

Beyond the Brick

Oregon cheese comes of age BY RYAN DAWE-STOTZ

A shrink-wrapped day-glo orange brick was, until recently, more or less synonymous with the phrase “Oregon cheese.” Sure, there were (and thankfully still are) those wingnuts down in Central Point making blue cheese and even some reformed lawyer out in Redmond making the stuff out of *goat’s* milk of all things, but by God, our cheese was hard, made of cow’s milk and the color of a stale candy circus peanut, and that was that.

To paraphrase Dinah Washington, what a difference a decade or two makes. While the aforementioned **Rogue Creamery** and **Juniper Grove Farm** are clearly at the height of their considerable powers — Juniper Grove continues to be the standard-bearer for not just artisanal chèvre but making it with raw milk; Rogue develops innovations like the grape-leaf-and-pear-brandy-aged Rogue River Blue — they are no longer outsiders by any stretch. Oregon, and the Willamette Valley in particular, can now count Camemberts, goudas and even a couple sheep’s milk creameries among its ranks.

Don’t disparage those orange bricks too much, though. Sometimes no other cheese looks quite right, and those Tillamook folks did turn out two fine cheesemakers in Melissa and Rod Volbeda of **Willamette Valley Cheese Company** in Salem. They create an impressive number of cheeses for having only started in 2002, but what’s even more impressive is how good the cheeses taste. Especially notable is Willamette Valley’s beefed-up take on boerenkaas, the traditional raw milk aged “farmer’s cheese” gouda made even more intensely caramel-nutty with the rich Jersey cow’s milk they use. Their meltingly creamy Shepherd’s Knoll and firm, sweet-butter-tinged Perrydale sheep’s milk cheeses are also well worth the trouble to find.

Somewhat strangely, Willamette Valley Cheese Company is not the only game in Oregon when it comes to gouda-style cheeses. Bend’s relatively new **Tumalo Farms**, though, makes theirs with goat’s milk, and they make it well, with two first place awards from the American Cheese Society in 2006 for

their peppercorn and beer-kissed Pondhopper cheeses. Tumalo Farms also uses cumin, fenugreek and rosemary to flavor their cheeses, but the finest is their unflavored Classico, where the quality of their goat’s milk and cheese making skills stand on their own.

Even more unusual than our abundance of local gouda is that right up the interstate in Albany, **Oregon Gourmet Cheeses** is making that rarest of crea-

wide variety of cheeses from this versatile milk. From traditional crumbly, sweet feta to blooming-rind soft cheeses to two varieties of their raw-milk Scio Heritage cheese (one a soft, subtle blue and the other a take on the firm, tangy Spanish cheese Manchego), Ancient Heritage gets it all right. Not to be outdone is Canby’s **Celtic Shepherd Creamery**, where Irish immigrant Brendan Enright makes not only cheese (including another Manchego-style) but also a fantastic and distinctively sweet sheep’s milk yogurt.

Despite this sudden sheep’s milk mini-boom, the most popular milk for artisanal cheese makers continues to be goat.

popular, oil-packed “Party In A Jar” have been local fixtures since 1994. **Fraga Farm** in Sweet Home is the state’s only certified organic goat dairy (though other Oregon creameries do make certified organic cheese). Their luscious raw milk feta, which took home a first place prize from the American Cheese Society in 2006, is truly something to behold. Most ambitious, though, is Lowell’s **Fern’s Edge Goat Dairy**. There, on the shores of Dexter Lake, Andhi Reyna is making distinctive cheeses with a more complex, mineral flavor and firmer texture closer to French chèvre than Oregon’s hallmark softer, sweeter goat’s cheeses, especially



tures (in the U.S., at least): raw milk Camembert. This is usually a very young cheese, but the method Oregon Gourmet uses to age their Camembert to the legally mandated 60 days for raw milk cheese results in a texture and depth of flavor that pasteurized versions just can’t capture. Good as their Camembert is, Oregon Gourmet is best known for their washed-rind, fruity, cheddar-like Sublimity, which comes in a host of flavors but is most satisfying in its original, unadulterated form.

Another sign of the true coming of age of Oregon’s cheese scene is the advent of two sheep’s milk creameries. Scio’s **Ancient Heritage** is the flag-planter: Oregon’s first sheep’s milk cheese company. No laurel-resting for them, though, as they have wasted no time in fielding a

Outfits like **River’s Edge**, **Silver Falls Creamery** and Tumalo Farms (and probably five others in the time it’s taken you to read this) are popping up all over the state, making fresh and aged cheeses inspired by the great cheeses of France, Spain and Italy. Rogue River’s **Pholia Farm**’s creative tommes even made it to the prestigious shelves of Manhattan’s Artisanal Premium Cheese — the cheese equivalent of making it to Broadway (the New York one with the plays, not the Eugene one with the restless youth).

Right in our area, though, three chèvre makers are helping the southern Willamette Valley keep pace with the rest of the state. **Alsea Acre** is the longest running of the three, and owner/cheese maker Nancy Chandler’s feta, fresh chèvres and

her blooming rind pyramid. Her finest effort, though, is her fresh pyramid covered in dried, wild-crafted chanterelles. Normally great chèvre not only doesn’t need but flat-out resists any adornment, but the fruity, earthy flavor of the mushrooms serves in this case to underscore and amplify the flinty and herbal notes of the cheese, while their drier texture makes the paste of the cheese feel softer in comparison. It’s really something, and you would be a fool to leave your next trip to the Lane County Farmers Market (where you can purchase all of Reyna’s cheeses) without it. ♦

Eugene native and erstwhile New Orleanian Ryan Dawe-Stotz is the cheese, wine and charcuterie buyer for Marché Provisions, co-hosts a radio show about local food and wine Sundays at 2 pm on 1600 AM KOPT, and would really rather not think about how high his cholesterol is.

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