

The American Cheese Society

NEWSLETTER 2ND QUARTER 2001

The Pursuit of Quality

By Matthew Rubiner
The Richmond Store
Richmond, Mass.

A year ago I wrote in these pages of the high cost

ACS Mission Statement

To uphold the highest standards of quality in the making of cheese and related fermented milk products.

To uphold the traditions and preserve the history of American cheesemaking.

To be an educational resource for American cheesemakers and the public through sharing knowledge and experience on cheesemaking as a hobby or as a commercial enterprise, with special attention given to specialty and farmhouse cheeses made from all types of milk, including cow's, goat's and sheep's milk.

To encourage consumption through better education on the sensory pleasures of cheese and its healthful and nutritional values.

and inconsistent quality of American artisan cheeses. I wrote as a retailer, struggling to sell American cheeses to a suspicious American clientele. I revisit these issues today from a broader perspective and with greater optimism.

I recently returned to retail after a year of consulting. To update and clarify my understanding of the market for American artisan cheeses, I conducted an informal survey of 30 retailers throughout the United States. (I used as my guide for this survey the ACS website and membership database, which has become an extremely and increasingly valuable tool of which Ricki Carroll and everyone involved in its rehabilitation should be very proud).

It is clear from my survey, and from my observations as a consultant over the past year,

that our industry has reason to be proud and optimistic. American cheeses are better represented in the market than ever before. New cheeses appear almost weekly and reach the market with astonishing speed. Distributors have embraced American cheeses, making them more economically available to retailers throughout the country. The food media has shone its light on our cheesemakers with growing dedication. And an increasingly enthusiastic, knowledgeable and confident clientele suggests that we have made progress toward establishing in the public consciousness the positive identity that our cheeses have long sought and must achieve.

I remain concerned, however, about the inconsistent quality of American artisan cheeses in the marketplace. My concerns are shared by a

vast majority of the respondents to my survey.

I have come to pardon the high price of fine American cheeses. I have a better understanding now of the many factors that inform these prices: an onerous regulatory environment, the low yield of our breeds, unachievable economies of scale, expensive milk, expensive land, expensive feed, expensive equipment, little or no government support, a young and poorly developed distribution system and often robust mark-ups. And while we can certainly expect an occasional local decrease in price as efficiencies are achieved, and while we must always encourage our producers to strive toward efficiency in their production, it seems unrealistic

EXECUTIVE BOARD

Kathleen Shannon Finn
President
Columbus Distributing
510-429-6860, Ext. 3464
Fax 650-637-8313
kfinn@columco.com

Bill McKenna
Vice President
Bill McKenna & Associates
415-647-8088
Fax 415-647-4088
Also Conference Committee
billmckenna@msn.com

Stacy M. Kinsley, Secretary
DCI/Salemville Cheese
920-387-5740 ext. 22
Fax 920-387-2194
skinsley@dancarterinc.com

Malorie McCurdy,
Treasurer
Cypress Grove Chèvre
707-839-3168
Fax 707-839-2322
Also Finance Committee
malatcyp@aol.com

Ruth Flore
Chairman of the Board
Flore, Price, & Associates
802-660-9914
Fax 802-660-9916
Cheese of Choice Co-Chair
ruth@floreprice.com

**BOARD OF
DIRECTORS**

John Eggena
Fromagerie Tournement
819-382-2208
Fax 819-382-2072
jeggena@interlinx.qc.ca

John Greeley
Sheila Marie Imports Ltd.
781-393-9100
Fax 781-393-0331
Judging Practices
and Procedures Committee
sheilamariimports@
worldnet.att.net

David Grotenstein
Food & Image
212-222-4578
Fax 212-222-4592
NASFT and Bon Appetit
Committees
foodandimage@aol.com

From the President...

Not All American Cheese Comes Individually Sliced



This was to be the “easy” article to write as my vocation and avocation is selling and savoring American specialty cheese. Sharing the cheesemakers’ stories and sampling their artwork with retailers is simple and rewarding — the stories touch the heart and the product delights the palate. Our American originals have found their place on our restaurant tables and cheese boards. The consumers in the San Francisco Bay Area where I work and play have sophisticated palates and always are looking for something new. We are blessed with a large number of local artisan cheesemakers and our retailers and chefs excel in promoting them in their markets and restaurants. We work through the sometimes problematic issue of price (how can this American-made raw-milk Gouda cost so much more than the Dutch imports?). We talk about small production batches, hand crafting, using milk from herds living on the farm and making a living without subsidies. We applaud a return to the earth — sustainable agriculture — and the benefits of quality.

But then the phone rang. A writer from a well known national men’s magazine had some questions about American cheese. I was dancing at the thought of this opportunity — a national forum to further expound on the virtues of American specialty cheese. Imagine my surprise when he started asking about American cheese — I mean, basic American cheese, processed and sliced — the kind we find on every hamburger in fast food outlets! I answered his questions and gave him the information he was looking for, but of course couldn’t let it go at that! I quickly mailed off our latest newsletter and had to add that one of the goals of the American Cheese Society is to change the consumer’s view of “American cheese.” We want our American consumers to be aware of the specialties in our heritage — not just the everyday Cheddar, Jack and Swiss.

Why do I mention this anecdote? It has

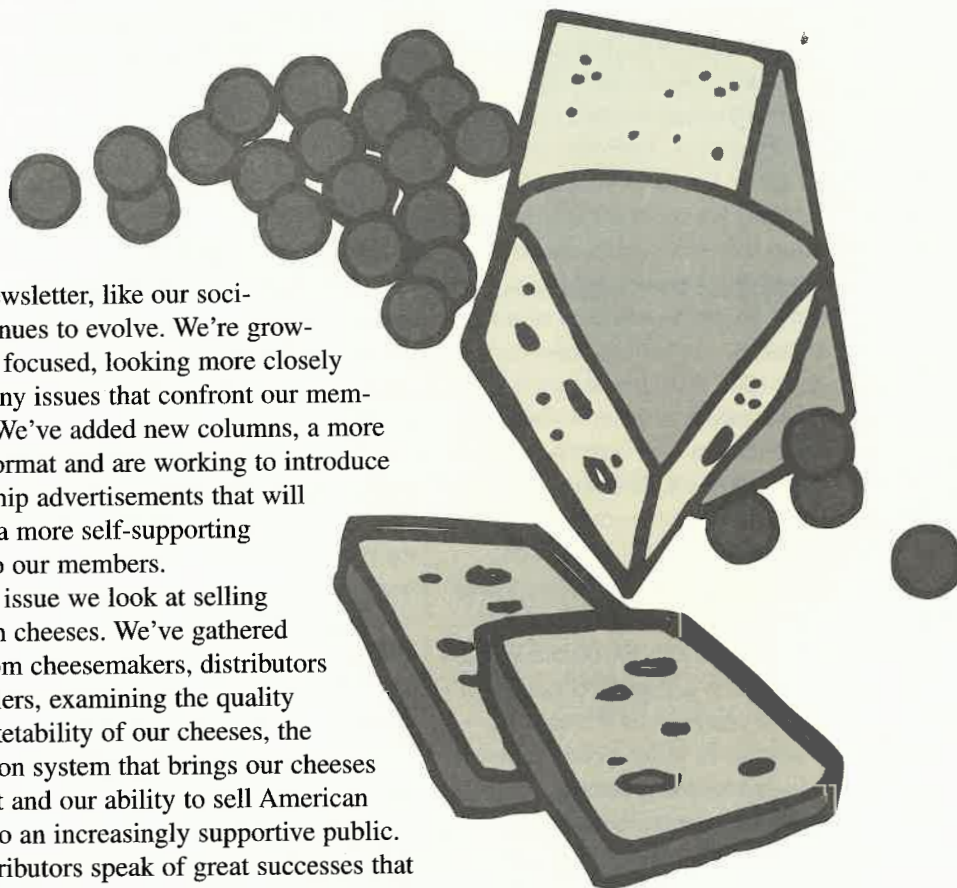
changed my thought process on selling American cheese. It broke me out of the specialty cocoon that has spoiled me in the Bay Area. Yes, we need to promote our artisan and specialty cheesemakers. Yes, we need to find ways to make their cheeses more affordable while giving them the opportunity to make their living doing what they love. But it made me realize that our work also must be on a more global level. How do we address the big picture? How do we get each American to identify with our specialty producers as the French identify with theirs?

