



SHEANA DAVIS and Ig Vella look over a cart of Vella's cheese.
Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune

Cheese please

Artisan Cheese Week kicks off on Sunday

By Emily Charrier INDEX-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

Break out the good gouda because it's official - the week of March 2 through 6, is Sonoma Valley Artisan Cheese Week, as proclaimed by 1st District Supervisor Valerie Brown.

"Sonoma County believes that agriculture is our most important asset and we strive to find ways to preserve and support those involved in that industry," Brown said. "Having guests to our county able to experience the incredible diversity of our products - wine, cheese, olives, etcetera - and hear those directly involved with production tell their story, makes us all the more special."

Sonoma Valley epicurean expert Sheana Davis is celebrating the season with the 6th annual conference "Cheesemaking: Opportunities and Challenges," which includes three days of lectures on all things cheese, March 4, 5 and 6, covering everything from agri-tourism to cheesemaking techniques.

More than 100 food writers, chefs, cheesemakers, brewers and retailers from as far away as London and New York will head to Sonoma for this annual event. Each day of the conference will be packed with lectures from epicurean experts in all fields. Sonoma cheese aficionado Ig Vella will share his wealth of knowledge from 50 years in the cheesemaking world.

"I have the most experience of anyone in the cheese business," Vella said. "There was a need for people to find out about non-pasteurized cheese and how to market it."

Marketing is definitely a focus of the conference, with lectures on distribution, retail pricing and cultivating loyal buyers.

The conference, which takes place at the Sonoma Valley Inn, attracted a sold-out crowd of 125 patrons, with 25 expert guest speakers scheduled to participate in lectures and panels all week. Each evening ends with a reception, where patrons can taste cheese paired with local beer and wine.

"We're truly giving them (attendees) the Sonoma experience," Davis said.

While the conference is sold out, residents can still get in on the cheese celebration when Davis partners with the Sonoma Community Center to offer "Conversations on Artisan Cheese," on Sunday, March 2, from 3 to 5 p.m., the first in the community center's Conversations on Food and Wine lecture series.

For \$20, attendees can hear stories of the business from Vella, food and wine consultant Clark Wolf, American cheese authority Laura Werlin, food columnist and author Janet Fletcher and third-generation California cheesemaker Franklin Peluso. Attendees sample food and cheese pairings during the event. Proceeds from the occasion will benefit the community center's Kitchen Remodeling Fund. To reserve a spot, call the center at 938-4626, ext. 1.

Rounding out the week, cheese lovers can head over to Petaluma for the Artisan Cheese Festival, which runs March 7 through 10, at the Sheraton Hotel.

Cheesemakers from around the Bay Area will be sharing their cheddar, jacks and every other type of cheese while participating in panel discussions and demonstrations. Sonoman and cheese heiress Chickie Vella will be there handing out samples of Vella cheese.

For more about the "Cheesemaking: Opportunities and Challenges" conference, visit www.sheanadavis.com.

To learn more about "Conversations on Artisan Cheese" visit www.sonomacommunitycenter.org.

For details on the Artisan Cheese Festival, visit www.artisancheesefestival.com.