at her rare wares.

After informing the table of the taste and texture of each cheese — as well as feeling out the customers' likes and dislikes — she pushes the cart away

from the table and carves three or six (\$18 and \$30, respectively) stamp-sized slices off the selected cheese wheels. She then adds three accruements to help cleanse the palate — fig-almond cake, quince paste and marcona almonds — so the customer can take in each cheese's distinct flavor separately.



Each cheese has a story, Ms. Stromberg says. Take the French cheese Valencay, for example. The granite-gray-colored goat cheese is said to have been the favorite of Napoleon. It's shaped like a pyramid with the top cut off. According to Ms. Stromberg, it once was shaped exactly like a pyramid. However, when Napoleon returned to France after a disastrous campaign in Egypt, he grabbed his sword and chopped the top off and said he never wanted to see another pyramid again. The remaining shape survived.

Restaurant patrons are drawn to stories like this, she says. "I was very impressed," says Ron Corrado, a construction manager from Alexandria who stopped by the restaurant for an early dinner. "You can tell she's got a strong passion for cheese."

Ms. Stromberg has worked in the specialty cheese business for five years. She was introduced to specialty cheese as a waitress and bartender working at Palena restaurant in the District. As time went on, she began doing research on her own and finding out how different cheeses were prepared and where to find them.

Sue Conley, a Palena customer and owner of the California-based cheese-making business Cowgirl Creamery, noticed Ms. Stromberg's zest for cheese. When she decided to open a Cowgirl Creamery in the District in 2007, she immediately tapped Ms. Stromberg for a position.

"She had such a love for cheese and had such a good understanding of it," Ms. Conley says. "She's just a delight to work with."

The Gaylord National and Old Hickory opened their doors in March. Ms. Stromberg jumped at the chance to be maitre d'fromage. She says there isn't another position like it in the Washington area.

If she isn't pacing the restaurant floor showing customers her cheeses, Ms. Stromberg is found around the restaurant's "cheese cave." Located along the back dining-room wall, the high-humidity refrigerator keeps temperatures hovering around 50 degrees. It holds the climate so cheeses can breathe and stay fresh, Ms. Stromberg says, indicating that if the temperature deviates too much, the cheese can go bad or dry out and lose its flavor.

In order to maintain that flavor, she burrows through every night, making sure each cheese is getting its proper care. It is important, she says, because she wants every customer to have a pleasant experience — especially if it's the customer's first time sampling specialty cheese.

Ms. Stromberg says she thinks more and more people are trying specialty or "artisan" cheese. As the numbers increase, she says, the industry will continue to grow.

"Cheese is where wine was 20 years ago," she says. "It seems that every year, it is gaining in popularity."

The numbers appear to back her up. The U.S. Department of Agriculture released a report in April 2008 that says total U.S. cheese production in 2007, excluding cottage cheese, was 9.7 billion pounds, up 1.8 percent from 2006. In addition, the report says that U.S. cheese consumption per person was 32.5 pounds in 2006, a 3.2 percent increase from 2005. By 2016, the report projects, consumption will jump to 36 pounds.

"There's so many different aspects of the cheese and food world that appeal to me," Ms. Stromberg says. "I love doing what I do."



MICHELLE GININGER/THE WASHINGTON TIMES



Carolyn Stromberg, a maitre d'fromage (expert in cheese) at the Old Hickory Steakhouse Restaurant in the Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center in National Harbor, Md., gives a presentation of the restaurant's cheese offerings (above). Ms. Stromberg is in charge of the restaurant's collection of specialty cheeses (left).