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Cheese CONNOISSEUR

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Lisa White

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Don Kagan

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Zionna Perini

See how this favorite has been updated for today's taste preferences. Recently, I've noticed fondue sets, including a pot, table

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Lisa White

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SUCCESS STAYS IN THE FAMILY

Natale Caputo, President, Caputo Cheese, Melrose Park, IL

BY LISA WHITE

When Caputo Cheese was created in 1978 as a small cheese shop, selling small bulk quantities of various types of domestic and imported cheeses, owners René and Pasquale Caputo were known for offering high-quality processed and blended cheese to food distributors and manufacturers.

Today, Caputo Cheese is run by their son, Natale, along with the Caputo team, and produces a wide range of cheeses, from the classic hard Italian varieties to award-winning fresh mozzarella.

Nat was born into the cheese business. Besides being responsible for the entire operation, he has dedicated himself to promoting cheese 24 hours a day.



Here, Nat Caputo discusses the family business and how it has evolved, highlights of his career, and the artisan cheese industry as a whole.

CC: Tell me about your history and background.

N.C.: My parents, René and Pasquale, started the business back in 1978. At the time, they were typical food importers, offering all types of foods they knew from Italy. In addition to cheese, they also imported olive oil, herbs, pasta, balsamic vinegar, etc.

The company mostly sold to restaurants, grocery stores and small distributors in the Chicago area. There also was a concentration of

COVER STORY

Italian cheeses, including mozzarella, provolone, Pecorino Romano and Parmigiano-Reggiano.

Prior to opening his importing business, my father owned a couple of pizzerias, shredding mozzarella at night. This is what gave my father the epiphany for a new opportunity: In the early '80s, he opened three cheese shops in Chicago. Here, he sold cheese retail in front and grinded and shredded Italian cheeses, in addition to cheddar, jack, Muenster and Swiss, in back. He also had a cut-and-wrap program.

As the cheese sector grew in the late '80s and early '90s, the business took off. We began supplying more Chicago restaurants and working with nationwide distributors. This precipitated a move into a 5,000-square-foot facility in the mid-'80s on the north side of Chicago.

In 1989, the business moved to its current location in the former Falbo Cheese facility, located in the Chicago suburb of Melrose Park. We went from a 5,000 to a 50,000 square foot facility. With our many additions over the years, the building is now 200,000 square feet.

I was involved in the business from the age of 10, first working the register, then cutting and wrapping cheese at 15, before slicing cheeses and meats at 16 and driving a truck at 18. I worked while going to school at Loyola University, where I learned about the operations and then worked on the administration side during the summers. After graduating college with a degree in business in 1996, I took over Caputo and have been at the helm ever since.

CC: Discuss the highlights of your career.

N.C.: I have two personal highlights. The first, after college, was when I took a month off to travel Europe with friends for a couple of months in 1994. I saw fresh mozzarella while there, and told my dad we needed to offer that.

The second was in 1999, when Caputo won the U.S. Championship Cheese award for our fresh mozzarella. This put us into a new segment, as we formerly just offered hard Italian cheese.

My greatest business highlight was ensuring the company was solvent. My father's main goal was to send me to college and have me graduate before taking over the business.

CC: Who has made an impact on you and why?

N.C.: By far, my parents have had the biggest impact on me. This is because they are the people who took the biggest risk to start a business and put their lives on the line. That says a lot about them. I give them the most credit, not only in starting the business, but in keeping it running for so long. In 2028, Caputo Cheese will be 50. That's pretty amazing!

CC: What organizations are you involved with in the industry?

N.C.: We are involved with the Wisconsin Cheesemakers Association and the American Cheese Society (ACS). We also have participated in the Cheesemonger Invitational. We have a culinary team here with Jason Herbert, who competes. We try to stay active in the industry and with farmers to support them as much as possible. We also participate in all the food shows, including IDDBA, Pizza Expo, PLMA and IFT on the sales side.



CC/AMIE TENZKE PHOTO

“Everyone in the industry supports each other. Your company can be the biggest or smallest on the block, but everyone supports all ideas. It really is a community, more like a family.”

— Natale Caputo



PHOTO COURTESY CAPUTO

CC: What accolades has Caputo received recently?

