

# FTWeekend

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## Who moved their cheese?

Two of New York's finest, says Paul Sullivan, and the results are some great local flavours

The apex of taste is not often found in dank, smelly caves. But on the west side of Manhattan two of the city's premier cheese sellers are betting that local caves are the way to go.

Terrance Brennan, the chef-owner of the restaurants Picholine and Artisanal, has built five caves in the Artisanal Cheese Center, located in an otherwise soulless office building. And Rob Kaufelt, owner of Murray's Cheese Shop in Greenwich Village, has moved his much-loved shop into a larger space across the street, where he has installed four caves in the basement and two glass-front "show" caves on the main level.

That these cheesemongers have invested the money to create sophisticated refrigerators that essentially allow their contents to rot speaks to the ever-increasing American taste for cheese. The benefits are twofold: European cheese can be ordered younger so there is less risk that they will be tied up in customs past their peak, and smaller American cheesemakers can use these facilities to bring out the flavours of their cheese in a way they never could on their farms.

With caves, "you can manipulate the texture and flavour of cheese," says Brennan, who sees 300 kinds of cheese in a year. "There's really only one epaisse people buy. We put it in the wash-rind cave. We continue to wash it. We spray it. You can tell and taste the difference. It makes them creamier tasting."

Daphne Zephos, Artisanal's director of *affinage* (cheese ageing), explains that in a cave cheeses can develop in terms of taste and creaminess; wrapped up in a refrigerator, they lose their subtlety.

The caves combine traditional cheese-ageing mechanisms with state-of-the-art systems. "I wanted a refrigerator that would allow my food to rot. I wanted food that would change," she says. "This isn't fish - this is cheese."

The rotting, as it were, is precisely controlled. Both temperature and humidity can be adjusted to one-tenth of a degree, and if something goes wrong, the monitoring system rings an alert as far away as France.

The wash rind cave, for example, is set at a minimum of 94 per cent humidity and reeks of the wine and beer poured over the cheeses. Under such conditions, a cheese can be sold at almost the exact moment it is ready.

Murray's caves, modelled on caves outside Rouen, France, are similar to Artisanal's except they are in a basement not in an office building. However, the company has also built a *haloir*, or drying room, so that cheese that arrives in moisture-creating plastic containers or gets held up in customs can dry out. "It's like a

spa for them," says Liz Thorpe, the wholesale and import manager.

No one should forget, though, that this is cheese ageing in New York, where vents pull in air from the city streets. The thought may be enough to cause a herdsman to weep, but Sasha Davies, Murray's head of *affinage*, jokes: "It's their terror."

She proffers two goats milk cheeses. The fresh Valency that arrived from the Loire region a few days before is creamy and moist with a thin coat of black ash on it; after almost three weeks in a cave it is denser, with a clay-like rind and a much smoother, creamy taste. Even more dramatic is the crotin, which, when fresh, is aggressively pungent and sharp; a fortnight later it is a lot saltier and more balanced.

It is all quite a change from a decade ago when Danny Meyer featured a cheese course at his newly opened Gramercy Tavern. At the time this was a radical thing for a less-formal American restaurant, even in New York. Only top French restaurants offered a cheese course.

"It was a lot more cumbersome than it is now. There were fewer wholesalers who

Murray's has also built a drying room for its cheeses. 'It's like a spa for them,' says Thorpe

could provide you with a wide array of cheese," says Meyer. "Now that the cheese course has become more accepted there are these companies like Artisanal, Murray's and Dairyland that have stepped up."

But how did New York and other parts of America go from brie and roquefort on special occasions to a choice of 20 to 80 cheeses?

"In the 1990s there was a confluence of a great economy that really allowed people to pursue an interest in travelling plus an explosion in writing on gastronomy," says Meyer. "It just found its time."

Meyer insists that the quality of the cheese he has served at Gramercy Tavern and his other restaurants has remained the same, but the selection has certainly grown. "It's like barbecue or jazz: people do it with their own expression, it's what makes it such a fascinating and delicious topic."

### RIND TRIPS

- Artisanal Cheese Center, tel: +1 212-239 1200, [www.artisanalcheese.com](http://www.artisanalcheese.com)
- Murray's Cheese Shop, tel: +1 212 243-3289, [www.murrayscheese.com](http://www.murrayscheese.com)