

sizzle

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THE AMERICAN CULINARY FEDERATION QUARTERLY FOR STUDENTS OF COOKING

artisanal
cheese steals the
spotlight

paella
possibilities

what it takes
to run a
restaurant

cooking
in the military



sizzle

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features

18 Smooth Operator

Successful restaurant owners combine culinary skills and business know-how.

24 Cheese Culture

Inspired by the local food movement, chefs and patrons embrace the growing number of American artisanal cheeses.

30 Cooking for the Troops

Military chefs enjoy variety, adventure and rewarding careers.

departments

7 Amuse-Bouche

Bits & pieces, plus...

10 Slice of Life

Eric Lutzenberger takes us along for a day at his internship at Toucan Cafe, Savannah, Ga.

12 Classical V. Modern

Robert Mancuso, CMC, executive chef at The Country Club in Chestnut Hill, Mass., and lead line cook Adam Munroe, prepare paella, two ways.

36 By Degrees

Bellingham Technical College's Michael Baldwin, CCE, demonstrates how to fabricate geoduck.

38 Grill

Peter Aiello, CEC, CEPC, discusses the value of apprenticeship.

40 Taste Test

Pikes Peak Community College's culinary program evolves to meet students' needs.

42 Events

A look ahead to the American Culinary Federation's 2011 regional conferences.

50 International Flavors

A world of flavors waits in Chile, an undiscovered gem where sustainability comes naturally.

54 Youth Team USA

Training for the 2012 "culinary Olympics," members of ACF Culinary Youth Team USA balance the pressure of competition with support from others and a little fun.

56 The Interview

François Kwaku-Dongo came to America not knowing English and never having cooked. Nine years later, he emerged as a protégé of Wolfgang Puck.

NEXT ISSUE

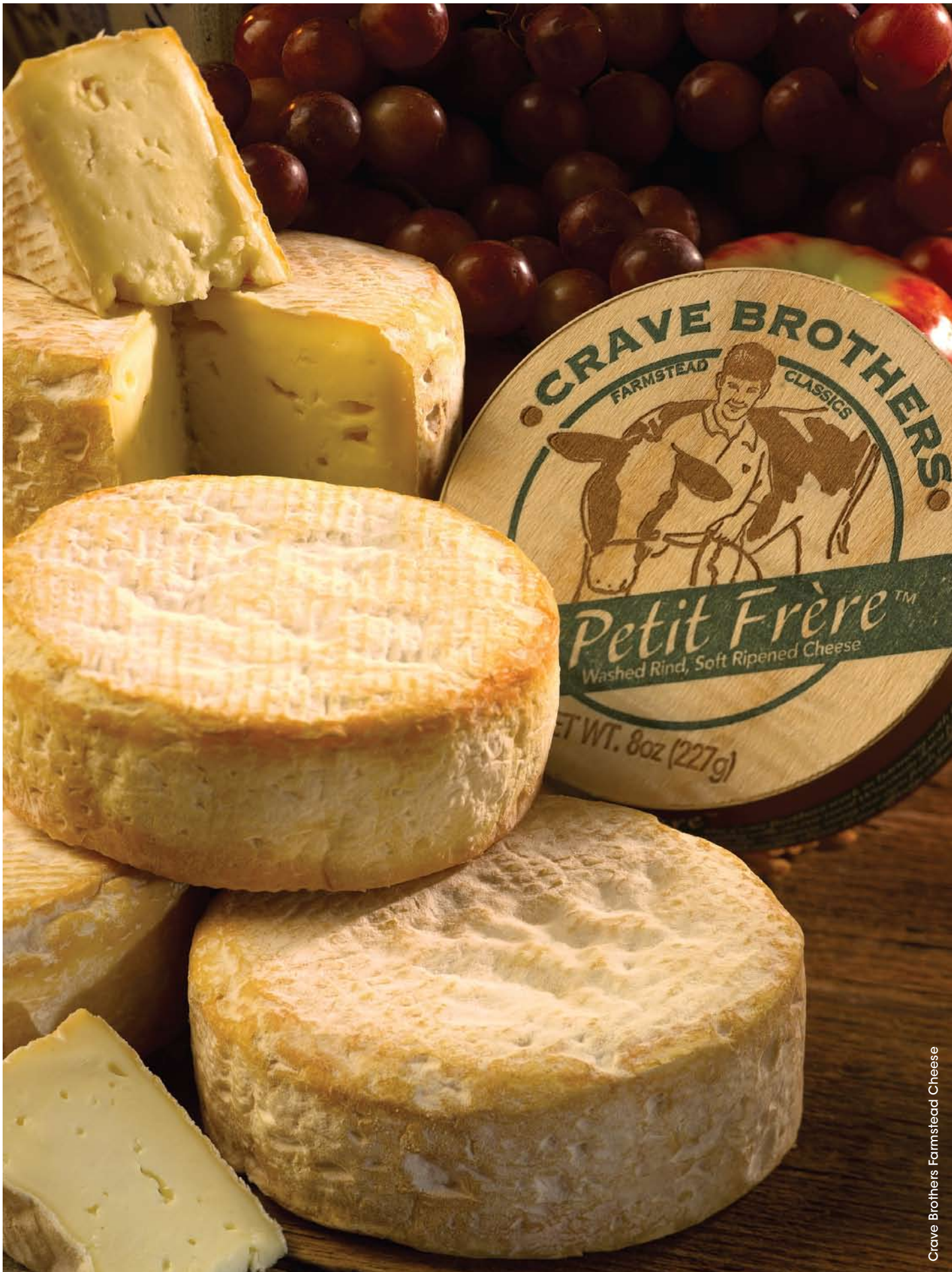
- Culinary competitions
- The life of a hotel chef
- Brunch trends

