

They Smile and Say Cheese

Buying, selling, teaching, aging - all are on their plate

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To enter the core of the operation, visitors don sterile, protective gear. Once inside, they confront an electronic panel whose dials monitor the exact temperature and humidity of five restricted-access sub-chambers. Should an atmospheric anomaly occur in one of the chambers, an alarm would go off, automatically notifying one of the principles.

A meltdown at this state-of-the-art facility would ruin a lot of cheese, for this is the storage area of the Artisanal Cheese Center in Manhattan . Situated in the decidedly unglamorous Far West 30s (the north-facing windows of 500 W. 37th St. offer an unparalleled view of the bus ramp leading from the Lincoln Tunnel into the business end of Port Authority), the center is an establishment new to New York: 10,000 square feet devoted to the buying, selling, aging and study of cheese.

The center is the brainchild of Manhattan restaurateur Terrance Brennan, who believes that artisanal cheese - cheese that is made by hand in small quantities - is on the verge of a breakthrough, much like wine was 20 years ago. Back then, according to Brennan, a good bottle of wine was the province of the most rarefied gourmets and, to boot, was reserved for special occasions. "Now, on a Tuesday night, people will open a nice bottle of wine," he said. "My mission is to get them to have a piece of good cheese, too."

Brennan embarked on his mission in 1993, when he opened Picholine, one of the first New York restaurants to offer a cheese course. Two years ago he opened Artisanal, a sprawling fromo-centric bistro with a retail cheese counter. His newest restaurant, Terrance Brennan's Seafood and Chop house, offers a cheese course as well.

Artisanal's cheese counter remains Brennan's only retail cheese outlet; the new center, which opened May 13, is concerned, rather, with mail-order catalog sales, wholesale and cheese education. Class topics are as wide-ranging as the term "cheese education" permits. Some, like Cheese 101, are for students at every level while Cheese Plate Composition is geared to restaurateurs and caterers. All the classes are taught in a culinary demonstration area with a gleaming kitchen and seating for 70. (For

information, call 877-797-1200 or visit www.artisanalcheese.com.)

Through the center's mail-order service, which debuted on Monday, anyone with a phone or a modem can connect with cheese consultants and place an order. Retailers and caterers can avail themselves of the center's wholesale business, and restaurants seeking to develop cheese programs can get product, counsel, or even the pre-plated cheese trays.

Brennan plans to expand his importing business so that eventually many of his cheeses will be purchased directly from producers. "We want the shortest distance possible between cow and consumer," he said.

A big guy whose preppy good looks are made somewhat more hip by a pair of striking, thick-framed eyeglasses, Brennan has reason to believe that investing in cheese will pay off.

"When I look at the amount of cheese that we sell in the three restaurants, at the cheese classes that sell out in 20 minutes, at the conversations I have with the people at Whole Foods and Gourmet Garage - I can tell that the demand for artisanal cheese is just going to increase," he said.

At Brennan's side are two self-described "cheese kooks," Max McCalman and Daphne Zepos. McCalman, Picholine's maître fromager since 1994 and author of "The Cheese Plate" (Clarkson Potter, \$32.50), will act as the "dean of curriculum" and teach many classes.

A dapper man whose courtly reserve evaporates when the conversation turns to his favorite subjects, he takes a sly delight in pronouncing some of their more euphonious appellations, for example Chabichou du Poitou ("shabby-shoe do pwahtoo"), a goat milk cheese from the Loire Valley and Innerschweizer Weicher ("inner- shvytzer vyker"), a Reblochon-like cow's milk cheese from Switzerland that is one of McCalman's favorites.

Singing cheese's praises - or, as he puts it, "spreading the good word on the curd" - McCalman is like a father who can't stop talking about his kids' accomplishments. If he is the proud papa, the center's nurturing mama is Zepos, secretary of the American Cheese Society and longtime consultant for the California Milk Advisory Board, who left San Francisco to take the position of director of affinage, or chief ripener, the person who tends the cheeses.

Zepos - who would bear even more resemblance to Maria Callas if any of the diva's roles had required her to wear white rubber boots, a lab coat and a hair

net - treats her charges more like a flock than inventory. With a staff of four affineurs, she greets the cheeses when they are delivered, opening crates, sniffing and poking them to assess their condition, and then assigning each to an appropriate cave (pronounced "cahve," this French term denotes a cheese-ripening chamber).

The caves provide optimal storage environments for each of five types of cheese: hard, natural-rind cheeses such as Parmigiano-Reggiano and Gruyère; young chèvres (goat cheeses); bloomy rind cheeses such as Brie and Camembert; the washed rinds such as Epoisses and Taleggio, and, in the coldest chamber, blue and fully ripened cheeses as well as those waiting to be assigned.

Zepos turns most of her cheeses three times a week to evenly expose them to their environments. Some cheeses get regular baths in salt water.

Her affection for the 200 or so varieties she manages is matched by her reverence for the whole sweep of the cheesemaker's craft. "It's not just lactic," she said of cheese's allure, "it's anthropological, it's cultural."

Zepos sees herself as connected with thousands of years' worth of history, "with traditions that have been honed throughout the centuries and that follow a logic that's truly human."

Oh, she knows how that sounds.

"We're all oddballs, us cheese kooks. We get an internal satisfaction when we take care of cheese. But if I can be in a dairy where there's a pail of milk curdling, I'm perfectly content."

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