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Artisanal's Big Cheese

Profile: Daphne Zepos

BY AMY BRAUNSCHWIEGER

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Standing in front of Artisanal Cheese Center's kitchen, Daphne Zepos faced 50 hopeful food-lovers attending the first of four two-hour classes on American cheeses. The students had already tasted and mumbled appreciatively over six of the eight cheeses, arranged in a circle on their plates, and had just reached the Mont St. Francis, a pungent washed-rind goat cheese.

"Take a whiff, and please don't giggle," Ms. Zepos said. Despite her request, the powerful, nearly obscene smell of the cheese sent the class into fits of laughter, even as Ms. Zepos insisted that the scent was not yet "barnyard."

Ms. Zepos's daily uniform of a white lab coat gives her a slightly scientific aura - which, as the class laughed, was offset by her amused expression. As head affineur, or cheese raiser, at New York's Artisanal Cheese Center, she controls the nuanced flavors of the 200-plus types of cheese in her care as much as the farmers who make them.

"I show too much respect for really stinky cheese," she told the class. "I understand I'm no longer speaking the same language as you. Just realize it's in the category of stinky cheese. Understand that and open the door. Once you get into it, it's incredible."

Ms. Zepos, a 45-year-old resident of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, is intimately familiar with cheeses ranging from a blue goat made in central Alabama to a mild, cow's milk cheese from the Alsace region of France. These days, along with raising cheeses, her job description also includes jetting around the country, developing American cheese makers, or fromageurs, and teaching them the subtlety of growing moldy rinds and creating flavors as European cheese makers have done for centuries.

Much like fine wines, cheeses need to age, allowing flavors such as grassiness, nuttiness, or mush roominess to blend and intensify. When refrigerated trucks deliver fresh farmmade cheese to Artisanal, they're only partly mature. Ms. Zepos then whisks away her wards to one of the center's five caves, where temperature and humidity are tightly controlled. One cave serves cooked cheeses, such as Parmesan; one is for cheeses with bloomy rinds, such as Camembert; one is for goat, one for blue, and one for cheeses with rinds washed in wine or beer, such as muenster. There, the cheeses will age while under her able care.

Including Artisanal, only three places in America have affinage caves - caves traditionally connected to a shop that are large enough to mature several hundred cheeses at once. (Numerous cheese



makers have smaller cheese caves). Ms. Zepos, one of a few affineurs scattered between the Atlantic and Chicago, traveled to France to select the refrigeration system to be shipped to the Artisanal Cheese Center, which is just west of Manhattan's Garment District.

Standing inside the caves, her wavy, brown hair covered with a white hairnet, Ms. Zepos described the various cheeses with a tenderness parents generally reserve for talking about their children. She senses when the chevre, a mild goat cheese, is ripe by the touch of her finger. She knows to wash the firm, orange rind of a

livarot with diluted port three times a week, and she coos over the newly arrived triple creams, shipped from Louisiana only a day after they were made.

Although she speaks with a French accent, Ms. Zepos was born in Greece, and considers Athens and the small, dry island of Sifnos - where her family summered - to be her home. Her neighbors on Sifnos were shepherds, and as a girl she would wake up early to help them round the sheep and goats off the hills. It was on this island that Ms. Zepos, together with a dozen other children, first made fresh goat cheese in preparation for a church festival.

Because of her father's diplomatic career, Ms. Zepos's family moved throughout Europe, where she attended French international schools. Each move to a new country brought encounters with new foods. To this day, one of her favorite flavors is England's Cadbury chocolate, which she tasted for the first time at 4 years old.

"I was a good food person from the very beginning. I think it was because I had bad eye sight," she said. "I saw through aromas and taste."

When it came time to choose a career, Ms. Zepos studied architecture in London, worked in advertising, and already hated her career path before moving to New York. After one year in America, she quit her job and enrolled in Peter Kump's New York Cooking School (now the Institute of Culinary Education), in the hope of creating a satisfying life.

"All the tendencies I had exploded," she said about learning cooking. "I became a happy person doing it."

She moved to San Francisco and worked as a cold line cook at Todd Humphreys's Compton Place Restaurant, enjoying even tedious jobs such as cleaning the ink from squid and cutting artichokes. One day, sous chef John Caputo noticed she had finished prepping before her colleagues and decided to keep her busy with a new responsibility - tending the cheese. She began tasting and buying cheeses for the restaurant, but no one could answer her questions on exactly how cheese was made.

Her curiosity was nurtured by Mr. Humphreys, who encouraged his staff to go on mini-sabbaticals, find new flavors, and bring them back. Ms. Zepos traveled Europe, speaking and studying with cheese makers and affineurs. Eventually, Mr. Humphreys created a cheese trolley for the restaurant, putting Ms. Zepos in charge of it.

"I went from the back of the house to the front of the house and developed a cheese program," she said. "It sealed my fate."

When he decided to ground a major cheese center in Manhattan, Terrance Brennan, founder of New York restaurants Picholine and Artisanal, sought out Ms. Zepos. She accepted his proposal and moved back to New York in 2002, turning her full attention to cheese.

"I had never focused on cheese the way I focused on it when I started here," she said.

Not only does Ms. Zepos raise the cheese, she chooses which cheeses will qualify for Artisanal's selections. There are the standard 50 best sellers - such as Epoisses, a creamy cow's milk cheese, and Abbaye de Belloc, a hard, caramel-flavored sheep's milk cheese - but it's the exotic cheeses made by small farmers that she feels define the collection.

While the common preconception is that the best cheeses come from Europe, importing the delicacies has become more difficult as America has become choosier about what foods it will allow into the country. European cheeses have also become more expensive as the dollar dips in comparison to the euro. Ms. Zepos spent much of the past two years traveling throughout America, meeting with farmers and advising them on how to make finer cheeses, and bringing select cheeses back to New York.

"I've been encouraging and working with cheese makers here to get my Camembert, my small goat, my staples," she said.

She organized Artisanal's classes on American cheese so patrons can taste for themselves the flavorful cheese made on this side of the Atlantic.

Despite smelling, tasting, and prodding cheeses daily, Ms. Zepos insists she's not completely hung up on the delicacy.

"I love tasting cheese more than eating cheese," she said. "I can be objective without wanting more. I'm detached, and that's helpful. Unlike with chocolate, because I'm obsessed with chocolate."

Artisanal Cheese Center, 877-797-1200, www.artisanalcheese.com.