N.C.: This year, we were honored to receive Best of Class for our Bocconcini in the Fresh Mozzarella category and second with our 1-ounce Fresh Mozzarella Slices in the Natural Sliced Cheese category at the U.S. Championship Cheese Contest.

In 2024, Caputo Cheese swept the Fresh Mozzarella — under 8 ounces all milk category at ACS, receiving first place for our Nodini, second place for our Mini Nodini, and third place for our Ovolini. These achievements surpassed our expectations. A few months prior, Nodini received Best of Class at the 2024 World Championship Cheese Contest.

Since 2018, Caputo Cheese has won 17 awards in national and international competitions.

In 2020's World Championship Cheese Contest, our Burrata and Mini Nodini won Best of Class, and Ricotta Red won second place. In 2019's World Cheese Awards in Bergamo, Italy, Caputo's Burrata won silver, and both Ricotta Red and Mini Nodini won bronze.

At 2019's ACS competition, our Burratini and Ricotta Red won first place, and Nodini won second place. That same year at the U.S. Cheese Championship Contest, our Ricotta Red won first place, and Nodini and Burrata both won third place.

In 2018, Caputo's Burrata and Nodini won first place and Burratini won second place at the World Championship Cheese Contest. Finally, that same year, ACS honored our Ricotta Red, Burrata, and Nodini with first-place wins, with Burratini winning second place.

CC: What do you like best about the industry?

N.C.: As massive as our industry is, I love how small it is at the same time. Everyone in the industry supports each other. Your company can be the biggest or smallest on the block, but everyone supports all ideas. It really is a community, more like a family. I love seeing people at the shows, as we're all working for the same cause. This makes the cheese industry different from most.

CC: What's your favorite cheese?

N.C.: Anyone who knows me knows my favorite cheese is Humboldt Fog from Cypress Grove. It's still my go-to, as it has put artisan cheese on the map. But I love Toscano, Parmigiano-Reggiano, Pecorino Romano and all Italian cheeses.

CC: How has the cheese industry evolved since you've been in it?

N.C.: We've seen technology help build the industry, as it improves quality and consistency. We love the technology aspect, but at the same time, I love the legacy of cheesemakers. Their manual procedures are still involved in the cheesemaking process. It's like the Old World is meeting the New World, and there is a better product on the shelves. I love the fact that there are more and more cheeses coming out every day. It's fun to see and enjoy.

CC: What are your plans for the future?

N.C.: In the past 50 years, we have stuck to a niche of hard Italian and fresh mozzarella and are growing in those sectors. There still is a lot to learn and build on. We're not heavy in retail,



CC/AMEE TENZEK PHOTO

although we have a great retail brand, so maybe it's a target for us in the years ahead. We are bringing on more people, so we have the capabilities to build on the great foundation we created in the last 50 years. For myself, I will continue this quest.

CC: What advice would you give someone who wants to be involved in the cheese industry as a career?

N.C.: If it were one of my children, I'd say be prepared to work hard. It doesn't come easy, but the fruits of your labor will show. This is not a typical nine-to-five job; you have to do what it takes to take care of the product because cheese is alive, living and breathing. Most people in our industry understand that.

People can be successful in the industry today, and I love seeing new people coming into the industry. We also love to support those just joining the industry, including interns. We are proud of our legacy, what we built and our team. It's not just a Caputo running this place; we also have great, highly motivated, passionate employees. This shows in our success. In addition, I give credit to my parents for taking the risk, myself for digging into the business and my team for their hard work and dedication.

CC

FEATURE

THE MELTY MAGIC OF RACLETTE

A humble alpine cheese becomes a winter obsession.

BY HANNAH HOWARD

If you've ever watched someone scrape molten cheese onto a plate of potatoes, charcuterie or kettle chips — your mouth watering, your heart fluttering — you've witnessed the mesmerizing magic of raclette. This Alpine tradition has gone from mountain firesides to trendy U.S. cheese bars and backyard winter feasts, and its rich, melty appeal shows no signs of slowing down.

But raclette isn't just a cheese, it's a ritual: a slow, satisfying, deeply communal way of eating that invites warmth, indulgence and joy. And whether you're wielding a tabletop grill or simply broiling slices over roasted vegetables, the spirit of raclette is always about togetherness.