Fortunately, American specialty cheese is, as Ruth Flore has said, “the darling” of the media right now. Janet Fletcher, Laura Werlin, and Paula Lambert have recently published wonderful books telling the stories of our cheeses. Martha Stewart is helping with spots on her nationally syndicated television show. Writers from many different venues contact me weekly. We are making headway. But our work also needs to be a collaborative effort on an individual and grassroots level. Every retailer, chef, distributor, broker, enthusiast, etc., shares in the work of telling our cheesemakers’ stories — not just to each other, but ultimately to the consumer. Yes, it happens with every new placement in a market or restaurant. It happens with every positive magazine or newspaper article we can generate. But, it also happens in sharing with our own small circle of friends, business associates and acquaintances. We each need to start addressing our own small areas to make a difference.

Read through this edition of the newsletter carefully. Understand the issues we face in selling our American specialties. And, let’s each of us do our part, in our own small circles, to promote our American treasures. Feel and own the power you hold. We can each raise the consciousness of one individual at a time. They will in turn do the same with someone else with exponential results. The big picture becomes smaller as we each take a stake in taking one step.

— Kathleen Shannon Finn

The ACS Newsletter Enters a New Era



Our newsletter, like our society, continues to evolve. We're growing more focused, looking more closely at the many issues that confront our membership. We've added new columns, a more regular format and are working to introduce sponsorship advertisements that will make us a more self-supporting service to our members.

In this issue we look at selling American cheeses. We've gathered views from cheesemakers, distributors and retailers, examining the quality and marketability of our cheeses, the distribution system that brings our cheeses to market and our ability to sell American cheeses to an increasingly supportive public. Our contributors speak of great successes that can serve as guides to us all. Where they have identified concerns and shortcomings, we hope they will spark thought and discussion.

As Louisville approaches rapidly, we've included in this issue a 2001 Conference guide and preview. We also feature a profile of Mary Falk, one of our industry's brightest lights.

As always we encourage your letters, questions and comments. We hope to compile these in a "Letter to the Editors" column in future newsletters. We also hope to establish firmly the "Ask the Expert" column in future issues, drawing from our unparalleled well of expertise to answer your technical questions about cheese and cheesemaking.

Judy Schad
Capriole Cheeses
Phone and Fax 812-923-9408
E-mail judygoat@aol.com

Matthew Rubiner
The Richmond Store
413-698-8698
Fax 413-698-8688
E-mail mjrjmr@earthlink.com

Board of Directors, cont.

George Haenlein F.W.
University Of Delaware
302-831-2523 • Fax 302-831-2822
haenlein@udel.edu

Regi Hise
foodcomm
608-270-0348 • Fax 608-271-7380
regi.foodcomm@worldnet.att.net

Mary Keehn
Cypress Grove Chèvre
707-839-3168 • 707-839-2322
CypGrove@aol.com

Paula Lambert
Mozzarella Co.
214-741-4072 • Fax 214-741-4076
mozzco@aol.com

Regina McDuffee
The Cheeseworks Ltd.
800-962-1220 • Fax 973-962-6886
Rmcduffee@thecheeseworks.com

Matthew Morgan
Zingerman's Delicatessen
734-663-0974 • Fax 734-769-1235
mmorgan@zingermans.com

Matthew Rubiner
Cheeseboy Inc.
617-547-0562 • Fax 617-576-1612
Trade Advisory Committee
Newsletter Committee
rubiner@mediaone.net

Judy Schad
Capriole Inc.
Phone/Fax 812-923-9408
Conference Committee 2001,
Newsletter Committee Chair
judygoat@aol.com

Radha Stern, Enthusiast
415-380-8230 • Fax 415-380-8532
radha-stern@msn.com

Cathy Strange
Whole Foods Market
703-527-7367 • Fax 703-527-7359
cathy.strange@wholefoods.com

Jodie Wische
Old Chatham
Sheepherding Co.
518-794-7733 • Fax 518-794-7641
Membership Committee
wische@blacksheepcheese.com

Daphne Zepos
415-647-0738 • Fax 415-401-0669
Judging Committee
daphnezepos@aol.com

COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSONS NOT ON BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

Laura Werlin
510-486-0213 • Fax 510-486-0214
Public Relations Committee
foodflaura@aol.com

Ricki Carroll
413-628-3808 • Fax 413-628-4061
Website Committee
info@cheesemaking.com

The American Cheese Society

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

EDITOR

Matthew Rubiner,
The Richmond Store

COPY EDITOR

Kate Sander, Cheese Market News

GRAPHIC DESIGN/LAYOUT

Annie Esser, A&E Graphics

COPY DEADLINES

February Issue: December 1

May Issue: March 1

July Issue: May 1

November Issue: September 1

The ACS Quarterly Newsletter is published by ACS and contains articles and information pertaining to its members. Views of contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the ACS. We encourage you to submit articles, letters, news items or photos to the editor for consideration. Please direct newsletter submissions and requests for ad information to:

Matthew Rubiner

ACS Newsletter

2089 State Road

Richmond, MA 01254

413-698-8698

Fax 413-698-8688

E-mail mjrjmr@earthlink.net

AD RATES

1/6 page vertical ad, 2 5/16" x 5" \$75

Classified, 50 words, 1 1/2" x 2" \$25

PAST PRESIDENTS OF ACS

Joan Snyder

Ari Weinzwieg

Zingerman's

Gerd Stern

Etcetera

Daniel Strongin

Access to Tradition

*Stacy Kinsley, '01

Dan Carter, Inc.

*Dominique Delugeau

Arthur Schuman

*Ruth Anne Flore, '01

Flore, Price & Assoc.

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF CHEESEMAKERS

Patrick Rance

Janet Rance

Frank Kosikowski

Richard Kleyn

From Laura's Desk...

Spring Cleaning

Some Notes on Matters Business and Otherwise

Business Matters

Spring brings tax season and a review of the past, making it an appropriate time to review some of the American Cheese Society's business matters. You read Ricki Carroll's review of historical activity for the ACS in our October 1999 newsletter. I'd like to provide some business-related history as well.

The ACS was organized in 1983, but chartered and incorporated in 1985, the officially recognized birthdate by the government for recording purposes. We received a 501(c)(6) designation from the IRS, a category for organizations which promote a business, trade or industry. It can be made up of manufacturers or retailers, or professionals such as doctors or accountants. Activities might include lobbying or trade shows, or other activities, as long as the organization is primarily undertaking 501(c)(6) activities. The 501-designated organizations are known casually as non-profits. This term often causes confusion, especially in the case of the 501(c)(6). Many now refer to these organizations as not-for-profit, which does not mean the organization cannot have profit. It is recognized that a not-for-profit needs to continue to increase its income over expense in order to continue to grow and continue providing benefits to membership. Literally, being a member of a not-for-profit means that no member or group of members can benefit financially from the income made from the transactions of operating the organization.

Not-for-profits generally are exempt from federal and state income taxes, but do pay sales and other taxes on certain business activities. Both 501(c)(3) and (c)(6) are subject to FUTA and FICA tax and are required to file an annual return, Form 990, due each year on May 15, as well as a state registration form.

Contributions, gifts, or bequests to the 501(c)(6) are not tax deductible; however, dues paid to the 501(c)(6) are deductible as an ordinary and necessary business expense.

In Other News...

In the Midwest recently, the NASFT held

The current foot-and-mouth disease tragedy ongoing in Europe seemed to weave in and out of the conversation continually, as well, and we cannot imagine the scope of trying to protect the U.S. borders from this fast-moving disease. Our global world, at one time so large, is now seeming smaller and smaller.

its Chicago venue and I decided to go down for a couple days and take it in. It's a great chance to catch up with members and allows me to walk the show floor in a more leisurely manner. I "worked" in the Zeurcher booth with all my friends (thanks Joe, Robert, Helder, Beth!) and was reminded constantly by the conversations what a small world we move in! It seems the waiter we had at the Ritz Carlton for dinner knew Helder's father, and worked in his past life with Robert. The current foot-and-mouth disease tragedy ongoing in Europe seemed to weave in and out of conversations continually, as well, and we cannot imagine the scope of trying to protect the U.S. borders from this fast-moving disease. Our global world, at one time so large, is now seeming smaller and smaller. It was beneficial to be able to sit down with Jason Hinds of Neals Yard Dairy for a bit one afternoon and get his very level-headed take on the proceedings! Thank you for the time, Jason. While the disease and its eradication have impacted regional economies, businesses there will have assets left afterward that they can rebuild on. Talk of rebuilding or fair market value only applies when addressed to a non-animate physical object. As Judy Schad said, "It's taken me 25 years to build my herd to this point! I could never get that back, could never start over." It's something to reflect on. I would just like to offer that by checking the USDA website, www.foodsafety.gov/, you can keep up to date on current press releases and actions taken by the government.

