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FOOD STUFF

Florence Fabricant

A Place to Bring Cheeses To Just the Right Age

Buying cheese in peak condition can be a challenge. Underripe Camembert, overly funky Teleme and dried-out goat crottins are not uncommon on restaurant cheese carts and store shelves.

Terrance Brennan, a restaurateur with a penchant for cheese, wants to change that, so he has opened the Artisanal Cheese Center, an aging complex at 500 West 37th Street, where cheeses are being pampered and will be shipped to mail-order customers, shops and restaurants. The cheeses will be sold retail at Mr. Brennan's restaurant Artisanal and via a catalog and a Web site.

"I wanted to be able to sell cheeses at their optimum, and the only way to do that is to control the aging and storage conditions," Mr. Brennan said. He said he hoped he could get rare and delicate items that cheese makers have not been shipping to the United States.



Daphne Zepos (near left in photo at right), a cheese expert and former chef in California, is in charge of aging at the center. Philippe and Rachel Alleosse (right and center), whose family owns cheese caves in Paris, are consultants. Jean-Claude Soilen, an expert in refrigeration for cheese caves, helped set up a computerized system for five rooms, controlling temperature and humidity in each. One is for sturdy cooked cheeses like Parmesan, one is for cheeses with bloomy rinds like Camembert, one is for washed-rind cheeses like Livarot, one is for goat cheeses and one will hold blue cheese. Most cheeses will be turned daily, and the rinds of some will be washed several times a week.

Another goal is to help improve the quality of America's artisanal cheeses by doing the aging for the cheese makers. "There are some excellent cheeses being made in America," Ms. Zepos said. "But they're not aged under the best conditions."

On May 19, Mr. Brennan's Web site, www.artisanalcheese.com, will start taking orders. A catalog will be available in August. Cheese classes for the public start Tuesday. For information (but not orders): (877) 797-1200.



Photographs by Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times