

Life

Cheese Tour offers bucolic glimpse into resurgent craft

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For The Saratogian

WASHINGTON COUNTY — The 2009 Cheese Tour taking place the weekend of Sept. 12 and 13 offers a look at the great artisanal and farmstead cheese makers in the region and a way to observe the resurgence of this nuanced craft taking place throughout the United States.

Just a decade ago, you wouldn't have had the opportunity to take a tour of some of our region's best artisan and farmstead cheese makers, nor would you have been tempted to taste cheeses named Longview Farm, Grace, Shushan Snow, Equinox or Sacre Bleu — representing unique cheeses made from the milk of cows, goats or sheep.

The people you'll find making cheese on their farms today have resurrected a craft common in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Before refrigeration, cheese making was a practical and tasty way to extend the shelf life of milk and recipes were handed down to each new generation.

This all changed in the mid 19th century with industrialization and the advent of cheese factories, where farmers could bring their milk to a central location for cheese production. By the early 20th century, almost no cheese could be found produced on farms in the United States.

Regional artisan and farmstead cheese makers today are breaking new ground.

They've set up their cheese making operations, have trained or have taken classes in this craft and create cheeses in small batches that represent their personal tastes.

A fifth-generation cheese maker, Marge Randles of the Randles' Fairview Farm in Argyle, uses cow's milk to make great cheese to minimize the affect of falling milk prices.

Liza Porter, of Longview Farm in Argyle, came to farming a littler later in life, but each artisan brings a commitment to sustainability and the goal of maintaining local vibrant, agrarian communities with a focus on people, land and animals.

Part of an increased awareness to be more mindful of what we eat and how food is grown or produced, the popularity of events like the Cheese Tour are testament to a heightened interest in all things 'local.'

Colleges and universities throughout the country offer not only courses in ag sciences, but sustainability, gastronomy and the culinary arts. As with the University of Vermont, some offer certificates in advanced level cheese making.

Karen Weinberg, one of the cheese tour participants, says there's definitely been an increase in the number of calls or e-mails

she receives each week from students and others interested in talking to her about cheese, cheese making, inquiring about internships or working at 3-Corner Field Farm, her sheep dairy in Shushan.

As with any increase in a subject's popularity, you'll find books, magazines, organizations, tours, courses, and even twittering dedicated to the subject at hand.

Kate Arding, co-founder of the quarterly magazine, "Culture," notes several components that brought about the magazine's debut in December 2008.

Arding, who has worked extensively in the U.S. and overseas with small-scale cheese makers for nearly two decades, has seen huge (positive) changes in the arena.

It was during a meal with co-founder and friend, Thalassa Skinner, when the two were asked by a veteran magazine publisher why there wasn't a magazine dedicated to the subject of cheese.

They all agreed that if they didn't do it quickly, someone else would.

The magazine's soft intro at the American Cheese Society annual conference in July of 2008, solidified their inaugural issue in December of last year, making it official — and challenging — a launch right at the start of an economic downturn.

Despite the odds, Arding remains optimistic about their niche publication (www.culturecheesemag.com).

"When you look at some of the most lively and healthy businesses, they're often launched during a recession," Arden said.

"Although we didn't anticipate the downturn, it's made for a very tight, focused publication where we've been able to maintain a growing, healthy and very viable magazine with quality writing and original photography," Arding said.

The American Cheese Society (cheesesociety.org) was started in 1983 as a national grassroots organization for cheese appreciation and for home and farm cheese making.

It was at the American Cheese Society's third annual conference in 1985 that the competition began.

Here, 30 cheese makers entered 89 cheeses in seven categories.

This year, the "Oscars of the Cheese World" took place in Austin, Texas, and recently witnessed a record-breaking 1,327 cheese entries with prizes awarded in dozens of categories.

Liz Thorpe, second in command at the well-known Murray's Cheese in Manhattan, has just seen the release of her new book, "The Cheese Chronicles" (Ecco, \$15.95, 2009), where she describes American's journey back to cheese making, as cheese makers in America are numbering well into the hundreds.

Thorpe credits the increased interest in cheese making and cheese to a combination of forces.

"One thing I discuss in my book is the growth of the farmers' market. Fifteen years ago, many American cheese makers had no market except far-off cities, and now they have three, five or 10 farmers' markets in their area, where they can sell at a more sustainable price and communicate directly with consumers."

She's observed from her position at Murray's that, during a recessionary time, people are driven to cook more at home and eat out less, and a slice of superior or premium cheese can offer a nice experience for those cooking for guests at home.

Regionally, the Washington County Cheesemakers announced its third annual Cheese Tour (go to www.washingtoncountycheese.com for details and tour map), this year representing five artisan and farmstead cheese makers — four in Washington County and one in Vermont, where Consider Bardwell Farm's land straddles the Vermont/New York border.

Cheese makers like Jeff Bowers at Sweet Spring Farm in Argyle produce only seasonally. Unless you catch someone like him, you may miss the opportunity to taste his great cheese.

The popularity of the largest cheese tour in the northeastern part of the country (several thousand people have taken this free, drive-yourself tour over the last two years) is testament to the growing interest in the topic of cheese making, the allure of the bucolic hillsides and the compelling stories of the people who produce their stellar cheese and dairy products in the Battenkill Valley region.

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