Good spring to you all.

Laura Jacobs - Welch

Transferring Value



By Liam Callahan
Bellwether Farms

The single biggest challenge facing American artisan cheeses is the difficulty in transferring the value of the product from the creamery to the customer. By value I mean the overall satisfaction derived from buying the cheese — not the cost.

The 10 years since my first involvement with ACS have seen tremendous growth in our membership and participation in the annual meeting. The flourishing of the ACS mirrors the marketplace as a whole. American artisan cheeses are diverse and of the highest quality. Despite their sometimes strange names, often mediocre packaging, limited production and high price, they also are more widely available than ever before. Why is this the case? With the diversity of cheeses available from Europe, it is rare to find an American cheese without a European substitute of similar quality at a lower price. At first glance it would seem that we are at a disadvantage in all the most important areas: price, tradition and reputation.

This brings us to the most important thing to remember — sales always increase where the customers know something extra about your cheeses. That is much easier to achieve in your own backyard. Through participation in food-related events, selling at farmers' markets, listings on restaurant menus and coverage by the media, most cheesemakers manage to get on their local cheese lovers' radar. These things improve the

value of your cheese in their eyes. While the cheese has not changed, the more they know, the better they like it. These people may like anything "local" or "hip," or they may long for the "simple" life. They may have met you at a demo, or their grandparents made cheese. Sometimes they are sure they saw my sheep on a weekend drive to the coast. This familiarity is our advantage over the European imports; we must work to strengthen this bond.

Once in the store there is little time and less space to remind them of the "extra" value of my cheese. Most customers outside my home area often are learning about Bellwether Farms for the first time. How can we as an organization increase the value of our cheeses at the point of sale in a cost-effective manner?

Individual cheesemakers must make the extra effort required to introduce themselves to retailers. Offer to educate the staff about your cheeses, and explain how you fit into the larger picture of the American artisan cheese movement. Extend an invitation to visit your creamery to the staff. Also, whenever possible, offer appropriate point-of-sale information about how your cheese is made. If possible do demos — there is no better way to educate your potential customers and the staff at the same time.

Retailers deserve much of the credit for the growing acceptance of our cheeses. They have sought us out, introduced us to distributors and carved precious space out of their already full

cheese cases for our cheeses. Nevertheless, they can do more. Many still resist the use of shelf talkers, fearing clutter. Often, those who do use them want a uniform appearance. By having them all the same, the "extra value" of our cheeses is muted. American artisan cheeses would benefit from shelf talkers that are a little bit bigger, brighter and more informative. Some stores are creating an American artisan/local cheese section. Is there a better way to highlight the value of these cheeses?

American artisan cheeses are diverse and of the highest quality. Despite their sometimes strange names, often mediocre packaging, limited production and high price, they also are more widely available than ever before.

Distributors must continue to be tolerant of us. Low-volume, high-maintenance products do not always fit neatly into the modern distribution system. Furthermore, giving an exclusive to a distributor makes small producers feel very nervous and vulnerable. Even so, large distributors are becoming interested in our cheeses — there is too much buzz and excitement not to be. No one is in the business of giving things away for free, but an American artisan page in the monthly newsletter once and a while would help to raise awareness. Could samples be provided to your customers at cost rather than billing us

back as sometimes happens?

The ACS has to raise its profile. The cheese-buying public must be made to understand that we are essential to their life as they know it (forgive the hyperbole). We make great cheeses, but we also preserve open space, continue time-honored traditions, offer hope for the continuation of family farming, make people nostalgic for a simpler time and so on. The ACS must be our number-one advocate generating a steady stream of stories about our positive attributes as a group. With the exception of the recent battles over the raw milk issue, I cannot recall ever seeing the ACS mentioned in the local press. We also should actively recruit more non-industry members. These are our customers. The more we do to get them involved, the better. Thought should be given to a consumer-oriented newsletter for these members in which we draw on the considerable expertise of our membership to address issues of interest to the consumer. How many times are we asked about mold on cheese, cheese and wine, *terroir*, differences in the types of milk, differences in the types of dairy animals, keeping aged cheese in the refrigerator, allergies, lactose intolerance and the nutrition of cheese in general?

The ACS and the American artisan cheese movement have made great strides, but must do more. Our enthusiasm is greater than our financial resources. A clear definition of our goals and careful planning for accomplishing them are required to make the most of our opportunities. 🐄

NEW ACS MEMBERS

WELCOME!

Amy Adams
Sysco Corporation
Houston, Texas

David Adelsheim
Adelsheim Vineyard
Newberg, Ore.

Ed Baker
Earthy Delights
DeWitt, Mich.

Michael Buffard
A3b
Anetz, France

Connie Collins
OGC
Portland, Ore.

Linda Dimmick
Neighborly Farms of Vermont
Randolph, Vt.

Mark Fischer
Woodcock Farms
Weston, Vt.

Mariko Gordon
New York, N.Y.

Maribeth Gould
DPI/Skandia Foods, Inc.
Arlington, Ill.

Ben Gregersen
Sierra Nevada Cheese
Sacramento, Calif.

Marya Kononov
Irving's State College, Pa.

Robert Larew
North, Md.

Michael Levy
Chef John Folse & Co.
Gonzales, La.

Cheesemaker Bio

Meet Mary Falk

Mary and David, and the Birth of Trade Lake Cheeses

*By Kristin Sande
Whole Foods Market
Minneapolis, with Mary Falk*

Mary and David Falk's Love Tree Farm sits on 200 acres of the Trade Lake region of northern Wisconsin. Sheep first came to Love Tree in 1989. David brought them home one day on a whim, for a hobby. They thought they might sell the lambs for meat. Things turned out different.

In 1994 they turned their attention toward selling milk from their growing flock, as a way to keep Dave working on the farm and to make Love Tree self-sustaining. They soon realized that to achieve this goal they would have to add value to their milk, so they turned to cheesemaking. Mary had some previous experience making soft cheeses and yogurt from her small herd of goats, and thought this experience would transfer to sheep's milk cheesemaking.

To be a licensed cheesemaker in Wisconsin requires 18 months as an apprentice in a cheese factory, or a 12-month apprenticeship followed by a four-day university short course. Prospective cheesemakers must then take an exam. Mary chose the year-long plan, and began to seek a willing cheese producer to take her on. Dave kept the farm

and family, which had swelled to three boys and 200 sheep, running smoothly.

Mary soon found work at Crystal Lake Cheese in Comstock, 45 miles away. Crystal Lake produces 12 to 16 1,500-gallon vats per day of commodity-type Muenster and assorted flavors of Colby and Jack.



"It wasn't anywhere near the kind of cheese I wanted to make," Mary explains, "but it was in open vats, and I would actually be able to touch and see the curd."

It was exhausting work, with long hours, six days a week, and the challenge of living off of \$6.50 an hour for a year. The day she com-

pleted her apprenticeship, Mary "spring-boarded" out of the factory and immediately enrolled in the cheesemaker's short course at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She passed her exams and was granted a cheesemaker's license.

Dave and Mary's original plan was to sell milk to the Wisconsin Sheep Dairy Co-op while they developed their cheeses and their facilities.

But Dave, a member of the co-op's board of directors, soon grew frustrated with the way the board was heading, and resigned.

"Dave came home one day, pointed to some goat's milk cheeses I was aging in an old brick oven (we weren't milking sheep yet) and asked me if I could make them with sheep's milk. I said, 'I won't know until I try.'"

That was good enough for Dave. He announced that he would begin work on the cheese room and aging cave immediately, and that Mary should be ready to produce in two months. So began Trade Lake sheep's milk cheeses.