FROM ALPINE HEARTHIS TO MODERN TABLES

Raclette has its roots in the Swiss canton of Valais, where herdsmen in the Middle Ages would prop a wheel of cheese near the fire, scraping the bubbling top layer onto crusty bread or potatoes. In fact, the word "raclette" comes from the French verb *racler*, meaning "to scrape."

In the Valais region, where snowy peaks give way to lush summer pastures, raclette was more than sustenance — it was a reward. After long days of tending cows, herdsmen would gather around a wood fire, wedge a wheel of cheese nearby, and wait patiently for the outer layer to bubble and blister.

There was no rush. This was the meal, the moment, the pause in a hard-working day.

"Raclette began as humble mountain fare — melted cheese scraped over boiled potatoes and eaten fireside by Alpine herdsmen," says Melissa Ledbetter, vice president of marketing and e-commerce at Swiss cookware company Kuhn Rikon. "It was a meal of comfort, simplicity and togetherness."

Today, that fireside tradition has evolved into an interactive, celebratory experience — shared at restaurants, at home, or even outdoors with a portable grill and some dry riesling.

TYPES & STYLES: THE CHEESE THAT SCRAPES

Raclette cheese is semi-firm, cow's milk-based, and designed to melt like a dream. It's nutty, buttery, aromatic, and indulgently smooth when heated. Traditional Swiss raclette often leans grassy and floral; French raclette (from Savoie or Franche-Comté) can have more funk.

"Raclette cheese is rich, aromatic, and nutty with a buttery finish," says Ledbetter. "When melted, it becomes incredibly smooth and creamy, almost velvety. Unlike many melting cheeses,



raclette has a distinctive tang and earthiness that pairs beautifully with simple ingredients."

In the U.S., domestic makers are putting their own spin on the classic. Wisconsin's Alpinage Cheese Co. produces a washed-rind, small-format raclette that's a love letter to its Alpine roots. Known for its golden paste, rich melt, and bold aroma, Alpinage's raclette is perfect for broiling or bubbling over a cast-iron pan.

"I've used traditional French raclette, but we like Swiss raclettes from Jumi Cheese," says Kurt Mullican, co-founder and head of cheese at Greys Fine Cheese & Entertaining, with locations in Memphis, Nashville and Franklin, TN.

He also recommends Albert's Golden Child, a German cheese coated in warming spices, for an aromatic twist. "We tend to use imported varieties, all alpine style."

A CHEESE, A VERB, A WAY OF LIFE

Mullican captures the raclette ethos best: "I tell them raclette is both a cheese, a verb, and a way to do dinner."

At Greys, raclette is more than a menu item — it's a slow food experience. Sometimes it's grilled at the table in personal pans; other times, he uses a traditional TTM melter (a professional-grade cheese-melting device made by TTM, Technique + Tradition + Matériel, a Swiss company known for raclette equipment) for scraping onto plates in dramatic fashion.

“What sets it apart for us Americans is that cheese is the star of the show, not meat.”

— Kurt Mullican, Greys Fine Cheese & Entertaining, Nashville, TN

“Last winter, when we were doing raclette plates, I sold so many because eyes would light up when I was scraping cheese onto a plate. They watched me like a hawk, and you could tell it peaked when they knew it was their turn,” says Mullican. “You can tell it’s a special occasion for them.”

That joy and anticipation are part of raclette’s appeal. “What sets it apart for us Americans is that cheese is the star of the show, not meat,” Mullican adds. “It’s relatively simple ... where the meal is just the sum of stand-alone ingredients.”

YOUR RACLETTE PARTY STARTER PACK

Ready to melt? Raclette at home can be as traditional or as creative as you like. It all starts with the heat. Whether you’re investing in a full-size tabletop grill or going for a charming compact option, you’ve got choices. For an even more rustic spin, you can simply broil slices in a cast-iron pan. No matter the setup, what matters is that the cheese melts to that perfect oozy, golden state.

Slicing the cheese is a deceptively important detail. “Have your cheese shop slice your raclette for you,” recommends Mullican. “It’s hard to slice into perfect slices without the right equipment — but a shop with professional tools can help you out.”

Mullican loves making raclette hot dogs topped with mustard-dill coleslaw — a nod to comfort food with a Swiss twist. He also swears by raclette nachos: “Just toss the cheese and chips in a cast-iron pan, throw it under the broiler. Get the pastrami hot and melty in a skillet, dump it on top — then dress it with Russian dressing and chopped cornichons. Amazing.”

