

Cheese CONNOISSEUR

Fall 2026

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RETURNING TO
PROVIDENCE FOR
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CHEESE RETAILER
MURRAY'S CHEESE:
NEIGHBORHOOD
HEART, NATIONAL
REACH

FEATURE
PROVOLONE: CHEESE
ENJOYED AROUND
THE WORLD

CHEESE TRAIL
NEW YORK CONTINUES TO
FUEL THRIVING ARTISAN
CHEESE INDUSTRY

CATHY STRANGE:
AN ICON OF
THE INDUSTRY

ELEVATING SPECIALTY CHEESE RETAIL
WHILE SETTING NEW INDUSTRY STANDARDS

A New Kind of Magic



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OPINION

ACS Will Return to Providence For Cheese Conference

BY ASHLEY MONTOKA



The American Cheese Society (ACS) is excited to announce that the cheese community will gather in Providence, RI, from July 13-16, 2027, for our annual conference.

Every summer, when we come together for our conference, the energy, passion, and camaraderie of our organization are on full display. The conference brings together people from every aspect of our community, from cheesemakers to retailers, distributors, educators, scientists and cheese enthusiasts. It is a time to learn, reconnect, exchange ideas, and celebrate the people and products that make the cheese industry so special.

ACS is thrilled to return to Providence, which last welcomed us in 2015 for "Cheese Camp," an event remembered fondly by many members. Returning more than a decade later offers an opportunity to celebrate that history while creating a new experience shaped by how much the industry, and ACS, has grown.

With its vibrant food culture and strong appreciation for local producers and artisans, Providence offers a unique setting for the ACS community. The Rhode Island Convention Center will serve as the central gathering place for education, relationship-building, industry conversations and exceptional cheese.

Additional information about the 2027 conference, including programming and event details, will be shared in the coming months. Registration and hotel reservations are expected to open in March 2027.

We look forward to welcoming the cheese community back to Providence!

Ashley Montoya is vice president of operations at Civica Management. She currently serves as interim executive director of the American Cheese Society, supporting ACS through a period of transition and continued growth.

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CATHY STRANGE: An Icon of the Industry

Strange has helped elevate specialty cheese retail while setting new industry standards.

BY LISA WHITE

PHOTOS COURTESY WHOLE FOODS MARKET

As Whole Foods Market's Ambassador of Food Culture, Cathy Strange brings decades of experience to the role. Formerly the company's vice president of specialty foods and adult beverage, her expertise includes serving as the retail chain's global cheese buyer.

In her current role, Strange remains deeply connected to the cheese industry. A member of the American Cheese Society (ACS), she previously served as the organization's president and on its board of directors. She also serves as chair and ambassador of the prestigious French association of cheesemongers and cheese specialists, *Guilde Internationale des Fromagers*, representing the U.S., Australia, Canada and Mexico.

In recognition of her contributions to the industry, Strange has been awarded the French Order of Agricultural Merit and is the only American and non-Italian to receive the *Coltellino d'Oro* from the Consortium of *Parmigiano Reggiano*.

Strange is also a board member of the Oldways Cheese Coalition, the Cheese Importers Association, the International Association of Culinary Professionals, Slow Food USA, and served as past president of *Les Dames d'Escoffier's* Austin Chapter.

With her extensive cheese expertise, Strange has traveled the world judging for the World Championship Cheese Contest, the U.S. Championship Cheese Contest, the World Cheese Awards, the American Cheese Society competition, the British Cheese Awards, and is one of six international judges for the *Casello d'Oro* of *Parmigiano Reggiano*.

CHEESE CONNOISSEUR had the honor of speaking with Strange about her background, impressive career and all things cheese.



CC: Tell me about how you became one of the cheese industry's most well-known figures.

CS: I was born in New York, lived in Germany for a bit, but grew up in Fayetteville, NC. I majored in education at the University of North Carolina in the late '70s, and played college athletics: basketball for four years, volleyball for three years, and softball and tennis for one year. I took a job at Florida State University as a physical trainer, then worked at the University of Tennessee at Martin.

Around that time, I decided to move back to North Carolina to be closer to my mother while she was ill. A college athlete friend happened to be managing an Italian restaurant in Durham, and she asked me to oversee the wine program.

This created an opportunity for me to work for an amazing restaurant while also being there for my mother, and that's when I fell in love with food. At that time, there was not much happening in the food world. There was no Food Network, and it wasn't until '94 that I picked up my first copy of *The Art of Eating*.

During my work in Durham, I met Mary Booth, and we became quick friends. She introduced me to people who shared our passion for food and broadened my horizons in the industry. After the restaurant was sold, I wanted to maintain my knowledge of wine vintages.