As promised, Dave (with the help of some good friends) finished the cheese room and unique, silo-inspired cave in two months. The first sheep's milk cheeses went into the cave as soon as the Falks received their Wisconsin Dairy Plant license. In 1997, the

"I definitely wouldn't suggest that anyone follow in our exact footprints. As cheesemakers we have been blessed with success after a very intense four years of learning on the fly. We had our share of mistakes. There is just no escaping the learning curve." — Mary Falk

first cheeses emerged, with thrilling results. Among their first customers were the Aveda Spa in Osceola, and Fairway Market in New York.

"It has been constant hard work, dragging around a load of debt, ever since that first day we jumped into this venture," Mary cautions. "I definitely wouldn't suggest that anyone follow in our exact footprints. As cheesemakers we have been blessed with success after a very intense four years of learning on the fly. We had our share of mistakes. There is just no escaping the learning curve."

The Cheeses

The Falks' passion and dedication to preserving Old World traditions is evident in their cheeses. Each is named for one of the glacial lakes that surround their 200-acre organic grass-based farm in Grantsburg. Most are made with milk from their 300 Trade Lake ewes. All are produced with the native molds of the north woods of Wisconsin. Mary says that molds are an integral part of the aging process and greatly add to the complexity of the flavor of the cheeses, and that each region has its own unique molds that, if given the proper environment, will flourish abundantly. The following cheeses are produced by the Falks:

- **Trade Lake Cedar**

A firm robust raw sheep's milk cheese with a rustic natural rind, aged at least 2½ months on boughs of cedar in Love Tree's fresh-air cave.

- **Gabrielson Lake**

A sweet, buttery natural-rinded cheese, made from the raw milk of a single herd of Jersey cows on a neighboring farm.

- **The Holmes Series**

Big Holmes, Little Holmes, Sumac Holmes and Love Tree Cubs and Black Bears. Sheep's milk cheeses of various ages and sizes, with coats of vodka-soaked nettles, charcoal, fresh herbs, sumac berries or ground peppercorns.

The Trade Lake Sheep Project

The "Trade Lake Sheep" on Mary and David's farm are a tough breed, carefully selected over the past decade for their hardiness and their ability to produce high quality milk from grasses without any grain supplementation. The north woods of Wisconsin is a harsh environment. The window for raising grain crops is very tight, but grasses grow abundantly and easily. The Falks believe that the only way a dairy sheep farmer can survive economically in the region is to raise a tough, hardy sheep that will thrive on a grass-based program while producing high-butterfat milk. In an effort to save family farms in northern Wisconsin, they plan to extend their breeding program to "satellite flocks" on neighboring farms. These "sister farms" will then supply Love Tree with high-quality sheep milk and cheeses. Mary has a vision "to turn this poorer region of

Wisconsin into a blossoming 'Napa Valley' of cheese over the next 20 years and in so doing help to keep income on the small farms."

Mary and David believe that the small-scale dairy industry should be governed by separate regulations that are tailored to their unique circumstances. Mary currently serves on the steering committee of a newly formed "network guild" which is being formed by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. The goal of the guild is to create a network of information sources to make it easier for small family farmers to produce value-added products on their farm.

"The Department has listened to the pleas of small cheesemakers who want to process on their farms. It is also developing more sustainable apprenticeship requirements, eliminating the mandatory apprenticeship in a factory, and replacing it with a combination of university short courses and a 30-day apprenticeship with a licensed cheesemaker."

Mary also stresses the importance of guiding small cheese producers in the subject of HACCP. She is currently working on customizing the HACCP industry dairy standards to make them applicable to the small farmstead producer. Mary and Marianne Smukowski, of the Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research, will be presenting this information during the cheesemakers' day at the ACS conference in Louisville. ☺

For more information on Love Tree Farm and its cheeses, visit their website at www.lovetreefarmstead.com.

NEW ACS MEMBERS

CONTINUED

Sandra Loveland

Desert Marigold Alpine Dairy
Phoenix, Ariz.

Thomas L. Marshall

Specialty Food American!
Inc. Hopkinsville, Ky.

Joan McNamara

Joan's on Third
Los Angeles, Calif.

Kenn Olson

Wisconsin Milk Marketing
Board Madison, Wis.

Jane Pearson

Chevy Chase, Md.

Geralyn Saada

Culinary Adventures, LLC
Matawan, N.J.

Calvin C. Snow

Snofarm
Brooktondal, N.Y.

Diane St. Clair

Animal Farm
Whiting, Vt.

Karen Templin

Michael's Wine Cellar
Sarasota, Fla.

Angie Vorhies

San Diego Chapter of AIWF
LaJolla, Calif.

Susan Walrabenstein

Healdsburg, Calif.

The Land of Cheese Marketing

Don't Get Caught Without a Paddle

By David Major
Major Farms

Cindy and I, along with other farmers and folks associated with Vermont Shepherd, have been selling cheese for over a decade now. During that time we have marketed every way we knew how, starting out in the rarified atmosphere of farmers' markets and local direct sales, then descending into the wide and deep valley of large-scale food commerce. There we were, nearly swept into oblivion by the fierce river of national distribution, big trucks, warehouses and commissions. On a lark, sweet fate washed us ashore, exhausted but still kicking. Since then, we have climbed back up a quieter ridge of direct sales, web, phone and mail order.

In our travels through the hills and valleys of the cheese-marketing world, we have learned three lessons:

1. Start Small

Every cheesemaker makes a great deal of mediocre to awful cheese for the first three years. Experience taught us that we should have started so small that we could afford to throw away the cheese and not almost ruin our reputation before we had one.

2. Stay Small

Our most successful years to date have been those where we've made just enough cheese to supply our regular customers and have not attempted to grow our supply substantially. We make a quality product and it tends to sell itself. Unfortunately, quality will not sell itself at a large volume these days. That's because almost all stores, from the local convenience store to the mall, are owned by huge chains that cannot be bothered dealing with small vendors and the variability that is inevitable with a handmade product. Happily, there still are some wonderful independent stores and restaurants out there that love to be different and to carry a unique product. We try first to have a strong local presence in Vermont. Second, we try to supply those stores and restaurants around the country that are unique and flexible enough to appreciate and sell our handmade cheeses. Third, we sell directly to cheese lovers around the country through our website www.vermontshepherd.com, being sure that our web prices are such that we do not compete against the business we must support.

3. Don't Get Big

Against our better judgment we have attempted to grow big enough to swim in the river of nationwide, if not global, food commerce, face-to-face with the gene-patenting, food factory chain marketing companies. In doing so, we discovered a phenomenal number of sinks. If we had known about them ahead of time, I don't believe we would have taken the plunge. There is a huge backwater of archaic and expensive distribution and warehousing systems. At a time when most businesses are reducing inventory to as close to zero as possible, we found warehouses holding our cheeses for the good part of a year sometimes. This cost money, which we had to absorb in a 20–40 percent reduction in price from what had been our wholesale price. We did feel for a while that we were selling a substantial volume of cheese. That was until we came across a prevalent undertow of fees, buy backs and changing terms. Eight months after invoicing, we were billed for a hefty number of cheeses that met some undetermined ill fate at a warehouse. One month after invoicing another company, we received a cheerful letter informing us that they were building a new warehouse

“to service us better” and therefore were deducting 5 percent off our invoice to help defray their cost for the new warehouse. Another company informed us apologetically that they were changing our terms after the fact and will be paying us a month later than we request when we sell cheese. That undertow has left us barely able to breathe. Then we faced the rapids of promotion, where wave upon wave of in-store chain promotions, expensive printed materials, unexplained promo fees, and contributions of free cheese left us utterly incapacitated. It is only a fluke of fate that we found ourselves washed ashore. And from the hill we have now ascended, it is plain to us that the river of general food commerce is just too chaotic for little swimmers like ourselves. It is a river that requires a company boat, and the size of the boat matters far more than what it carries. That is a pity, I think, but no matter. At least we have been able to climb back up the ridge to market our cheeses to other independent stores, restaurants and individuals who have not been swept away. There may be little money in it up here, but at least we are having fun making a fine product and doing what feels best. Isn't that what counts? 🐄

A Newcomer's Perspective



By Tom & Kristine Johnson

At Bingham Hill Cheese Co., we have a newcomer's perspective of selling cheese. We are grateful to other artisanal cheesemakers who paved the way to the specialty shops with their professionalism. Indeed, when we made our first phone calls to specialty shops such as Dean & DeLuca, The Wine Merchant, Murray's Cheese Shop and Whole Foods, they were very receptive to evaluating our product. This turned out to be true for any of the retailer members of the ACS. We ship cheese to these specialty shops and high-end groceries via UPS, which adds up to \$1.50 per pound to the cheese.