RACLETTE RISING: WHY WE’RE OBSESSED

There’s a reason this melty moment is trending. “There are a lot of Millennials who are seeking experiences over your run-of-the-mill going to chain restaurants,” notes Mullican. “For some younger adults, the rising costs of living make travel prohibitive, so a lot of us seek other little ways to treat ourselves.”

And raclette feels like a treat. It’s luxurious but unfussy, rooted in tradition but endlessly customizable. It’s as welcome at a dinner party as it is at a weeknight meal.

“Draping a blanket of raclette over a baked potato and having a nice glass of wine is a great way to give yourself a little treat,” Mullican adds.

Ledbetter agrees: “Picture this: A long table on a crisp autumn evening, surrounded by friends. The raclette grill is bubbling with creamy cheese. On the table — baby potatoes, grilled asparagus, cornichons, sourdough bread, prosciutto, mushrooms and roasted apples.”

There’s something elemental, almost primal, about melted cheese. And raclette, perhaps more than any other cheese, invites us to slow down, lean in, and savor it together. **CC**



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CHEESE RETAILER



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Cheese Storytellers

Fromagination showcases Wisconsin's rich history of cheese.

BY KEITH LORIA

Fromagination, a go-to cheese shop in Madison, WI, for 18 years, is the creation of owner Ken Monteleone, who is passionate about highlighting Wisconsin's rich cheese-making heritage and its emerging artisan food scene.

"A visit to Fromagination should do more than just satisfy your palate," he says. "It should also foster an appreciation for healthy, flavorful Midwestern foods and the talented people behind them."

Growing up in Colorado, Monteleone's family owned a specialty food business, and he has fond memories of working with local farmers and seeing how food items could unite a community.

In the early '90s, Monteleone moved to Madison to take on the corporate world and fell in love with the city. He worked as a shoe buyer and traveled the world, with no thoughts of ever opening his own business.

"Eventually, I decided I had enough of the corporate world, and I wanted to stay in Madison and become part of the food scene," says Monteleone. "I thought a cut-to-order European-style shop was needed."

Raised in an Italian family, his fondest memory was celebrating the holidays with an 80-pound Parmigiano Reggiano, and throughout the season, the family would give that to friends and family who would visit in December.

"Cheese was always something that was shared," says Monteleone. "But having lived in Madison for 15 years before I opened Fromagination, I got to know a lot of the producers from the Dane County Farmers' Market, which is located right outside our doorstep."

He was also familiar with the state's rich history of cheesemaking that goes back 125 years, but at the time his shop opened in 2007, no shop focused on telling the stories of the artisans.

"One dream I had always had was opening a store that celebrated the producer and become an advocate for telling those stories," says Monteleone. "We like to say that every cheese tells a story, so we like to dive in and really showcase them."

AN EVOLVING BUSINESS

Even though Monteleone had a well-thought-out business idea, getting his shop off the ground was not easy. He had to go to numerous banks before he found one that believed in the concept.

"The only reason he [the lender] believed in it was because he had a family in the dairy business, so I finally was able to get a small business loan," he says. "Two years into it, we were struggling, even though we were getting a lot of national press. We were even featured in the *New York Times* shortly after opening, but it was tough."

One of his moments occurred in 2009 when Monteleone got a call from Tony Hook, who is known for making cheddar in Wisconsin, who told him he was introducing a 15-year-old cheddar and offered him the chance to be one of the first stores to carry it.

"I was a little hesitant because we had never had a cheese that retailed for over \$30 a pound, and when he told me the price, I knew I would have to retail for over \$80 a pound, so I asked for 10 pounds," he says. "This was back in 2009, and I had 40 messages from people who had read about the cheddar or heard about it in a podcast that Tony did on *All Things Considered*."

Monteleone called Hook and told him that he had already sold four times as much as he had contracted for, and the cheesemaker was more than happy to help him out with more.

"The orders poured in throughout the country, and that helped us get through the holiday season," he says.



CC/AMIEE TENZEK PHOTO

NOTABLE PRODUCTS

When Fromagination first opened, Monteleone had planned to open with a small assortment of European cheeses, and the shipment got delayed, which he calls “a blessing in disguise.”

