



Feta Compli?

Not by a long shot. Daphne Zepos brings the wide world of Greek artisanal cheese to America.

By Susan Soriano

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Surprise: Feta is not Greece's only cheese. There's also Kasseri, Kefalotyri, Kefalograviera, Graviera, Myzithra, Anthotiro, and Anari—a wide variety of hard and soft cheeses. But as a child who spent summers on the rocky island of Sifnos, in the Greek Cyclades, Daphne Zepos particularly loved Gilomeni Manoura, a locally produced goat and sheep's milk cheese whose tiny crumbs she'd sprinkle on cucumber or tomato slices, or sometimes on pasta. This dry, salty cheese has a "strong goaty kick," which becomes "a little boozy and more complex as you eat it," says Zepos, from her post as director of affinage (maturing and refining) at Terrance Brennan's new New York City-based Artisanal Cheese Center (ACC).

Cheese is Zepos' life's work, and her mission is global. "I love preserving these rustic little creations from farmers off in the boonies, and then serving these cheeses to the most civilized diners in the most refined settings," she says. It makes sense for a woman who grew up playing with the children of farmers, shepherds, and cheese-makers during the summer, but eventually adopted New York City as her home. "My buddies and I would chase the sheep and goats that had gone behind the hill early on summer mornings," she recalls. "We'd all hang around as they got milked."

A large part of Zepos' job is tending to the maturation of as many as 250 different cheeses in the state-of-the-art aging "caves" at the ACC. But she also spends a great deal of time actively seeking epicurean treasures such as Toma del Maccagno and Sola Val Cassoto from the Piedmont region of Italy and stateside stars like Hoja Santa from Texas and Purple Haze from California for the center's impressive international and domestic selection. Before taking on her current role at the ACC, she was a fromager for Brennan at Picholine in New York and a chef and director of the cheese program at Campton Place in San Francisco.

Her first wave of longing for the Gilomeni Manoura of her childhood struck her seven years ago, while she was working at Campton Place. "I became extremely homesick for that cheese," she says. Her mantra became, "I want it. I'll have it."

Yet Zepos suspected that satisfying her intense desire would be tough. No one-click ordering here. She understood the various shipping routes this Manoura might travel; that once she was able to place a significant order right after the February milking season, she'd have to find a way to package the product and transport it on a seven-hour ferry trip from Sifnos to Athens, where all foods for export from Greece are consolidated and shipped. She knew it would then have to make its way to another port in either Italy or France, and then to Port Elizabeth, in New Jersey. If there were obstacles posed by red tape, she'd need to rely on the help of other *affineurs* like herself in Europe.

And frankly, just contacting the cheese-maker, Kirnikos Mastrokallos, would be difficult. Despite her deep connections with this remote village, Zepos didn't have easy access: This was a place where, for years, there was one phone number shared by the entire village. Plus, the dairy was hard to get to. "You would have to walk two hours [from town]," Zepos explains.

The breakthrough? "I have a cell phone," Mastrokallos announced, with obvious pride, during Zepos'

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annual visit in 1998. He used it to stay in touch with his son, a soldier. It was stored in a tin pail, to prevent the phone from falling into the milk while he was working.

It was a welcome surprise for Zepos. Finally, she could start a conversation, place an order, make arrangements.

Gilomeni Manoura from Sifnos, as well as a shepherd-made Kefalotyri from Crete, a blue cheese from Naxos, and an award-winning Niotiko (a semi-soft sheep's milk cheese) from Ios, will be available for sale this spring through the Artisanal Cheese Center (www.artisanalcheese.com; 212-239-1200 or toll-free 877-797-1200). The center currently carries a feta and a moist Manouri from Mount Vikos.

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