The Cheeseworks, a national cheese distributor, is working with us to cut the shipping rate customers ordinarily pay through UPS. We asked retailers about their favorite distributors before

making this decision. It became clear to us during these discussions that distributors who hire (and train) the most pleasant, knowledgeable and service-oriented sales representatives have the best reputations. Price was a serious factor to retailers, but service, including how the distributor stored and delivered cheese, seemed most important. In the end, we chose Cheeseworks not only because it has a good reputation for service and quality, but mostly because its sales representatives love our cheese enough to rave about it to retailers.

We also recently signed up with Freshnex.com, an Internet "exchange platform" for overnight delivery of perishable foods direct from the source. Freshnex.com is an exciting outlet because it had solved two issues plaguing the artisanal cheese industry: cash flow and shipping costs. The

company takes orders and pays us, and we ship overnight air directly to the customer using Freshnex.com's FedEx account number. The company had negotiated a super-preferred rate with FedEx, so that its small markup is invisible to the customer.

Besides wholesale and distributor sales, we sell Rustic Blue via three retail outlets: out of our factory, via our website and at farmers' markets. The benefits of retail sales are twofold. First, and most obvious, we get a better profit margin through retail sales. Second, and more intangible, we have the opportunity to market our product, receive immediate response from the customer and build a following. Our small, local Alfalfa's sells six five-pound wheels a week — without sampling out Rustic Blue. Most of those sales are made by us at the farmers' markets.

We struggled over how to price our Rustic Blue. We wrote a full business plan before deciding we could afford to indulge our passion for blue cheese — and Rustic Blue's price reflects those numbers. The minimum price included these considerations: the cost of start-up (amortized over 30 years); the cost of having small loads of

milk delivered (over \$1.20 per gallon); labor costs (\$10–15 per hour plus our yet-unseen salaries); and low yield (Rustic Blue is a comparably dry blue). Somewhat randomly, we decided that there would be no Rustic Blue if our price needed to be greater than Stilton. We currently price our cheese near the Stilton mark, and, at our first-year production levels, did not break even at that price. We are doubling production and, with luck, a small increase in moisture content, and meager economies of scale, Bingham Hill Cheese will be profitable in 2001. 🧀



An Unstable Environment

Planes, Trains & Automobiles: Distribution Woes are Common and Difficult

By Linsey Herman
Crystal Foods Imports

American farmhouse and artisan cheeses have made tremendous inroads in the U.S. market over the past 20 years. Distribution of these cheeses, however, has not kept pace with the swell of new cheesemakers and their new products. Factors such as logistics, transportation costs, inventory turns, product cost, perceived value and consistent supply on the distributors' end, and consistency and quality, availability and supply, price, packaging, and marketability on the cheesemakers' end, contribute to an unstable environment for distribution in all but one or two markets.

Distribution in the specialty food market is by nature fragmented and inefficient. Innumerable trucks, trains, boats, planes, brokers and tariffs can be involved in transporting products, resulting in higher costs throughout the supply chain. Products produced domestically have fewer hurdles to clear, but those they do face can raise prices precipitously. Distributors must, in order to promote American artisan and farmhouse cheese, take lower margins and find creative solutions to their logistics issues.

Few specialty distributors service customers with costly fleets of trucks or multiple warehouses. To reach distant markets, distributors often rely on common-carrier trucking companies and airfreight to

send and receive product. This process, while bringing to market previously unavailable cheeses at more reasonable prices, shaves precious days off the life of highly perishable cheeses. Unpredictable and unreliable ground and air transportation also seriously compromise quality. Since distributors occupy a

Distribution in the specialty food market is by nature fragmented and inefficient. Innumerable trucks, trains, boats, planes, brokers and tariffs can be involved in transporting products, resulting in higher costs throughout the supply chain.

pivotal point in the supply chain, it is vital that quality be maintained in the receiving and in the shipping of cheese. Outsourcing transportation makes this a more difficult task, often impossible to overcome.

For some cheesemakers, direct shipping can be a convenient way to circumvent distributors, but the added 30–40 percent cost for second-day or overnight air can be prohibitive for many small specialty retailers, who cannot afford to buy the quantity or pay the shipping for direct purchase of cheese. They must instead rely on distributors for their supply. Even so, to the uneducated consumer, there is little perceived value in these domestic cheeses; they will opt for the less expensive,

and often more consistent, imported products every time.

Distributors, however, do not operate in a vacuum. Cheesemakers are equally responsible for their products and their success in the marketplace. Many cheesemakers, such as Old Chatham Shepherding Co., are able to distribute directly to retailers owing to a reasonable price point (even with shipping factored in), great marketing and publicity, customer education, efficient operations and most importantly, consistency of product.

Cheesemaking may be an art, but cheese selling is still a business. Cheesemakers who operate on this principle are better equipped for survival in the long run.

Cheesemakers also must take into consideration the marketing of their products. In this advertising and brand-driven age, name recognition can create tremendous momentum and growth for their products. Distributors alone cannot create a market for new or extra-regional products. Distributors can help by taking lower margins, but it is actually the synergy between cheesemaker, distributor and retailer that can make or break a new product. Cheesemakers must look for marketing and promotional opportunities in their home regions: in-store demos, special promotions, farmers' markets, local press, restaurants and even culinary schools.

Consumer education, targeted specifically to the distributor and cheese seller also is vital

to the success of a product. Customers want to know where the product is made, who makes it and what their story is. They want to see pictures or visit the farm or meet the cheesemaker. The story sells a cheese the first time; quality and value brings customers back for more.

For all but the privileged few in wealthy or well-supplied markets, distribution cost is a major issue that, coupled with the cheesemaker's pricing structure and lack of name recognition, can make a

For all but the privileged few in wealthy or well-supplied markets, distribution cost is a major issue that, coupled with the cheesemaker's pricing structure and lack of name recognition, can make a product virtually impossible to sell.

product virtually impossible to sell. Cheesemakers who wish to expand their reach beyond their immediate market must think like a business and work with their distributors or their retailers to offer better pricing and more consistent product. In turn distributors and retailers must lower their margins to make product more accessible to their customers. It is only through cooperation that our distribution channels and our cheese shops will reflect the bounty that is American specialty cheese. 🐄

The Thrill of Victory, The Agony of Defeat

Some Sound Advice From the Front Lines

By Linda Luke
The Cheeseworks

Nothing is more exciting than to introduce to a store or chef a new, wonderful treasure from our nation's increasingly innovative cheesemakers. As a salesperson, I attempt to educate myself about the history, methods and technical details of a new cheese. My job is to sell, and selling means educating, creating interest and building trust. If I tell my customers that we are thrilled to be offering a great new cheese, they invariably get caught up in the excitement.

So after all that, it's discouraging to check back the next week and hear a retailer say that this exciting new cheese just is not selling. What happened? Maybe I did a poor job explaining what this new product was all about. Perhaps the retailer had a busy week and couldn't properly focus on introducing a new

cheese. Price could have been an issue. Or it might have arrived in less than optimal condition.

There are four basic challenges to the successful marketing of American specialty cheeses:

1. Distributors need to be thoughtful in placing new products.

Spend some time really educating a store or chef about a new cheese. Explaining some of the unique features of a product often can overcome price objections. On the other hand, if a retailer says customers never will pay \$20 per pound for a particular cheese, trust the retailer — he or she knows his or her clientele better than you do, and may not believe in the product enough to put aside price concerns.

2. Cheeses don't sell themselves.

People sell them, through tasting, talking and making great signage. American specialty cheeses love being talked about and they have great stories. A perfect example is Mary Keehn's Humboldt Fog. It doesn't look like any other cheese in the case. There are so many wonderful things to talk to customers about with this cheese: the goats, the rind, the layers of ripening and the visual Morbier influence. All these exciting details will help sell the cheeses, if you share them.

3. Price does matter, but not always.

Price is a sensitive and complex issue and evokes strong opinions. If a cheese is too expensive, it will not sell. A cheese that doesn't sell will never be tasted or please the palate of a customer who might buy more. If customers

don't buy from retailers, retailers won't reorder from distributors, and distributors will slow down or stop buying from cheesemakers. Resentment and finger pointing follow. That

said, I'm the first to admit that "too expensive" is a relative term. Some premi-

um-priced cheeses continue to see robust sales, usually because they are special or unique in some way. If an expensive cheese has a European historical equivalent that sells for half the price, the American product will be a tough sell.