“We ended up focusing on Wisconsin cheeses that first month,” he says. “It was not initially planned. That helped set the stage for what we were all about and brought what was going on in our own backyard to the grand stage with our opening.”

At the time, Wisconsin was going through what Monteleone characterized as a “cheese renaissance,” with a lot of new cheesemakers entering the arena.

“Some of them were fourth-generation cheesemakers whose families had closed the businesses, and they were resurrecting those,” says Monteleone. “So, we started about the same time these artisans were entering the scene.”

Over the years, as these cheesemakers have grown, Fromagination has developed strong relationships, and it’s helped the shop expand.

“We work with producers who have a story to tell,” says Monteleone. “We want to represent Wisconsin first. Today, over 80% of our assortment is Wisconsin-made.”

Although the shop primarily features Wisconsin products, Fromagination frequently offers guests the opportunity to sample cheeses from renowned producers in regions, like Vermont, Minnesota, California, Italy, France, England and the Netherlands.

A cheese worthy of space at Fromagination is one with an interesting story.

“We like to get to know the producer, and it’s very important that we buy directly from them,” says Monteleone. “Even though it would be easier to buy from a distributor, we would prefer to pay a little more so we can call the producer, visit their farm and really know what’s being delivered to our store. Those relationships are very important to us so we can tell the story authentically.”

For example, Fromagination works with Ron Henningfeld of Hill Valley Dairy, and one of its most popular cheeses is Luna, a cave-aged, natural rind alpine/gouda hybrid with a nutty and tangy flavor, slight crunch and earthiness from the rind.

“There are only a handful of shops that carry his selection of artisan cheeses,” says Monteleone. “The flavor intensity of Luna really has a unique character to it, and it’s become a staple in our shop.”

A TOP TEAM

The business has gone through a lot of changes in 18 years — it’s survived the pandemic, stayed strong amongst a lot of protests (the store sits right on Capitol Square) and an ever-changing environment in the retail world. Monteleone credits his team with helping get through it all.

“We may be a very small retailer, but when you have this community, you can make a lot of noise when you all partner together. It’s the people who really make this worthwhile.”

— Ken Monteleone

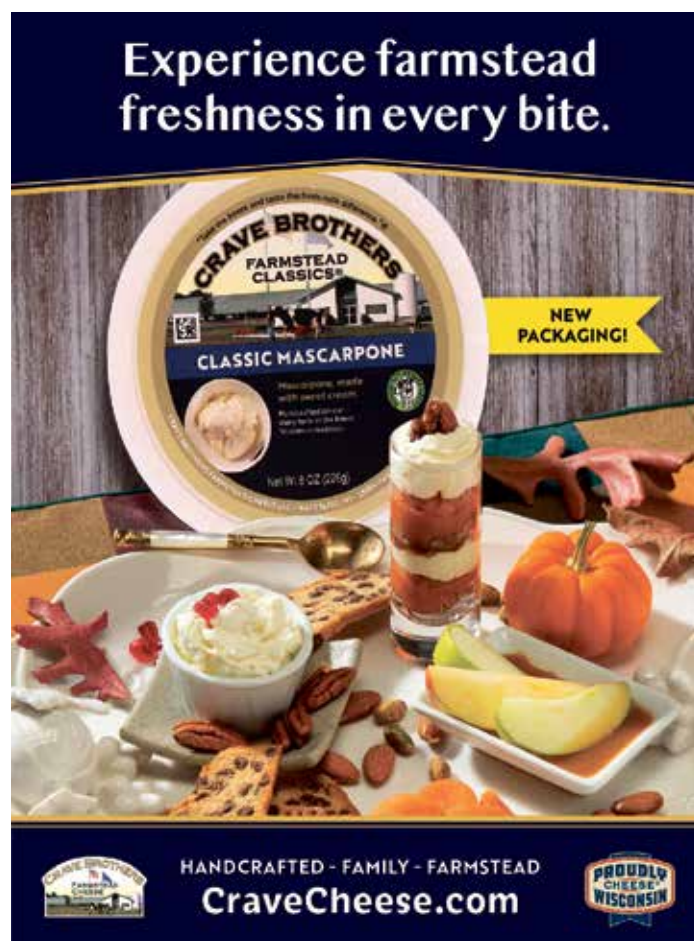


“Our team focuses on service and hospitality,” he says. “Our big point of differentiation is becoming storytellers and really getting to know what people like.”

