

There's Cheese in Them There Hills



Right under our noses, creamy, mouthwatering cheeses are being crafted in the kind of deeply-thoughtful, profit-defeating ways usually limited to small Alpine villages. **By Mike Madaio**

Technically, it was a launch party for Greener Partners' Farm Explorer, a mobile, interactive exhibit that picks apart the farm-to-mouth process to make it more easily digestible for kids. An admirable undertaking, beyond doubt.

But my attention kept gravitating to the *hors d'oeuvres*, which featured cheeses from a group of local dairy farmers that calls itself the Chester County Cheese Artisans. Between the sultry Yellow Springs Farm goat cheese *gougères*, a light-but-earthly spinach and Birchrun Hills Farm bleu cheese dumpling and the airy potato croquettes made with a cheese from Doe Run Dairy, I found myself having a hard time concealing my excitement that cheese of this caliber was coming from my own backyard.

I needed to know more, so I tracked down Catherine and Al Renzi, the owners of Yellow Springs, an eight-acre farm in Chester Springs that specializes in fresh and aged goat cheeses, made from processes that pull from Italian and French traditions. The Renzis formed the cheese artisans.

"We saw how other agricultural groups have had success, like Napa wine or the Vermont Cheese Trail, and realized we had an opportunity to increase exposure for all of us," Catherine says.

It's not a coincidence that so much cheese is being made in Chester County. The Renzis' own plot was originally a dairy farm 150 years ago. "Chester County was the dairy for colonial America," she says. "Take Philadelphia Cream Cheese and Breyers, for example. These brands reflect the dairy heritage of Philadelphia's countryside, but that's lost in most modern experiences. We'd like to revive awareness as to why this is such a great place for cheese-making. It's the soil, topography, the short distance to the city. It's a unique place."

Sue Miller, who owns Birchrun Hills Farm with her husband, Ken, and makes small-batch, Holstein cow's-milk cheeses, uses a term typically reserved for wine descriptions: *terroir*. Which is French for the environment works a kind of magic that man will never be able to replicate.

"There's been a lot of pressure for development in Chester County, so we originally looked at moving to Central Pennsylvania," Miller says. "But there's no land, no soil, no community like Chester County. And everything about it is reflected in the flavor of our cheeses. Even the environment where we age the cheese is unique."

Respected restaurants like Nectar in Berwyn, Alba in Malvern and Victory Brewpub in Downingtown, all of which feature the artisans' cheeses in some fashion, are giving the group traction. Miller's also made a name for Birchrun at local farmers markets. "We sell our milk in the commodity market as well, but it's not the same as handing cheese directly to a market customer," she says. "There's a real pride in being able to look someone in the eye and present something that we've made entirely on our farm."

Catherine Renzi's hopeful that a long-discussed Chester County Cheese Festival will finally pick up enough momentum to come to fruition soon. For now, she's satisfied with the incremental, hard-earned gains that have been won as a piece of a grassroots movement.

"I truly believe that if one of us is successful, we're all successful," she says. "If a consumer has a great experience, it can open the door to the entire community."



Wine of the Issue
St. Urbans-Hof Ockfen
Bockstein Riesling Kabinett
LEIWEN, GERMANY | \$24

Wine wonks have long been big on Riesling, especially the kinds produced in the Mosel region, where St. Urbans-Hof is based. The rest of us, though, have been harder to convince. Thus, "The Summer of Riesling," which launched five years ago in New York City and has since become a national campaign in which restaurants are encouraged to feature at least three Rieslings on their wine lists throughout the summer.

For home consumption, the Ockfen Bockstein is an easy pick. For one, St. Urbans-Hof has a great reputation. And this particular Riesling is widely available (including Pennsylvania's Fine Wine and Good Spirits stores). The Germans classify their wines through a rather complex system—go figure. All you need to know is that "kabinett" signifies the top tier, and those wines are made only from fully-ripened grapes.

The Ockfen Bockstein starts sweet with notes of apple and honey, but it ultimately balances out with a bracing acidity and the trademark Mosel minerality.

Mike Madaio is a co-founder and editor of the Web site, <http://pavineco.com>, which explores wine from a Pennsylvania consumer's perspective.