cheese

CULTURE

Inspired by the local food movement, chefs and patrons embrace the growing number of American artisanal cheeses.

By Jody Shee



“Artisanal” is not a catchword to attach to a rustic-looking piece of food to give it a trendy sound. In the case of those making and serving artisanal cheese, it’s a genuine skill that is experiencing a renaissance in the U.S.

Young culinarians are lucky to begin a career in foodservice at the same time that artisanal cheese is taking its place in the forefront of all that’s handcrafted, sustainable and world-class in freshness and flavor.

coming to terms

At its core, experts agree that artisanal cheese is made by hand in small batches by an artisan. Some would add that no machinery is used in the process, but that’s a background issue that should not take the focus off the art. “Large-scale equipment would never be involved, but some use smaller-scale equipment or machinery, using technology through temperature control or scales, things like that,” says Jenny Harris, executive chef/fromager (cheese expert) for Tria Commissary, Philadelphia, which prepares food for two Tria wine, cheese and beer cafes, and Biba Wine Bar, also in Philadelphia.

“We are developing that sense of history, place and flavors that emerge from different parts of America. Artisanal is alive and well.”

—Matt Jennings

A more refined subset of artisanal cheese is farmstead cheese, in which the animals used for milking and the cheesemaking operation are located together.

Many cheeses are made with heat-treated pasteurized milk to eliminate bacteria, while others are made with raw milk. In that case, it is required by law that the cheese be aged for a minimum of 60 days. “That way, whatever bad bacteria exists because of not being heated all the way gets eaten up by good bacteria, and after 60 days, it’s perfectly fine to eat,” says Steve McKeon, chief executive officer for cheese producer Emmi Roth USA Inc., Monroe, Wis.

Only in the past decade have American cheesemakers developed their craft and product to the point that they export their cheeses to European countries, which themselves are leaders in fine cheesemaking, says Matt Jennings, executive chef, co-owner and master cheesemonger at Farmstead

in Providence, R.I. “We are developing that sense of history, place and flavors that emerge from different parts of America. Artisanal is alive and well.” Farmstead was founded as a cheese shop in 2002, with La Laiterie, a 40-seat new-American bistro, added on a few years later.