Booth recommended I pursue a job at Wellspring Grocery, a specialty store in North Carolina's Research Triangle Park area where I grew up. Wellspring's cheese selection rivaled stores like Dean & DeLuca's and Balducci's, making it a destination for specialty foods. I joined Wellspring part time in 1991, the same year Whole Foods Market was acquiring companies ahead of its IPO.

So, I started my cheese career working for this very specialized grocer, which was founded by Lex Alexander, who had a passion for the highest quality products, like Ari Weinzwieg from Zingerman's. We had Neal's Yard Dairy cheese 32 years ago. We had the best produce from the area. We just had the best of everything.

With Whole Foods Market acquiring us, we brought this unique capability of bringing in the highest quality products that weren't out of a cooperative-style environment. It was a really great blend and collaborative vision to grow the business.

Working at Wellspring Grocery when Whole Foods Market purchased it and went public was a fortunate circumstance.

I desired more knowledge, and I knew the stores were always about the highest quality and getting better every day. I wanted to increase the standard and create a new environment for cheese, and I was able to do that through Whole Foods Market.

Becoming fast friends with people who have lived and traveled abroad is the basis of my journey.

CC: Discuss the highlights of your career and how the industry has evolved.

CS: Working at Wellspring and meeting Lex Alexander was a highlight, as well as meeting Randolph Hodgson, founder of Neal's Yard Dairy.

I went from working part time to full time and moved to Washington, D.C., to open a new generation of Whole Foods Market stores under the Bread & Circus name. When I worked at Chapel Hill, it was Whole Foods Market's 11th location. Today, the company has expanded to more than 550 stores.

Then I became a coordinator for Whole Foods on the East



Coast, covering the Mid-Atlantic region from New Jersey to Florida. At the time, the East Coast was a hotbed for emerging food trends. In 2001, I stepped into a global role as the Global Cheese Buyer, which gave me the opportunity to work on an international scale.

Another high point was being on the board of ACS and being elected president in the early 2000s. We hosted the ACS conference in D.C. during that time, and it was a highlight to show what Whole Foods Market did. This included things like standards around animal welfare and showing cheeses that don't have chemicals sprayed on them, as well as using no artificial hormones in our cow's milk cheeses.

There was a time when the use of synthetic hormones was widely acceptable. When we took the step to eliminate them and advocate for animal welfare, I was booed off the stage.

As part of our focus on cheese quality and auditing, we collaborated with industry organizations, including the California Milk Advisory Board, the Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research, and Cornell University, which helped support those initiatives.

We brought in important products not available in the U.S. at that time, like Le Gruyère. The Parmigiano Reggiano program was built around hand selection, and I'm proud of it.

Whole Foods Market's team members are respected for their knowledge; we sent 100 team members to the first ACS Certified Cheese Professional Exam.

CC: When evaluating an artisan cheesemaker, what specific elements stand out to you first?

CS: We are beyond the days of certified product being enough to make it a part of the assortment. Products also must taste great. From there, I ask questions to understand how the cheese is made and whether its quality is consistent.

We also evaluate how well it travels and whether it reliably meets the cheesemaker's own standards. About 60% of the time, the answer is no.

Building a partnership is about trust, but it's also about confirming that the cheese consistently delivers on quality and flavor. If it doesn't, there may be issues with the making process or animal care, and we'll often work with the producer to help address those.

CC: Talk about the importance of promoting local cheesemakers.

CS: I think Whole Foods Market changed the American artisan industry by embracing local. When I first worked in North Carolina, there were only four cheesemakers, and there are now 35.

The local level of growth has been dynamic for the artisan cheese industry, and customers helped when they embraced U.S. artisan cheeses, so our timing and commitment were perfect.

We were the first to focus on local with our Local and Emerging Accelerator Program (LEAP), which is geared for small producers looking to grow. Whole Foods Market helps producers make more informed decisions, gain exposure, and build collaborative, long-term partnerships. We're proud of the work we've done to champion local producers and sustainability — serving not just as a retailer, but as an advocate for the industry.

CC: What emerging cheese trends are you seeing?

CS: It hasn't hit the U.S. yet, but countries like Japan have great cheesemakers. The varieties are hard to make over here.

Also, cheeses from Thailand and Taiwan are emerging. Donkey milk cheese from Spain did well when judged at the World Cheese Championships. And mixed-milk cheeses will have their day again. Now we segregate, but these will be back.

CC: How do strict European Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) criteria compare to the evolving protections for American artisanal names?

CS: PDO is different from the U.S. Code of Regulations. A PDO designation relates to how a product is made and where it originates, whereas U.S. regulations are based on standards of identity and product categories.

Unfortunately, European PDO protections were not established as trademarks in the U.S., so terms are often used to describe a style rather than a protected designation, unlike wine appellations.