4. Step up to the plate on quality issues.

Sometimes we distributors have a hard time getting a new line off the ground and slow rotation affects quality. In such cases we should take responsibility and make restitution. Other times the problem is in production. In these cases, the more information from the cheesemaker, the better. I am not referring to seasonal variation (though it is invaluable for distributors and retailers to understand and appreciate seasonal variation). If something is happening to change the taste or texture of your cheese in a substantial way, consider not shipping that cheese, or at least make sure everyone understands why it is altered.

Let's keep up an ongoing discussion of these and other issues, with the goal of expanding sales for cheesemakers, retailers and distributors. American artisan cheeses are simply too good to keep to ourselves! 🧀



Speak Your Mind in Future Issues with Topics that Interest You

The newsletter welcomes your thoughts, suggestions and articles. Following are the topics and deadlines for newsletters in 2001. If you are interested in contributing please contact:

Matthew Rubiner
The Richmond Store
2089 State Road
Richmond, MA 01254
413-698-8698
Fax 413-698-8688
E-mail mjrjmr@earthlink.net

3rd Quarter 2001: Creating an American Cheese Consciousness

We love Parm and Stilton, but let's get on with it! We're good! Why don't we say so? Who's doing American cheese trays? What retailers concentrate on American cheeses in their cheese cases? Also the pre-NASFT & pre-Conference issue.

Deadline for articles, info and photos is May 1, 2001.

Caseus

We are soliciting substantive articles for this issue as well as cheese and cheesemaker profiles.

Deadline for articles, info and photos is April 1, 2001.

4th Quarter 2001: Post-Conference Wrap-Up & Business

Included with *Caseus* mailing.

Deadline for articles, info and photos is Sept. 7, 2001.

Successes and

By Matt Morgan
Zingerman's Delicatessen
Ann Arbor, Mich.

I sell spoiled milk for a living. Yes, it's true. I convince affluent, educated, otherwise sensible adults to hand over substantial sums of their hard-earned cash in exchange for foods whose smell can clear rooms.

I work for a small but highly successful specialty retailer in the Midwestern United States called Zingerman's Delicatessen. Some would rightly point out that Zingerman's sits fortuitously in the oasis called Ann Arbor, a city described as "10 square miles surrounded by reality," a city from which the annual haze of April's Hash Bash never quite clears. Zingerman's was started almost 20 years ago by Ari Weinzwieg and Paul Saginaw with the mission of bringing the world's great peasant food traditions to the people of Ann Arbor. Lucky for us, those traditions include hand-crafted cheeses.

American cheese sits in grand company at Zingerman's. Miles Cahn's cheeses nestle in between raw milk Bries from the Ile-de-France and noble Stiltons from the United Kingdom. Ross Gagnon's Cheddars vie for consumer loyalty with venerable Montgomery's and Keen's Cheddars. Two dozen other American artisanal cheesemakers parade through the counter in rotation throughout the course of the year, complementing and



competing with their predecessors and contemporaries from countries with millennia of cheesemaking traditions.

The stature of the European cheeses makes the competitive landscape a tough one and can make selling American cheeses an uphill battle. There are substantial hurdles to overcome in both consumer perception and product quality. I've often seen American cheesemakers succeed dramatically in the ACS judging, only to falter in the marketplace when the most critical moment comes, the moment when Mrs. or Mr. Retail Customer decides to spend some money. When it comes right down to it, retail customers usually choose European cheeses over their American counterparts.

Why is this true? After five years of selling food from behind the same counter, I

believe that I understand some of the motivations of the consumer — why he or she chooses one cheese over another. I think that a better understanding of who the end customer is — the retail customer — could help American cheesemakers and retailers sell more cheese. I can't tell anyone how to make cheese, or how to milk a goat, cow, or sheep. What I can share with you is what happens every day, 10 dozen times across the cheese counter at Zingerman's. Take it for what it's worth.

Here are some key challenges facing retailers of American cheeses:

Flavor. Many American cheeses are less flavorful than their European counterparts. Sometimes the flavors are off balance or simple, with less complexity than European

Challenges:

Retailing American Specialty Cheeses

cheeses of the same type. This ties in with “character,” which I mention last.

Quality. Appearance, texture and flavor count. A customer who loves a cheese wants to be able to count on a modicum of consistency, and some of our homegrown products are more consistent than others.

Value. Far be it from me, a man who might sell 3 ounces of balsamic vinegar for \$200, to say that any cheese is too expensive. However, the customer always is comparing flavor and price. Two things are true: better flavors fetch higher prices, and rarely will anyone pay more for a product that gives them less gastronomic pleasure.

Character. Another facet of the value and quality issues. Is the cheese uniquely American? A car aficionado can tell you that German autos have that “certain something,” that quintessential “German-ness,” that makes them sigh with pleasure when they get behind the wheel. A cheese lover can tell you that French cheese has that certain “French-ness” that makes the hairs on the back of their neck stand up. Is this real, or psychological? Is it because the car buff knows it’s a German car, or the cheese lover knows it’s a French cheese? Does it matter?

Let’s think about some

successes. I will break them down, and try to explain how each of these meets the challenges I mentioned above.

For Zingerman’s, Shelburne Cheddar has been a consistent, solid performer for years. The flavor is good — rich and full, with good acidity and texture and subdued bitter qualities in the finish. The cheese rates highly in quality: very consistent, with some seasonal variations in flavor, and consistent appearance. Its price, while higher than some block Cheddars, is at a comfortable middle place between standard-bearing English Cheddars and large-production American ones, so it rates very highly on value.

Coach is another consistent performer. Its goat cheeses are well balanced and full-flavored and incredibly consistent. The wholesale prices of \$8–11 a pound make them more expensive than mass-produced European goat cheeses but less than the most expensive handmade ones.

When I think about what will make American cheeses successful in the future, I ask: Are American cheese uniquely American? What does that mean? Is it style, presentation, flavor? I assert that it is a combination of all these things. The Americas, culturally, are an amalgam of traditions and people from everywhere, though we cannot deny the strong European influence. I think that

cheeses that embrace and build on those influences are American. The very descriptor, “American,” implies inclusiveness, tradition and room for experimentation. Build on the successes of the past.

I am not a microbiologist, but I do understand that the world’s great fermented foods are all strongly influenced by the microorganisms that ripen them. Wine, beer, salami, and yes, cheese. The flavors and textures of all these foods are affected by the yeasts, molds and bacteria that ferment them. In part, French wine tastes “French” because it’s fermented with indigenous yeasts and matured in indigenous barrels, with indigenous molds in the air.

Building on the traditions of Europe to create great cheese traditions in America is sensible and natural. Making Cheddar in New York and Blue in Washington with the same packaged cultures from Europe must detract from the American character of otherwise fine products — how could it not?

American consumers have a strong home-team spirit — they want American cheesemakers to succeed in the world market, and they will put down their hard-earned cash to support them. The best thing American cheesemakers can do is secure their loyalty by making irreplaceable products. ☞

I’ve often seen
American cheesemakers
succeed dramatically in
the ACS judging, only to
falter in the market-
place when the most
critical moment comes,
the moment when Mrs.
or Mr. Retail Customer
decides to spend some
money. When it comes
right down to it, retail
customers usually
choose European
cheeses over their
American
counterparts.

VIEWS from Retail

Raymond Hook

Star Provisions, Atlanta

I'm a man with a mission. When people think about American cheese, I want it to be with the same reverence given to French champagne, Iranian caviar and Italian truffles. I want to wipe out the image of dyed-yellow gunk melted on a chain hamburger patty. Can I hear an Amen?

As an American artisan cheese retailer, I approach my job with no less than missionary zeal. And with that comes many responsibilities. First, I feel responsibility to my organization, so that we may run a profitable business and create an environment conducive to marketing the best possible products. That means respecting the craftsmanship and love that is required to make cheeses of this caliber.

Secondly, I feel responsibility to our customers, to educate and introduce them to the uniqueness and craftsmanship of cheesemakers in this country. Thirdly, I feel responsibility toward the cheesemakers, that we show consideration for their hard work and artistry.