The restaurant draws on the emerging ideal of “food being locally sourced, made by hand in small quantities and really seasonal, as an honest reflection of food we love,” Jennings says. As a former gourmet retail cheese buyer with additional experience working for a cheese producer and wholesaler selling to restaurants, Jennings has spent his career involved in the cheese revolution, which, he says, really started to explode the same time farmers markets started to take off. “People got interested in that California mentality of purchasing from their farmer buddy down the street, and it spread from west to east,” he says. The passion for artisanal cheese relates to the convergence of unique flavors related to time

and place. “It’s an incredible representation of history. It’s kind of a stamp on a certain time frame,” he says, comparing it to the way wine represents the nuances of the earth.

operations and animals

Naturally, the flavor and type of cheese first depends on the animal used and what it eats, then on the techniques of the cheesemaker. Crave Brothers Farmstead Cheese LLC, Waterloo, Wis., milks its own Holstein cows and gives them the same feed year-round to keep the flavor, protein and butter consistent, says company president George Crave.

The cheese, and thus the milk, should reflect the uniqueness of the artisan and the factory making it, he adds. Cheeses can be made from cow’s, goat’s or sheep’s milk, or a blend. With its cow’s milk, Crave Brothers makes a fresh, milky mozzarella, classic mascarpone and its most popular, unique European-style Les Frères cheese with an earthy, fruity flavor.

The art involved in Les Frères, for example, has much to do with the different cultures used to get the right flavor. Rather than pressing the cheese, it is form-filled, allowed to develop



in a warm room for 24 hours, then brined and moved to a cellar environment where it is washed in a variety of cultures for a few weeks, then packed and sent out. It continues to age and develop through distribution, Crave says. When it’s 2 months old, it tastes different than at 1, 3 or 4 months. “It starts to develop an attitude and gets nice and bigger flavors—rich and savory with a very creamy mouthfeel.”

Alex Seidel, chef/co-owner of Denver’s Fruition Restaurant, bought a 10-acre farm and recently purchased a flock of sheep. The restaurant staff turned the barn into a cheesemaking facility with aging rooms, and in October 2010, began making and selling ricotta cheese to 40

Top: Hand-selected artisanal cheeses are prepared for a cheese board at La Laiterie at Farmstead Inc.

Left: Called Berry Blues FARMpie, this pizza, created by Daniel Orr, features artisanal goat cheese, apples and cranberry compote.

Right: Fruition Restaurant’s Alex Seidel raises his own sheep and produces and sells ricotta cheese.



restaurants in the Denver area. “We’re the only artisanal sheep’s milk producer in the state of Colorado,” Seidel says. He is developing an Italian-style Pecorino-type cheese, which will be available at two ages, a young one as a table cheese and one aged longer suited to grating.

Through his new experience with artisanal cheese, he advises others to understand where their food comes from and how it is produced. “Everyone doesn’t need to be a cheesemaker. Discern the good from the bad. There must be an understanding of quality, texture and flavor,” he says. “Understanding how it was produced will help, and whether it is raw or pasteurized. It will all help in becoming a better chef.”

One of the challenges in artisanal cheesemaking is that producers sometimes are not familiar with foodservice and

are inexperienced in connecting with chefs. In Texas, it’s a gap filled by Houston Dairymaids, a marketer and wholesaler that partners with 10 Texas dairies. “I see myself as a conduit. I collect the story from the cheesemaker and tell it to the chef,” says owner Lindsey Schechter. With her experience, she advises others to develop a palate for cheese “and be very particular about sources, whether through a distributor or the cheesemakers themselves. Try to build relationships and be open to a lot of communications. You will be rewarded with the best cheese they have to offer.”

menu applications

Some might shy away from artisanal cheese, thinking that they can’t afford the higher price. Jennings with Farmstead suggests that reluctant buyers shop at small artisan showcases where they can talk directly with cheesemakers.