Given the size and scale of the U.S. — California alone is larger than many European countries — it would be limiting to apply the same framework. They're really two different systems and aren't directly comparable.

CC: What do you like best about the industry?

CS: The people are inspiring. They can be a millionaire or an intern just starting in the cheese business.

Andy and Mateo [Kehler, founders of Jasper Hill Farm] just wanted to bring dairy back to where they grew up. There are so many stories of perseverance since it's not easy to make cheese.

It's so different from many things. You're dealing with animals and processing products. People want every cheese to be better because it reflects on all of us. And it's a healthier product than people think.

CC: What are your favorite types of cheese?

CS: Whatever is in my refrigerator. Parmigiano Reggiano is so versatile. I love fresh goat cheeses where the milk is fresh.

I like sticky, gooey cheeses like Jasper Hill Farm's Harbison or

“If you taste a cheese and remember it, that puts it ahead of the pack because it creates a lasting impression. You don't need another bite. That's what separates a good cheese from a great one.”

— Cathy Strange

Blakesville Creamery. I tend to go from hard to fresh, but you will always find one of those in my fridge.

CC: What are your plans for the future?

CS: I love having the opportunity to work with women in the industry. I want to work more with a new generation of female farmers who have a high regard for animal welfare and are not afraid to take chances.

I also want to create a cheese museum that travels around the country. I mentioned this at the Wisconsin Cheesemakers Conference.

We are losing a generation of cheesemakers who are talented. In the future, I want to honor them and capture their voices to tell the story, not just in the U.S., but internationally. **CC**

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MURRAY'S CHEESE: Neighborhood Heart, National Reach



Murray's Cheese began as a single Greenwich Village shop in 1962. Today, its New York retail business includes the Bleecker Street flagship (pictured) and a Grand Central Market shop.

CHEESE CONNOISSEUR/AIMEE TENZEK PHOTO

Education, careful curation and hands-on affinage help a NY institution bring the intimacy of a specialty cheese shop to customers.

BY KEITH LORIA

Step into Murray's Cheese on Bleecker Street and the abundance is part of the magic. The counter is stacked with anywhere from 200 to 300 cheeses, including familiar cheddars, delicate bloomies and rugged natural rinds. For an experienced turophile, it is an invitation. For a first-time specialty cheese shopper, it can be intimidating.

This is where Murray's really shines, by offering knowledge delivered with hospitality. A cheesemonger starts a conversation, asks what the customer likes and what the cheese needs to do, then offers a taste. The goal is not simply to complete a sale. It is to help someone leave with confidence.

"The thing that is so great about Murray's is: No. 1, the longevity of it, but No. 2, the fact that we've held on to our neighborhood feel even as we have continued to grow," says Cynthia Chovet, vice president of operations at Murray's Cheese. "There are fewer

specialty shops like us around. Everything changes, but it's nice to know that you can rely on the fact that we're there."

SCALING THE NEIGHBORHOOD SHOP

Murray's began as a single Greenwich Village shop in 1962. Today, its New York retail business includes the Bleecker Street flagship and a Grand Central Market shop that has served commuters, tourists and regulars for more than two decades. Both occupy iconic locations, Chovet says, but still function as neighborhood stores.

The company's relationship with Kroger opened a larger route to the consumer. Murray's joined the Kroger family of companies in 2017, and its branded kiosks now operate within the Kroger footprint across the U.S. The arrangement gives customers far from Manhattan access to a curated specialty selection and a monger-led experience inside a supermarket.

Extending its reach without flattening the experience is crucial to Chovet's work. A chef by training, she spent 25-plus years in specialty foods, much of it with French and Italian companies operating in the United States. Murray's is her second cheese company, and she views its longevity with an operator's eye and an appreciation for place.

"We've worked very hard to make sure that we continue to handpick all of the selections we carry and preserve how we interact with customers," says Chovet. "We've maintained that trust even as we've grown. For me, that's part of the joy of working for a brand that has been able to hold on to its heart but continue to grow."

EDUCATION AT THE COUNTER

For Murray's, education is not a responsibility that sits apart from retail. It is the daily approach that makes a large assortment accessible.

"We continue to educate the customer every single day, because people walk in and we'll have 200 to 300 different cheeses on the counter for sale," says Chovet. "If you're not familiar with specialty cheese, that could be a bit overwhelming."

The monger's task, therefore, is to lower that introduction barrier. Rather than leading with technical language, employees ask why the shopper came in, what flavors they already enjoy and what they want to accomplish. A cheese for a weeknight recipe invites a different recommendation than the centerpiece of a celebration board.

"We really depend on our mongers to open those conversations with customers, figure out what they want and talk them through things," says Chovet. "More importantly, we have them taste things as well. Letting people taste and try is a key part of finding what they will really enjoy."