We have our work cut out for us. I see a brainwashed society that feeds their children McDonald's Happy Meals. Where does that food come from? I know where the cheese I sell comes from, who makes it, where the milk comes from, and the quality imparted to the product.

How can we return to a society that values the source of our food? I want to make that happen. I want Americans to understand the pleasure and importance of food, not just as nourishment for the body, but for the mind and soul as well.

So lastly, I feel a responsibility to the bigger picture, elevating the American food culture. I want to illuminate the value of fresh, locally grown and crafted products, products that are closest to their natural state and free of unnecessary chemicals and preservatives. As a country, I want us to embrace stuff that's just plain good for us, starting with wholesome, artisan cheese. How do we meet those challenges? It's all about the details. We start by educating ourselves. We have to develop our own passion so we can share that passion with our customers. Informed customers are more apt to try and buy new products. We need to hone our business acumen so that we can remain profitable, less waste, better product management, proper storage and appealing presentation. We need to offer our customers an increasingly higher quality of cheese. We need to promote uniqueness, quality and value. We need to promote cheeses that are nothing less than art.

Andrea London

WorldofCheese.com

I have been concerned about the quality of distribution of American artisan cheeses for many years. I order directly from producers as well as from distributors. Fortunately we have distributors in the San Francisco Bay Area who sell cheeses from a variety of smaller American producers. We would prefer a mix, but by necessity we order primarily from wholesalers. This reduces overall cost and allows us to buy smaller amounts more frequently.

The problems with buying from the distributors include discontinuation of products and compromised quality when turnover is low. We need to receive very young cheeses because our turnover is slow in most cases. The problems with buying direct from producers include the need to buy larger amounts and inadequate packaging. Cheesemakers should be more aware of how they pack their boxes so that the cheese arrives in the same condition it was in when it left the plant or farm.

The pricing of American cheeses vis-a-vis European imports is a sensitive issue online, due to the availability of cheeses from online-only sellers, "bricks and mortar" companies with websites, direct sales by producers and European internet sellers that ship to the United States. Our pricing is competitive with other online retailers. We do periodic price comparisons. Other online food retailers sell 12 of the American cheeses we sell, and seven of our producers sell their cheeses online. The overall price of the products online is higher than in traditional retail outlets because of the shipping costs. We price the more expensive cheeses under our usual margin to keep the cheeses in line with the European products.

Barbara Hoover

Central Market is a large retailer in Texas offering the finest fresh foods, specialty groceries, beer and wine. Our cheese department carries approximately 650 cheeses. American cheeses make up just a small part of our product mix and require a special commitment by our staff to sell them. They are a growing

part of our business, but have a long way to go to achieve the success we have had with European cheeses.

We have been most successful at our store when we have been able to create an ongoing relationship with the producer. Old Chatham, Capriole and Texas Jersey are three producers who have

Francis Schuck

Murray's Cheese Shop, N.Y.

When I began working behind the cheese counter some 10 years ago, I had no idea that there was such a thing as a handcrafted "American Cheese." All I knew were the multitudes of mass-produced yellow Americans, Muensters and Cheddars from New York, Wisconsin or Vermont. I remember my contempt for those cut-and-wrapped products and feverishly asked the purveyors I knew to find me some truly wonderful cheeses made in America. I was tired of my customers' contempt for American cheeses and their belief that only Europeans make great cheeses.

I still look back with utter joy when I first tasted a wonderful handmade sheep's milk cheese that my friend in Vermont urged me to try. It was packaged in the most aromatic hay lined box, like a work of art. I had to have more. Finally, an American cheese that I could introduce to my customers with pride.

Since then I have been exposed to many fine-crafted cheeses that have inspired my customers' and my own palate. The only drawback is price. I understand that Europeans have been creating cheeses for centuries and we in the colonies are new to the cheese game, but as palatable as most of these domestic cheeses are, their prices are hard to swallow for the average customer. When someone can buy an exceptional European cheese at half the price of an American product, why should they opt for the American? The answer lies in the hands of the salespeople. They can champion a cheese more than any magazine article. They give the cheese a voice and are the people that introduce the consumer to the wonders of American cheese. When I am faced with a customer looking to recapture a European "moment," I immediately guide them to a homegrown variety. They are often in utter disbelief when I tell them that it is made in the U.S.A.

It is up to the cheesemonger to build an audience for the exceptional cheeses made by American artisans. With the ever-increasing variety and availability of such products, it is only a matter of time before artisanal cheeses are as familiar to the average customer as the antiquated yellow American.

formed a close working relationship with the management and staff of three of our locations. These producers have committed the time and resources to visit our stores, train our staff and interact with our customers. They also provide printed materials. Our staff is a powerful sales force when they have a personal

connection to the producer, understand the passion behind the product and are knowledgeable about the product and how to use it.

Delivering the cheese to the store in top condition is another requirement for success. Capriole is distributed by C.E. Zuercher & Co. and arrives in perfect condition

Dannie Ray Sullins

Whole Foods Market Gold Coast Chicago

When I first started selling American cheeses 10 years ago, I made more mistakes than I had successes. I learned some important rules, the first being that you have to settle in for the long haul. The initial investment was huge and I tossed a lot of cheese before we managed to gather, digest and dispense enough information to create the demand to support the program, all the while trying not to unintentionally ruin the cheese that we had no idea how to handle. Often I wasn't even sure what the cheese was supposed to look like. Which leads me to my next lesson: most American cheesemakers love to talk about cheese and will help you understand what is going on with their product. They might even invite you to come watch it made.

What a revelation! Suddenly I wasn't selling just cheese; I was selling history and romance. I tried to memorize the names of goats at Capriole. I took pictures and videos of baby kids and showed them to my customers. City dwellers listened in awe as I told tales of goats frolicking through fields of alfalfa. Suddenly my farmstead program grew in leaps and bounds. European cheeses lost a little cash that year, and sales of domestics skyrocketed. With the help of the media and chefs, people started doing cheese boards at home, and American cheeses were at the top of our list of recommendations. Distributors suddenly started looking at them as more than a novelty or a fad, but as a movement gaining momentum.

We are at a crossroads now, and challenges must be met with great integrity and care. Many distributors know less about these American cheeses than the cheesemongers. Many cheesemongers focus on numbers and immediate turnover. They don't know how to care for the cheeses and worse, often give out false information. Many cheesemakers are afraid to try anything other than fresh Chevre or Baby Swiss, and for every cheesemaker that succeeds, three don't make it. The FDA is nipping at our heels.

Our work is cut out for us. That is why the ACS is one of the most valuable tools that we have as a means to bring together the entire chain, from pasture to palate.

Cheesemakers, go to the stores that sell your product. Retailers, visit the dairies. Distributors, take as much initiative as possible to learn and educate both ends of the spectrum. We must keep the momentum going. After all, France has been exporting cheese for two thousand years. We have a lot of catching up to do.

Central Market, Austin

every time, as does everything we order from them. Old Chatham has mastered the art of shipping via ground delivery and getting the product to us in beautiful shape, and Texas Jersey delivers direct to our stores themselves. All three methods can work; the key is to care for the cheese so it does not suffer in transit.

to expect significantly lower prices in the future.

But do high prices matter that much? Few consumers question the price of Beluga Caviar, "tradizionale" balsamic vinegar, or first-growth Bordeaux. These products are simply assumed to be expensive. Indeed, it can be argued that high prices actually enhance their marketability. High quality justifies high price. High price demands high quality.

Respondents to the survey agreed unanimously that high price is a subsidiary concern to inconsistent quality. High prices shine a spotlight on quality. They tighten the range of quality variation that a customer will tolerate, particularly a Euro-centric customer already suspicious of American cheeses. It is critically important that the overall quality and consistency of American cheeses improve.

Quality must begin at the creamery. I have only a shallow technical understanding of the many factors that cause variation in the quality of cheeses from batch to batch. I am therefore hesitant to offer recommendations on how to improve quality. I am certain, however, that problems in quality, if understood and conscientiously addressed, can be corrected. I am certain because many of our "American Classics" — Coach Farm, Old Chatham, Grafton and Shelburne Cheddars, Great Hill Blue, Juniper Grove, Westfield Farm and Cypress Grove, to name but a very few — have achieved and maintained remarkably high standards of quality, unrivalled even among European producers. They have become classics precisely

because of their makers' attention to quality, conscientious grading before release to the market, and creative approaches to finding outlets for cheeses that do not meet the market's rigorous expectations.