While some chefs might choose not to hide their most prized cheese in a mac and cheese dish, Jennings finds it to be the perfect application for the knotty bits left from the cheese shop. “At the end of the week, we take all the odd shapes of cheese, grate them up, and that’s the sauce for our mac and cheese. That’s what we’re known for,” he says.

From his history working in restaurants in France and Belgium, Daniel Orr developed an appreciation for artisanal cheeses that he carried with him to his current restaurant, FARMbloomington in Bloomington, Ind., where he is chef/owner. It fits with his passion of helping neighbors and supporting local vendors, “creating our own regional palate of flavor we can support and use in our restaurant.”

For example, the artisanal goat cheese he purchases from Capriole Farm in Greenville, Ind., is part of the character of what he menus as the World’s Greatest BLT. Besides the goat cheese, it combines local bacon, avocado, tomato, arugula and wasabi/herb mayo. Capriole Julianna goat cheese is aged longer (4-8 months), giving it a “funkier” flavor, Orr says. For the flavor to shine, he serves it on its own, or accompanying a salad with curly endive, local apples

and apple cider vinaigrette. The artisanal goat cheeses also work as part of an herb dip for crudités.

With his own ricotta cheese, Seidel with Fruition found great success including it in a beet salad. He rolls it in pumpkin seed granola and serves with beets and greens. Each time he develops a new dessert menu, Seidel highlights a cheese. Rather than serve it with a cracker, he incorporates it in a small composed dish, much like an appetizer.

In Kansas City, Mo., Jasper Mirabile Jr., chef/co-owner of Italian eatery Jasper's, gets artisanal cheese from several farms, including Crave Brothers, and is always impressed with the flavor and texture compared to industrial cheese. "Consider master cheesemakers and the certification they go through. It's an honor to meet these people," he says. He serves the artisanal cheese several ways. A cheese board available before the meal always features five cheeses: two Italian, one Wisconsin, one from Missouri and ricotta cheese he makes himself, which may be served with a bit of homemade blood orange marmalade.

But one of the signature services at Jasper's is Mirabile's table-side cheesemaking exhibition. He wheels out a mozzarella-making

cart, complete with curds and boiling water, and stretches the cheese before the guest while explaining the fine points of cheesemaking.

While some chefs advise against mixing artisanal cheese in with a dish because other ingredients may take away from the cheese, Mirabile believes that one of the advantages of artisanal cheese is that it holds up better. He uses his mozzarella in several dishes, including Pollo Alla Saltimbocca, chicken breast medallions layered with prosciutto di Parma and fresh mozzarella in a lemon/sage reduction.

Naming the cheesemaker on the menu draws attention to the fineness of the cheese and is a way to applaud the local artisan.

For those looking at a foodservice career, "I urge everyone to go not only for artisanal, but local, smaller batches," says Harris with Tria Commissary. "It's the way things should be in the future." ■

Jody Shee, an Olathe, Kan.-based freelance writer and editor, previously was editor of a foodservice magazine. She has 20 years of foodwriting experience and writes the blog www.sheefood.com.

cheese pointers

- "Spoilage is one of the big issues across the board with artisanal cheese. It should never be tightly wrapped in plastic wrap. Rather, wrap in cheese paper or parchment or butcher's paper."
— Matt Jennings, executive chef, co-owner and master cheesemonger, Farmstead Inc., Providence, R.I.
- "There will always be inconsistencies from one cheese batch to another within an artisan's operation, because the cheese is handmade. This wide range of variability is to be expected and embraced."
— Jenny Harris, executive chef/ fromager, Tria Commissary, Philadelphia

MORE ON THE WEB

For Jasper Mirabile Jr.'s creamy polenta recipe, visit www.acfchefs.org/sizzle.

Opposite: Artisanal goat cheese purchased from Capriole Farm in Greenville, Ind., is part of the character of what Daniel Orr menus as the World's Greatest BLT at his FARMBloomington restaurant.