CURATING WITH PURPOSE

Behind that freedom to explore is a disciplined selection process. Murray's merchandising team holds tastings, works closely with suppliers, and maintains relationships with small producers — including American makers looking for a route to market for a new cheese.

"We bring new things in constantly," says Chovet. "It can be a smaller producer trying something new that they want us to take to the market for them. Our merchandising team works very closely with our suppliers and producers to get the cheeses they think help fill in our set in a meaningful way."

But there's more to the selection process. The team considers whether a prospective cheese adds something distinct or duplicates a style already in the case. It also must meet Murray's standards for production, flavor and quality.

The resulting assortment intentionally spans geographies and traditions. Old World European cheeses remain essential, as do American farmstead and specialty selections. Murray's also carries cheeses from Mexico and South America and continues looking to other regions for traditional products that can bring an unfamiliar flavor or story to the counter.

A CREATIVE ENGINE IN LONG ISLAND CITY

Selection is only one way Murray's shapes what it sells. At its Long Island City caves, the company practices affinage, taking young cheeses and guiding their maturation through controlled environments and hands-on care.

Chovet has visited the Emmi Kaltbach caves in Switzerland,



CHEESE CONNOISSEUR: AMEE TENZKE PHOTO

Murray's cheesemongers make specialty cheese more approachable by guiding shoppers through the extensive selection, asking about their tastes, occasions and needs to recommend the right cheese for every meal or celebration.

where granite-lined spaces are built into a mountain. "We don't have mountains in Long Island City," she says, "but we created a similar environment to age cheeses in."

The facility includes separate caves for Alpine, natural-rind, bloomy-rind and washed-rind cheeses. Each requires a different balance of temperature and humidity, and each supports distinct organisms, textures and flavors.

"It is not that we are actually making the cheeses, but we are taking a green cheese and turning it into something unique through the aging process," says Chovet.

Stockinghall, Murray's award-winning clothbound cheddar, demonstrates the partnership. A New York producer makes the young cheese for Murray's, then sends it to Long Island City, where the caves team carefully ages and tends it for at least a year before release.

The program received another validation in July, when six Murray's cave-aged cheeses earned medals at the 2026 American Cheese Society Judging & Competition. The recognition underscores a role few retailers occupy: Murray's does not merely source and sell artisan cheese; it helps determine how select wheels will express themselves at maturity.

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Chovet sees the specialty market moving back toward many of the qualities on which Murray's was built. Higher-end specialty stores are opening again, both as focused shops and within grocery, as consumers pay closer attention to how they feed themselves and their families.

"We're really going full circle on the artisanal market," she says. "What's old is new again. You see the market focusing on: 'How do I feed myself? How do I feed my family? I want products that are clean. I want products that are good for me.' That's where this idea of the artisanal market is coming back into play."

Murray's role in that revival is to keep widening the invitation. Chovet is encouraged not only by customers' cheese knowledge, but by the personal meaning they attach to food made by hand. A memorable cheese becomes connected to a holiday, a trip, a dinner, or the person who introduced it.

"It's a beautiful thing when it's been handmade, and you know where it came from," she says. "Potentially, you know the farmer, and you might have met the cow, the sheep or the goat. It gives people an opportunity to connect back to their food source." **CC**



PHOTO COURTESY BELGIOIOSO CHEESE

Provolone: Globe-Shaped Cheese Enjoyed Around the World

History, aging styles, and flavor profiles make provolone a standout.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Imagine standing in a supermarket cheese department beside a provolone so enormous it stops shoppers in their tracks. When the time finally comes to cut into it, cheese lovers drive from miles around for the chance to watch — and taste.

Franklin Fernandez, specialty cheese merchant at Uncle Giuseppe's Marketplace, travels annually to Cremona, Italy, to meet with world-leading manufacturer Auricchio S.p.A., to taste provolone and select cheeses, and source for the Melville, NY-headquartered gourmet Italian grocery, with 13 locations in New York and New Jersey.

One of Fernandez's selections is definitely in a class of its own. It makes the trip from Italy to the U.S., arrives on the sales floor, and becomes impossible to miss: 900 pounds of aged Italian cheese, the Provolone Gigante.

Its sheer size gets attention, but the Gigante also makes a point about a cheese many shoppers think they already know. Provolone can be young or aged, mild or sharp, with flavor and texture that change considerably depending on how it's made and matured.

To understand provolone, Fernandez says, it helps to go back to Cremona, a city in the Po Valley of northern Italy's Lombardy region, where generations of cheesemakers have crafted pasta filata, or stretched-curd cheeses, and established the area as a heartland of traditional provolone production.