I remain dismayed, however, at the number of substandard cheeses that reach the market. Cheesemakers, particularly newcomers, must appreciate the irreparable damage that even one batch of substandard cheese can do to their reputation, to customer confidence and therefore, to their prospects in the market. Despite our industry's successes in recent years, our hold on public confidence remains fragile. The grading of cheeses released to the market must be more rigorous. I urge all young cheesemakers to read carefully David Major's views on this subject in his insightful and impassioned piece in this newsletter.

Quality also must be maintained throughout the distribution system. This is a big country. Distributors, with their vast logistical networks and flexible volume requirements, have a clear and valuable role to play. It is common among retailers and cheesemakers to blame distributors for failures to maintain quality, and indeed they are often to blame. My survey suggested that dissatisfaction with the distribution system is high, particularly among retailers located far from producers and major urban distribution centers. But distributors have their own set of realities that cheesemakers and retailers often fail to appreciate. Linsey Herman of Crystal Foods and Linda Luke of Cheeseworks outline these realities better than I would be capable in their articles

within this newsletter.

It is clear, however, that significant improvement can and must be made. The world of large-scale national and regional distribution can be hostile to small producers and their fragile, finicky cheeses. Indeed, it may prove an inappropriate system for many of our producers. A cheesemaker's main criterion in deciding how to get cheeses to market must be quality of handling and not cost saving.

Finally, quality must continue through the retailer. The retailer is the last check on quality before a cheese reaches its most important judge of quality, the consumer. We retailers must take this role very seriously. We cannot shy from rejecting cheeses that are not suitable for our clientele. We must hold distributors responsible for the quality of their handling and transport. We must hold cheesemakers responsible for the quality and handling of cheeses that we purchase directly. We do an ultimate service to the industry by protecting quality so vigorously.

As retailers we also have the responsibility to be expert in the cheeses we carry. We must understand and appreciate the unique handling and marketing requirements of every cheese. We must be able to articulate and communicate our concerns to cheesemakers and distributors. We must work closely with them to better understand what accounts for variations in quality, to find ways to improve quality and to find outlets for cheeses that do not meet the market's requirements. We are, after all, our industry's primary ambassadors to the public. The task of selling American cheeses rests largely on our shoulders.

Read carefully the many impassioned articles from retailers in this issue. Learn from their experiences and use their successes as your guide.

Improving the overall quality of American artisan cheeses will be greatly facilitated by increasing the quality and frequency of communication between cheesemakers and the trade. Very few respondents to my survey reported anything but cursory interaction with cheesemakers. It is important that cheesemakers understand the requirements of the market and details of their cheeses' performance. It is equally important that retailers and distributors understand and appreciate the unique concerns and pressures of the cheesemaker. The American Cheese Society provides many forums for increased communication. This newsletter is a forum. The ACS website is a forum. The ACS conference is a forum.

And to address the issue of quality and marketability specifically, the ACS has established a Trade Advisory Committee to serve as a resource for cheesemakers and members of the trade. The main activity of this committee will be to establish regional boards of advisors comprising retailers, distributors, brokers and other members of the trade to serve as informal consultants to cheesemakers, particularly those with little experience in the market. We are currently seeking volunteers from the trade to round out our regional boards. We will ask little of your time. We hope that cheesemakers will use this resource to gain a clearer understanding and more realistic view of the expectations of the market. Please contact me if you are interested. ☺

FOR SALE

Turn-key Cheesemaking Equipment:

500-litre (147-gallon) Gadan vat with all accessories, past. thermometers & chart recorder, 750 gallon bulk tank w/CIP, 12-cylinder cheese press, air compressor, soft cheese vats & drip-off molds, cheese molds, shelving, 1-chamber vacuum sealer, TEC scale, 450-gallon milk hauling trailer.

Prefer to sell as group: \$26,500.00 FOB.

Call 607-277-5279 or

e-mail cleary@twcny.rr.com.

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

We are requesting any nominations for board members be submitted in writing to the ACS office. Board terms are three years, and it is necessary that all board members be actively involved in the organization on a volunteer basis; this is a working board. Board members must be willing to actively serve on or chair a committee. Please send in writing a list of those you would like to nominate and a list of their accomplishments and contributions to the Society.

Any Questions? Ask the Expert! The American Cheese Society is an unrivaled collection of cheese expertise. Let's use it. In each future Newsletter, our experts will answer technical questions from our readers. Questions may cover any subject related to cheese, cheesemaking and the cheese trade. **Please submit questions to Matthew Rubiner,** Fax 413-698-8688, E-mail mjrjmr@earthlink.net.

ACS Calendar

May 1-4 2001

Cal Poly Products Technology Center: Dairy Science and Technology Basics for the Farmstead Cheesemaker
San Luis Obispo, Calif.

This four-day course (including a day of hands-on cheesemaking) is similar to Cheese Short Course I, but emphasis is placed on farmstead cheese production. In addition to information covered in Cheese I, this course includes designing a business plan, marketing, sales distribution, cutting, packaging and labeling. Cost \$595. Contact: Laurie Jacobson, 805-756-6097 or calpoly.edu/~dptc/shortcou.htm

Saturday, May 19, 2001

Beginning Cheesemaking with Cynthia Sharpe
Lenoir, N.C.

Full-day workshop featuring goat's milk and cow's milk cheeses. Workshop fee of \$40 includes lunch. Sponsored by The Hometown Creamery Revival. For an informational flyer or to register, contact Vicki Dunaway by e-mail or 540-789-7877 before 9 PM Eastern.

May 23, 2001

Dairy HACCP Workshop

Center for Dairy Research
UW-Madison, Madison, Wis.

This one-day workshop will cover design and implementation of HACCP plans in dairy plants. Contact information – Marianne Smukowski – 608-265-6346

June 3-5, 2001

Dairy Deli Bake 2001

Sponsored by IDDBA, this year's theme is "Northern Lights." Join us at Dairy-Deli-Bake 2001 to "light" your way to knowledge and the beauty of the Land of 10,000 Lakes. The show is a magnet for buyers, merchandisers, brokers, distributors, manufacturers and industry professionals from all categories. Contact: 608-238-7908
www.iddba.org

June 23-24, 2001

Making Soft-Ripened Cheeses of France
Cornish Flat, N.H.

Contact: Suzanne Lupien, 603-542-8635
www.uvm.edu/~susagctr/sp99calendar.html

June 30 and July 1, 2001

Making Sheep & Goat Milk Cheeses, Cornish Flat, N.H.

Contact: Suzanne Lupien, 603-542-8635
www.uvm.edu/~susagctr/sp99calendar.html

August 2-5, 2001

18th Annual Conference

The Chef and the Cheese — On The Table

We welcome you to the Camberley Brown Hotel in Louisville, Ky. It will be a grand celebration of the artisan chef, the cheesemaker and the creativity that has inspired the recent growth of great American cheeses. There is no more appropriate place to celebrate quality, regionality and craft than in Louisville, a city of fine restaurants and deep food traditions.

Contact: ACS office at 262-728-4458

The American Cheese Society

The American Cheese Society is an active, not-for-profit organization which encourages the understanding, appreciation, and promotion of America's farmstead and natural specialty cheese. By providing an educational forum for cheese makers and cheese enthusiasts, the society makes an important and direct connection between the maker and the consumer.

Special Thanks to our Conference Sponsors

American Institute of Wine and Food, Kentucky Chapter

Brown-Forman

California Milk Advisory Board

The Camberley Brown Hotel

New England Dairy Promotion Board, Inc.

Sullivan University

Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board, Inc.

August 2-5, 2001

18TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE



We invite you to this year's **18th Annual Conference of the American Cheese Society** at The Camberley Brown Hotel in Louisville, Kentucky. It will be a grand celebration of the artisan chef, the cheese maker, and the creativity that has inspired the recent growth of great American cheeses. There is no more appropriate place to celebrate quality, regionality, and craft than in Louisville, a city of fine restaurants and deep food traditions. We hope you will join us at one of Derbytownt's most gracious landmarks, the historic Brown Hotel. Visit with cheese maker and chef, food writer and food monger. Savor the finest food, wine, and bourbon, and, of course, some of the world's best artisan cheeses.