The store offers samples of most of its product, and at any given time, has 80-100 cheeses available, complemented by other local products that pair with cheese.

“Our team is really outgoing and hospitality-driven and takes pleasure in creating a fun environment that showcases the artisan,” says Monteleone. “We can’t compete on price, so we compete on the experience and the taste.”

CC



CHEESE TRAIL



California Artisan Cheesemakers

A look at 10 cheesemakers carrying on a rich tradition.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

You could say there have been two gold rushes in California. The first started in the late 1700s — long before gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill in 1848 — when Spanish missionaries introduced fruits, vegetables and cows. Cheesemaking soon followed, and *Queso del Pais*, or “country cheese,” emerged, according to the California Milk Advisory Board (CMAB), in Tracy, CA. This evolved into what today is the pale golden yellow, buttery-flavored Monterey Jack.

Today, California is the second-largest producer of cheese after Wisconsin. However, the state's real claim to cheese fame is its artisan production over abundance.

“California's varied geography, from coastal fog to inland valleys, allows for a wide range of cheese production, from soft and fresh to hard and aged cheeses, says Valerie Miller, executive director of the California Artisan Cheese Guild, in Durham, CA. “The mid-1990s saw a resurgence of the artisan cheese movement in Northern California, leading to a wide array of cheese styles and the pioneering of goat and sheep's milk cheeses, with cheesemakers gaining international recognition for their innovative and high-quality cheeses.”

Here, *CHEESE CONNOISSEUR* highlights some of California's notable artisan cheesemakers, their history, and what makes them stand out.

BELLWETTER FARM

Petaluma, CA

At an age when some people consider retirement, Cindy Callahan, a registered nurse and later a tax attorney, turned to a new profession. In 1986, Callahan founded Bellwether, one of

California's earliest licensed sheep dairies.

Cheesemaking started in 1990 when Callahan's son, Liam, joined the farm. Research trips to Italy in the early 1990s helped shape the creamery's Old World approach. The mid-1990s welcomed the introduction of Carmody Jersey cow's milk cheese, followed by a series of now signature products, such as Crème Fraîche, Sheep Milk Yogurt, Whole Milk Basket Ricotta and Organic Cow Yogurt.

“On our early trips to Italy, we fell in love with the hand-dipped ricotta we saw there,” says Diana Callahan, co-owner and Liam's wife. “Italians lined up at markets for the fresh, still warm ricotta, and we knew we wanted to recreate that experience here at home. Our ricotta is hand-dipped in traditional baskets, which creates its delicate shape and texture.”

Bellwether's most recent introduction is its Fresh Sheep Log, available in both Original and Sonoma Herbs flavors. It's a soft, creamy, fresh cheese with a clean flavor and no strong “sheepy” notes that spreads beautifully on crostini, adds richness to salads, and makes an elegant centerpiece on a cheese board.

COWGIRL CREAMERY

Petaluma, CA

Back in 1997, two college friends, Sue Conley and Peggy Smith, started a business with a shared dream of celebrating



PHOTO COURTESY BELLWETHER FARMS



organic practices and spotlighting the craftsmanship of local sustainable agriculture in Northern California's Sonoma County. Three years later, the duo's Cowgirl Creamery introduced its first cheese, Mt Tam, a triple-cream, soft-ripened cheese named

after the prominent peak, Mount Tamalpais, which rises over San Francisco Bay.

"Today, we're carrying the torch of the food revolution that started in our backyard. Organic. Farm-to-Table. Delicious. Award-winning cheese. It's in our DNA. And it defines our famous creations, including the beloved triple cream Mt Tam," says Kaya Freiman, brand manager. "Mt Tam takes you from fudgy firmness to buttery softness with flavors spanning from bright creme fraiche to complex and mushroomy, evoking North Bay's lush green and gold pastures."

Triple Cream Brie is the creamery's newest cheese.

"Its rind-to-paste ratio offers a decadent and delicious tasting experience with a stunning bloomy rind and buttery texture," says Freiman.