"To me, nothing says Italy like provolone," he explains. "Go stand in Cremona. Walk the cobblestones, look at the cathedral,

think about the fact that Stradivari made his violins on those same streets. Craftsmanship comes naturally to that city, and in my opinion, Auricchio provolone is its highest expression in food."

From familiar slices tucked into sandwiches to specialty cheeses aged for depth and complexity, provolone offers more variety, and more nuance, than many cheese lovers may realize. Here's what makes this Italian classic worth a closer look.

ITALIAN ROOTS

Provolone's story begins in Southern Italy but took a defining turn north to the Po Valley, Italy's agricultural heartland, in the second half of the 19th century. Following Italian unification, cheesemakers from Southern Italy brought their expertise in stretched-curd cheeses north, where plentiful high-quality cow's milk and excellent farming conditions helped turn that tradition into what we know today as provolone.

"This meeting of southern cheesemaking expertise and the rich dairy heritage of the Po Valley gave birth to Provolone Valpadana, a cheese that combines craftsmanship, innovation and regional identity," says Giovanni Guarneri, president of the Consorzio Tutela Provolone Valpadana, the consortium that protects, promotes and oversees Provolone Valpadana PDO. The cheese has held Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status under European legislation since 1996.

Its name, however, dates back much further.

"The name 'Provolone' first appeared in agricultural literature in 1871, referring to a large-sized version of the traditional provola," says Guarneri.

FROM CURD TO CHARACTER

Provolone Valpadana PDO is made exclusively from cow's milk, with each cheese hand-tied and fashioned into one of four traditional shapes: salami, melon or pear, truncated cone or flask, ranging from a pound or less to more than 220 pounds. The new Provolone Valpadana PDO logo, introduced in March 2026 and used on packages and labels, features a golden-yellow cheese-shaped silhouette, the Italian tricolor, and the PDO designation.

"Provolone Valpadana PDO must be produced within its designated geographical area according to specifications that cover every step, from milk production through aging," says Guarneri. "The traditional shapes are part of that heritage. Still, their different sizes and forms can also affect how the cheese ages and develops its final texture, aroma, and flavor."

The difference between PDO and non-PDO provolone is the origin of the cow's milk and respect for the consortium's strict rules.

However, this is still a regulated cheese, says Pat Doell, a fourth-generation cheesemaker who has spent his entire career at the Luxemburg, WI-based plant, which was founded by his family and is now part of Agropur, a major North American dairy cooperative headquartered in Saint-Hubert, Quebec, with U.S. operations based in Appleton, WI. "This means that any provolone you buy is going to meet certain standards that include moisture and milkfat content."

Age is where provolone really shows its range.

"I refer to provolone as the cheese for all seasons," says Errico Auricchio, founder of BelGioioso Cheese, Inc., in Green Bay, WI, which makes its own starter culture and sells its cheese in four stages of aging, with flavors ranging from mild and buttery to pleasantly aromatic and robust. "It's made to be eaten either fresh, medium, or aged."

Dolce (mild) is one of the two main styles of provolone and is aged up to about 30 days.

"There is now a strong interest in Auricchio Dolce provolone," says John Dammacco, vice president of sales and marketing for the Ambriola Company, in West Caldwell, NJ, which was acquired by the 1877-founded Auricchio S.p.A of Cremona, Italy, in 2015, and is the sole importer of Auricchio Provolone.

Auricchio uses proprietary rennets and natural aging to define the unique flavor of its five aged provolone varieties. "Dolce is a very mild, approachable provolone, great for adults and kids for snacking, as well as an excellent cheese in the kitchen," says Dammacco.

Piccante (sharp) is the second major provolone type.

"Auricchio Piccante, aged 12 months, comes to us in the chub, close to 3 feet of cheese out of Cremona," says Uncle Giuseppe's Fernandez. "Straw-colored paste, semi-hard, compact with a little flaking when you cut it, and that spicy punch and musty aroma that is the trademark of a real provolone. This is the most identifiable provolone in the world."

There's provolone aged even longer.

"Our Riserva is a 200-pound chub made exclusively for Uncle Giuseppe's, and we take it to 24 months," says Fernandez. "It has become a holiday tradition. Our customers ask for it by name every year."

CUCUMBER 'SPAGHETTI' WITH AGED SPICY PROVOLONE VALPADANA PDO AND SMOKED TROUT

Courtesy of Provolone Valpadana PDO

INGREDIENTS:

2 oz (60 g) aged spicy Provolone Valpadana PDO, shaved
2 cucumbers
10½ oz (300 g) smoked trout fillet
1 lemon
1 tbsp whole-grain mustard
1 tbsp maple syrup
4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
Fresh dill

DIRECTIONS:

In a small bowl, whisk together the extra-virgin olive oil, whole-grain mustard, maple syrup, and lemon juice until well combined. Season with salt and freshly ground black pepper, then stir in a few sprigs of fresh dill. Set the dressing aside.

