



Cheese center keeps a watch on the rind

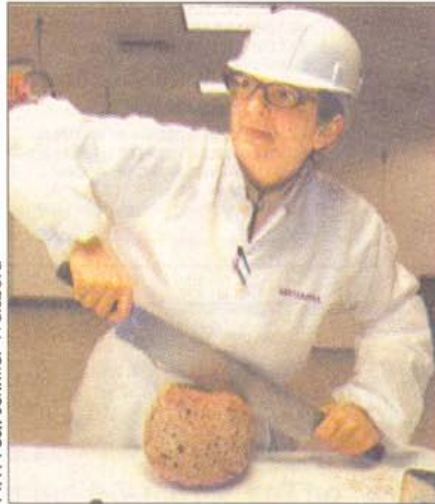
By CYNTHIA KILIAN

CHEESE has suffered enough!" Max McCalman declares.

The maitre fromager and his colleagues at Artisanal Cheese Center are on a mission to right that injustice.

The just-opened complex on Tenth Avenue and 37th Street is the latest venture of Terrance Brennan, chef and owner of Picholine, Artisanal and Terrance Brennan's Seafood and Chop House.

His multi-functional space is dedicated to the art of "affinage," or aging, of fine cheeses for sale to restaurants and soon to the public through the Web site www.artisanalcheese.com. (There's also a "cheese of the month" club.)



N.Y. Post: Jennifer Weisbord

"We want to bring cheese to everyday life," says the chef, "like having wine with dinner."

Rooms for functions and open-to-the-public classes kicked off



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Artisanal Cheese Center specialist Daphne Zepos (left) cuts a piece of nimolette. The center sells many varieties (above) to restaurants.

the educational curriculum last night with Cheese 101, and cooking and cheese plate composition classes are to follow. The first lecture, June 3, explores the raw milk debate.

At 10,000 square feet, the com-

plex is hardly the biggest operation of its kind, but it's the most exacting, designed to "give cheese a better chance of having a good, long, healthy life," says McCalman.

To that end, its most unusual feature is the cheese cave room, where five customized refrigeration systems are tightly calibrated to the optimal climates for different cheese styles. There's one for blue, washed rind (a.k.a. "the stinky room"), fleuries and chevres, as well as a holding cave.

The atmosphere is almost lab-like in its indulgence. Hair nets and plastic booties must be worn in the cave area, and traffic in and out of the caves is kept to a minimum to keep the temperature, humidity and microflora in check.

Watching over her pungent charges is Daphne Zepos, the "affineur" whose job it is to "keep the cheeses happy" — up to 30 tons of them.

Though some are from as far away as Tasmania, those esoteric ones aren't the whole idea.

"We're trying to have a great variety of American cheeses," Zepos says. "Those, I have to tell you, are rarer to find. American cheeses aren't on the level of French cheeses, for the most part."

"In six months' time, we'll know which of these American cheeses have responded to what we do and have become glorious. It's like getting a girl and making her into a full, mature thing — voluptuous and fabulous."