CYPRESS GROVE

Arcata, CA

What began for Mary Keehn as a backyard hobby — raising goats for their easy-to-digest milk — soon evolved into something much bigger. In 1983, she founded Cypress Grove, one of the first creameries, dedicated to producing high-quality goat cheese.

Inspired by a trip to France, Keehn developed Humboldt Fog, the creamery's now-iconic soft-ripened goat cheese with a line of edible ash. Today,

Cypress Grove remains nationally celebrated for Humboldt Fog and continues to craft an award-winning range of soft-ripened, fresh and aged goat cheeses.

"With its dramatic line of edible vegetable ash and a lush, citrusy tang, Humboldt Fog broke all the rules and helped define what American goat cheese could be," says Christy Khattab, marketing director. "It's iconic for a reason: ripened from the outside in, it offers a beautiful creamline and a balance of texture and flavor that evolves with age."

Cypress Grove's newest cheese is Olive & Herb, a fresh goat cheese blended with green olives, garlic, and a hint of rosemary.

FISCALINI FARMSTEAD CHEESE

Modesto, CA

In 1914, Swiss immigrant John Baptiste Fiscalini bought 160 acres and 10 cows in Modesto, unknowingly laying the foundation for a family legacy. Fast forward to 2000, Fiscalini's grandson, also named John, discovered the family's heritage of cheesemaking in Switzerland. He decided to return to this craft.

The following year, San Joaquin Gold, a hard Italian-style cheese made in 30-pound wheels and aged for a minimum of a year,

launched under the Fiscalini Farmstead brand. Today, two of John's children, Laura Genasci and Brian Fiscalini, direct the day-to-day operations along with their father.

"We like to call San Joaquin Gold our award-winning mistake," says Genasci, referring to the gold medal the cheese won in its first competition. "With used equipment, a recipe, and a team who had never made cheese before, we crafted our first batch of what we believed was a Fontina. A year later, when we hired an experienced cheesemaker, he told us it wasn't Fontina. However, he liked the cheese, and felt it had promise. With a few trials and tweaks, we had an American Original, and we named it after the San Joaquin Valley, where it is produced."

LAURA CHENEL

Sonoma, CA

Laura Chenel, founder of the namesake creamery in the heart of Sonoma County, mastered the centuries-old craft of artisan goat cheesemaking by studying in France. In 1979, Chenel pioneered the introduction of her California-made Original Fresh Goat Cheese Log.

Her big break came when famed farm-to-table chef Alice Waters, of Chez Panisse, served it sliced, panko-breaded, baked, and nestled in a bed of fresh greens. This iconic salad is still on the Chez Panisse menu, and Chenel's Original Fresh Goat Cheese Log is sold at specialty cheese shops nationwide.

"Over 40 years later, our cheesemakers continue Laura Chenel's legacy of craftsmanship, best-in-class standards, and unwavering care that goes into every step of the process, including using high-quality domestic goat's milk from family-owned farms," says Durae Hardy, marketing director. "In this way, the cheeses reflect the best of both worlds: traditional craftsmanship, filtered through the landscape and culinary traditions of Northern California."

MT. EITAN CREAMERY

Bodega, CA

One of the smallest and newest artisan cheese producers, having opened in 2023, is Mt. Eitan Creamery. Created as an atelier, a working studio where making cheese is treated as a thoughtful craft, owner and fromager, Omer Seltzer, draws his inspiration from his boyhood days growing up and herding goats on the family's farm in Israel's Judean Mountains.

Later, he graduated from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, apprenticed at goat farms in Southern France, and came back to open his



Omer Seltzer, owner and fromager, Mt. Eitan Creamery

CHEESE TRAIL

creamery in California's Sonoma County. He sources goat milk and whole Jersey cow's milk locally to make his cheese. On the goat front, Mt. Eitan's Raya is a standout. So is its Tome, a firm alpine-style cheese.

"Our goat cheeses reflect a slow, attentive process shaped by time and place," says Seltzer. "Raya is made in two styles: one aged between six and 12 months, with steady, earthy tones; the other aged a full year, where the flavors deepen into something sharper and more concentrated. Tome, aged in large wheels, leans in a different direction — firmer in texture, with a gentle sweetness that emerges slowly."