Wash and thoroughly dry the cucumbers, then use a spiralizer or julienne slicer to turn them into long cucumber "spaghetti." Arrange the smoked trout on four serving plates. Top each portion with a nest of cucumber spaghetti, drizzle generously with the prepared dressing, and finish with shaved flakes of aged spicy Provolone Valpadana PDO. Serve immediately. Serves 4. **CC**

Consumers should look out for lipase as an ingredient, says the Ambriola Company's Dammacco. "Lipase, a natural ingredient often found in USA domestically produced provolones, can add an overtly piccante flavor without naturally aging. In Italy, lipase in the provolone production is not allowed."

Beyond this, there are even more types.

"We produce provolone in several varieties, including smoked, non-smoked, reduced fat, sharp and reduced sodium," says Agropur's Doell, who is certified as a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker in mozzarella and provolone. "Recently, our smoked provolone won best in class at the 2026 World Championship Cheese Contest."

While the best provolone has been the same for over 100 years and cannot be changed, cheesemakers are developing new packaging and different forms for consumers and chefs looking for convenience, says BelGioioso's Auricchio. "We slice, cube, and shred our provolone. We even have a bite-sized snack that can go into a lunch box. We also combine a slice of provolone and salami for a very unique snacking roll."

ONE CHEESE, MANY WAYS

Provolone may have centuries of history behind it, but some of its best uses are also the simplest.

Start with a sandwich, suggests Auricchio. "Some Italian bread, a slice of aged provolone, and cold cuts like mortadella or salami."

Doell recommends taking advantage of the cheese's melting ability in cheesesteaks, paninis, cheeseburgers and lasagna. "Pizza is another favorite," he adds. "Combine provolone with mozzarella to bring more flavor to the pie while adding an even melt, creamy mouthfeel and good browning." **CC**

CHEESE TRAIL



The New York Cheese Trail

The Empire State's history, climate, and dairy expertise continue to fuel a thriving artisan cheese industry.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Picture a quarter-mile of New York streets lined in both directions with wagons piled high with cheese. That was Little Falls in 1866, when, on a single day, more than 380,000 pounds of Herkimer County cheese rolled into the railroad station. During an average season, 25 million to 30 million pounds changed hands here.

From 1864 to 1870, this small Mohawk Valley city was the world's largest interior cheese market, with prices set in Little Falls helping determine cheese values across the United States and influencing international trade. America's first Dairy Board of Trade followed here in 1871.

Today, cheese lovers can step back into that remarkable era at the Little Falls Historical Society Museum, where an exhibit tells the story of the nation's first cheese market.

"Few places have shaped American cheesemaking quite like the Empire State," says Rachel Banks, president of the New York State Cheese Council (NYSCC), in Orchard Park, NY, and recipe development specialist and caves manager for South Dayton, NY-based Eden Valley Creamery. "New York's influence on the cheese world stretches back more than two centuries. Early Dutch and English settlers brought traditional cheesemaking techniques to the region, while New York's fertile farmland and favorable climate helped establish one of the country's earliest dairy industries."

This foundation grew (aided by the Erie Canal) advances in cheesemaking standards at the New York State Fair and, eventually, for Cornell University's dairy research and education.

Nowadays, 60-plus cheesemakers statewide carry that legacy forward, transforming cow, goat, and sheep milk into everything from fresh chèvre and bloomy-rind cheeses to washed rinds, blues, alpine styles and aged cheddars.

Behind this growing artisan community, the NYSCC has been

building connections through education, outreach and promotion. Its interactive map points cheese lovers to more than 115 locations across the state. It's a great starting point for discovering the cheesemakers, farms, and distinctive cheeses writing New York's next chapter.

Here is a sampling of cheesemakers fulfilling the state's hub:

1. Churchtown Dairy

Hudson, NY

A legendary farmer, the woman who saved the land, and a beloved cow all have namesakes in Churchtown Dairy's cheese case. It's a lineup with a story rooted as deeply in the Hudson Valley soil as the farm itself.

Beginning in the 1980s, Peggy Rockefeller preserved more than 2,700 acres of farmland from development. In 2008, daughter Abby took over 250 acres in Churchtown, building a dairy around organic and regenerative agriculture. Milk production followed, and in 2017, head cheesemaker Matt Spiegler arrived to develop cheeses showcasing the farm's milk.

Two originals remain standouts. Wendell, named for farmer and writer Wendell Berry, is a raw-milk, semi-firm Tomme that's buttery, bright and piquant. Peggy, honoring the farm's founder, is a Camembert-style cheese with notes of sweet hay and fresh



PHOTO COURTESY CHURCHTOWN DAIRY

cream that turns decadently gooey with age.

"We're really proud of our newest cheese, the Redwood," says Spiegler.

Named for a beloved matriarch of the herd, Redwood is a 4-pound raw-milk pudgy wheel washed in Taconic Gold Cider from nearby Little Apple Cidery. Buttery, fruity, and full-flavored, it offers more Alpine notes than Wendell and a soft, fudgy paste.

"We love it with a glass of Little Apple's ciders, or the Morris Ale from Roe Jan Brewery in Hillsdale, NY," says Spiegler. "It pairs well with salumi and pickles and ferments of all kinds."

Better yet, buy a wedge at Churchtown's farm store, which is open year-round, then wander the gardens and watch the herd being milked.

PHOTO COURTESY EDEN VALLEY



2. Eden Valley Creamery South Dayton, NY

One of Western New York's most famous sandwiches has found its way into a cheese. Eden Valley Creamery's Gitane on Weck takes inspiration from the region's beloved Beef on Weck, Buffalo's iconic sandwich of rare roast beef, salty caraway-studded kummelweck, and fiery horseradish, transforming its signature caraway taste into a Tomme-style, natural-rind cheese.

Founded in 2019, Eden Valley Creamery uses certified single-source organic milk from the Mammoser family's multigenerational dairy, established in 1949, to make handcrafted artisan cheeses. Today, the multi-family-owned creamery carries that dairy tradition forward, crafting fresh cheese curds; aged cheeses such as cheddar, Havarti, and Gouda; and natural-rind artisan-style cheeses.

"Our signature cheeses are Gitane on Weck and Wanderer, both award-winning cheeses that represent two distinct sides of our cheesemaking philosophy," says NYSCC's Banks

While Gitane celebrates Western New York, Wanderer looks toward Europe. This Alpine-style cheese offers a supple texture and buttery flavor layered with toasted-nut and malt notes. Banks suggests pairing Gitane with horseradish honey mustard, hearty bread and a local beer, while serving Wanderer with dry hard cider, cured meats, crisp apples and toasted nuts.

Newest to the cave is Luna, a soft-ripened bloomy-rind cheese with a mushroomy exterior and increasingly luscious, buttery center. "It's an elegant yet approachable cheese that we're excited to share," says Banks.

Drizzle Luna with honey and herbs, or go decidedly less traditional: score the top, bake until gooey, and break out the kettle chips for dipping.

3. Four Fat Fowl

Stephentown, NY

For the makers of Four Fat Fowl, the perfect St. Stephen is so ripe and gooey it practically becomes its own dip. Cut off the top, tear into a fresh baguette and dig in.

That indulgent triple-cream cheese was the first creation

from the Stephentown, NY, creamery founded in 2013 by master cheesemaker Willy Bridgham, his wife Shaleena, and Willy's sister Josie Madison. The idea had percolated during family vacations before the couple honed their craft at Old Chatham Sheepherding Company, 15 miles south.

The family eventually took the plunge: Willy would make the cheese, Shaleena would sell it, and Josie would manage everything in between.

St. Stephen remains the flagship. Made with milk and cream from Dutch Hollow Farm, the soft-ripened triple cream fills a niche its makers saw for a New York specialty cheese in this decadent style.

"Our favorite way to eat St. Stephen is when it's super old and gooey," says Bridgham. "Some would say they like it younger, so they can cut and slice or bake it, but for us, the older the better."

Now there's CamemBertha, Four Fat Fowl's second and newest cheese. This Camembert-style wheel brings a springy texture and earthy undertones to the table. Bridgham suggests going classic with fruit and a glass of room-temperature wine, or warm it until luscious and scoop it up with crusty bread or crisp potato chips.



PHOTO COURTESY FOUR FAT FOWL

4. Jones Family Farm

Herkimer, NY

Sometimes customers know what a farm should make before the farmers do. When shoppers repeatedly passed on goat meat but enthusiastically proclaimed their love for goat milk cheese, Suzie and Peter Jones, owners of Jones Family Farm got the hint.

The couple bought a small herd of Nubian goats and launched their namesake creamery in 2009, initially renting processing space before converting the farm's milk house into a creamery a year later. A 2019 expansion added aging caves, production space and a retail store with windows offering a peek into the cheesemaking.

"I'd say our signature cheese is our fresh chèvre buttons, which we've done from the very beginning," says Jones. "They are very delicate and have converted many a goat cheese skeptic."

Another favorite, New York Crème Cheese, is a lighter, flavorful take on full-fat cream cheese popular with local bagel shops and cheesecake bakers.

Daughter Harper, 24, is putting her own stamp on the cheesemaking. After learning with goat milk feta, she experimented with small-format, mold-ripened cheeses before creating Pazuzu, with a soft *P. candidum* rind and a layer of sumac and earthy spices.