PHOTO COURTESY NICASIO VALLEY



NICASIO VALLEY CHEESE COMPANY

Nicasio, CA

Like some California artisan cheese-makers, Nicasio Valley's heritage dates back over a century. Fredolino "Fred" Lafranchi immigrated from Switzerland to California's Marin County and founded the Lafranchi Dairy in 1919.

Fred's son, Will, visited the family's homeland several times. In 2010, Will and his family hired Swiss Master Cheesemaker, Maurizio Lorenzetto, to mentor them in making the cheeses of Switzerland's Valle Maggia, but in California. Unlike all others, Nicasio Valley's claim to fame is it's the only organic farmstead cheese producer in the state.

"Foggy Morning, a fromage blanc style cheese, is our most well-known. It's the first cheese we made with Maurizio," says Rick Lafranchi, managing partner. "Its nuances change with the seasons. It gets creamy when the cows have high butterfat during the winter season, a sweeter flavor when the cows are on pasture during the grazing season, and an overall great milky, tangy flavor year-round."

PHOTO COURTESY SIERRA NEVADA



SIERRA NEVADA CHEESE COMPANY

Willows, CA

Friends Ben Gregersen and John Dundon started Sierra Nevada Cheese in 1997 with a shared passion and simple goal: to make quality, artisanal-style dairy products by traditional methods and milk sourced from local,

family-run farms throughout Northern California.

Working out of a restored 1958-built creamery, the duo and their team focus on small-batch cheese, yogurt and butter. The business has gradually expanded to include a distribution center and a retail space.

"We are recognized for our Gina Marie Cream Cheese," says Meghan Rodgers, sales and marketing manager. "It's a brand we purchased in 2002, and we continue to craft it with only three ingredients — rBST-free and antibiotic-free cultured milk and cream, and salt. We use a traditional, three-day draining process in muslin bags to give it its smooth texture and creamy flavor without artificial ingredients, gums, stabilizers or fillers."

Raw Milk Smoked Goat Cheddar is Sierra Nevada's latest cheese, introduced in 2018.

TOLUMA FARMS & TOMALES FARMSTEAD CREAMERY

Tomales, CA

The coastal areas of Sonoma and Marin counties are the ancestral homelands of one of California's indigenous people, the Coast Miwoks. It's on 160 acres of this fertile farmland that Tamara Hicks and David Jablons, with daughters, Josy and Emmy, founded Toluma Farms, opened it as a goat and sheep dairy in 2007, and soon after started Tomales Farmstead Creamery to craft cheese. The sustainable farm, with nearly all its acres certified organic, is now protected as agricultural land under the Marin Agricultural Land Trust.

"Our best-known cheese is Teleeka, which is the Coast Miwok's word for 'three,'" says Hicks, co-owner. "It's a triple milk cheese — goat, sheep and cow. There aren't many triple milk, soft ripened cheeses out there, which makes ours stand out."

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Bossy, a soft ripened cheese made exclusively with more easily digestible A2 Jersey milk sourced locally, is the creamery's most recent introduction. The moniker gives a nod to past and present. It represents a popular cow's name in the mid-1800s and, as Hicks says, gives a respectful and loving nod to bossy females everywhere who get the job done.

WILLIAM COFIELD CHEESEMAKERS

Sebastopol, CA

Rob Hunter and Keith Adams' paths first crossed at U.C. Davis, then split. Hunter stayed in California, building a career at several well-regarded wineries, including Bennett Lane in Calistoga, where he now leads the winemaking.

Adams headed to Minnesota, opening a bagel shop and later founding Alemar Cheese, known for its Camembert-style cheese under the Bent River brand. Years later, the two men found themselves back in touch, with the commonality of having years of hands-on experience in fermentation and flavor.

That connection led to William Cofield Cheesemakers in 2016, which has successfully navigated a pandemic, fires, and floods since its opening, focusing on British-inspired cheeses. As Adams says, the project is less about nostalgia and more about combining skill, curiosity, and a long-standing friendship.

"I'd say our signature cheeses are the two we entered the market with," says Adams. "That's our Bodega Blue, a Stilton-inspired blue cheese, and our McKinley Cheddar, a lush, cloth-bound aged cheddar. We're also known for making and selling fresh squeaky cheese curds, a Midwest favorite. All three are made with organic, grass-fed milk from nearby Petaluma."

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