PHOTO COURTESY JONES FAMILY

CHEESE TRAIL

As it ages, the paste turns satiny, pairing beautifully with chewy cumin- or coriander-scented bread.

Underlying it all is the farm's "Fair Shake Milk" philosophy, which supports other family farms with an agreed-upon price floor that covers production costs and rises when market prices do. As Jones puts it, "We need a healthy farm ecosystem to survive."



PHOTO COURTESY KATIE BECKER PHOTOGRAPHY

5. Oakfield Corners Dairy

Batavia, NY

This 12th-generation New York farm looked to Latin America for its newest chapter, turning milk into cheeses that taste like home.

The Oakfield Artisanal-brand cheese adventure began in 2023, when former farm intern Molly Moffett was invited back to start a creamery. Cheesemaking began on the farm in spring 2024, fulfilling a longtime goal to diversify into value-added products.

Moffett, now cheesemaker and operations manager, focused on fresh Latin American-style cheeses, working with the farm's Hispanic employees to develop recipes rooted in the flavors they knew and loved.

Today, the lineup includes Queso Fresco, Queso Chihuahua and Queso Oaxaca. Chihuahua earned third place at the 2024 American Cheese Society competition, while Oaxaca took first in 2025.

Hand-stretched Oaxaca, formed into an eye-catching ball of cheese ropes that pull apart like string cheese, is best known for its milky, creamy, tangy taste.

"It's the most challenging and rewarding one to make," says Moffett.

It's equally rewarding in the kitchen. Moffett loves cooking with Oaxaca for its beautifully smooth melt but offers another fresh take: marinate it in oil and balsamic, then pair it with ripe tomatoes and bread.

For now, Oaxaca is Oakfield's newest creation, but the young creamery plans to expand its cheese line in the coming years.

6. Shtayburne Farm Creamery

Rock Stream, NY

A taste of Shtayburne Farm can be as familiar as a wedge of cheddar or as unexpected as a spoonful of peach-habanero Quark. That range reflects a Finger Lakes-based dairy family willing to stretch tradition while staying firmly rooted on the farm.

Dairy farming runs generations deep in the Hostetler family. Looking for a way to remain on the farm without expanding into a mega-dairy, owner-cheesemaker Lorin Hostetler began

exploring cheesemaking in 2009. After apprenticing with a Pennsylvania cheesemaker and studying at Cornell University, he built the creamery and made his first batch in October 2010.

Cheddar and cheese curds came first, followed by Monterey Jack. Today, Summit is the signature cheese: a cheddar-based cheese with buttery, nutty, caramelized complexity and a slightly crumbly texture. "My personal favorite way to eat it is to get a few pieces," says Hostetler, who pairs it with raspberry rosé wine jam and crackers.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Quark, a European-style fresh, mild, spreadable cheese rich in protein that inspired use in everything from pancakes and cheesecake to stuffed pasta and bagels. New piquant versions push it further, including peach habanero and roasted garlic, with rosemary in development. "The possibilities are endless," says Hostetler.



PHOTO COURTESY SHTAYBURNE FARM

7. Yancey's Fancy

Corfu, NY

Few cheesemakers can say they've spent nearly a century putting unexpected flavors into a wedge. Yancey's Fancy can. Celebrating its 100th anniversary this year, the New York cheesemaker is still finding new ways to surprise cheese lovers.

The story began in 1926, when German immigrant Leo Kutter

started handcrafting artisan cheese in Cowlesville, NY. Shortly after World War II, Kutter built a factory in nearby Corfu, where Yancey's Fancy still makes cheese today. Its lineup now includes more than 80 varieties of cheeses, spreads and fresh cheddar curds.

Flavor has long been its calling card. The collection ranges from Original Horseradish Cheddar and triple-crème Grand Reserve Bergenost Havarti to 18-month XXX-Sharp White Cheddar and Smoked Gouda with Bacon. Champagne Cheddar and Strawberry Chardonnay Cheddar showcase wines from New York's Finger Lakes, while Original Buffalo Wing Hot Sauce Cheddar gives another hometown favorite the cheese treatment.

"Our newest offerings are definitely as bold and unique as our original cheese catalog," says Michael Best, marketing manager.

That includes Pabst Blue Ribbon Cheddar, created with Pabst Brewing Co. to capture the beer's hoppy character and citrus undertones. Even more unexpected is Ube Gouda, pairing earthy purple sweet potato with hints of vanilla and caramel.

Best suggests enjoying the classics with crackers, charcuterie or a cold beer, while newer flavors shine tucked into a grilled cheese sandwich, melted over burgers, tossed into mac and cheese, or featured on an eclectic cheeseboard.



PHOTO COURTESY YANCEY'S FANCY

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