



Say Cheese!

A Missouri artisan cheese maker teaches the art of handcrafted cheeses. BY NINA FURSTENAU

WHILE CHEESE-MAKING sounds mysterious, it is nearly impossible to keep milk from turning into cheese all by itself. Just try leaving it at room temperature for 24 to 36 hours. The result? Naturally forming lactic bacteria creates acid and coagulates the milk. This, Merryl Winstein, a cheese maker in St. Louis, says is a traditional way of making cheese and is the basis for cottage cheese, yogurt, chevre, and other cheeses even today. “It’s incredibly simple to do,” Merryl says. “Ordinary people did this for thousands of years. They made nourishing food from what was at hand.”

Because I have never met a cheese I didn’t like—marbled and blue, smooth and creamy, smoky, or even tart, the taste has me hooked—the process is intriguing. Plus, I have childhood memories of making simple cheese with my mother, watching the curds and whey separate while blinking back steam rising from the stove. So, a Missouri cheese-making class is irresistible.

In the Webster Groves neighborhood of St. Louis, cheese school happens on weekends. Merryl offers cheese-making classes from her home

two to four times per month and more than 400 students, mostly from Missouri but some from Colorado, Illinois, California, New York, and elsewhere, attended in 2010 CAN WE GET 2011 NUMBERS?. Students gather, pick out clean towels to wipe away stray curds, and hand each other recipes in anticipation of making blue cheese, mozzarella, kefalotyri (a hard, white Greek cheese), and ricotta. Or, depending on the class, cheddar, Camembert, chevre and Swiss. At the center of it all, Merryl examines the contents of a boxed cheese-making kit a student brought in for inspection. She pulls out a gadget. “That’s like a beverage thermometer,” she says, “too small to see.” By experience, Merryl can tell you what works well with cheese. A larger dairy thermometer is more to her liking.

When you walk into her basement classroom, cheese is not the first thing you see. Shelves with clear and pale blue mason jars line a wall. Exposed pipes decorated with pink and green plastic strips run overhead, a stainless steel stove is laden with large, gleaming pots, and particle-board floors are obscured by tables, cheese-making supplies, chairs, and wooden cheese presses.

Then, you see it: the cheese mother lode. Rounds of waxed cheese sit on a shelf, some four inches thick, some two inches, some in red wax, some in black. The rounds are blue cheese, traditional cheddar, and Swiss. I sense there are stashes of Camembert and Brie, the bloomy rind cheeses, stored in cooler places out of sight.

Merryl trained in specialty cheese at the Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese in Burlington, Vermont, and started offering classes in the art of cheese in 2003. It all started for her, though, in 1993 with raising a goat.

“I really liked the taste of goat milk and it never occurred to me that there was another way to get it,” Merryl says. After marriage, she and husband Richard Hibbs bought their home with its big yard in Webster Groves and Merryl’s thoughts turned back to her early interest. “I looked through the ordinances in Webster Groves and found that farm animals were provided for.” She now keeps several milk goats and chickens.

By 8:30 AM the day of class, Merryl tempts her newest goat to its milking stand with grain. Though it balks, the goat settles in eventually and produces a gallon and a half of raw milk. The other three goats do the same without hesitation, old hands at the process. Raw, freshly drawn milk, Merryl says in her book *Making Cheese is a Breeze*, is ideal: “It’s close to the right target temperature already for making cheese and unwanted bacteria haven’t had time to multiply.” The freshness adds to the taste as well. Since Merryl is not in the business of selling cheese, she uses raw milk from her own animals to create cheeses she loves. Pasteurized milk also works for cheese, she says, with adjustments made to the recipes.

By 9 AM the class is reading the recipe for mozzarella. A “bulk culture” that looks like yogurt is passed around for us to see before a small quantity goes into the pot of warm milk. Merryl knows the science. She will tell you details on process. Specific quantities of cultures are clear. But it’s the taste that carries the day. From her class the day before, Merryl hands out a plate of chevre. Tasty, check. Fresh and amazing, check. Hard to pass to the next person, double check.

By 10 AM, she shows the class how milk for mozzarella has flocculated,

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From top: Merryl Winstein stores her cheese in wax. Merryl keeps several goats for cheese making. Ken Muno owns Goatsbeard Farm with his wife, Jennifer.



MELISSA KLAUDA; NINA FURSTENAU

From top, clockwise: Goatsbeard Farm makes many varieties of artisanal goat cheeses. The farm is located in Harrisburg. Merryl Winstein has offered cheese-making classes since 2003.



or reached the curdling point and started to thicken. Merryl takes a tiny dusting of blue mold powder and puts it in another pot of milk warmed to 90° F. She suggests that using about one tablespoon of the powdery part of your favorite purchased blue cheese will create the same effect. “By making tiny alterations, I get to tailor it to my taste.”

Student John Rekesius drove six hours from his home near Springfield, Illinois, to take the class. John, who brews his own beer as well, likes the idea that individual taste plays a role. “It’s the hands-on aspect,” John says, “Like beer, you can tweak cheese to your own taste. There is an inquisitiveness (inherent) in making it yourself.”

At 10:37 AM the class checks the resiliency of the mozzarella. John places his palm on the top of the solidifying milk as instructed and the cheese comes off the side of the pot a little. The surface feels bouncy like soft-set gelatin. By 10:46, Merryl is heating up a stainless steel pot of milk for the blue cheese. At 11:04 AM, Merryl makes a lunge for the stove top and turns off the burner under the blue cheese concoction. She checks it—too hot. She brings out her pH meter and checks the mozzarella. Temperature and acid levels are key to cheese recipe steps, she says. “It’s not practical to make cheese and not know something about pH. The pH tells you the cheese texture, and the texture shows the pH or acid level.”

In the afternoon, the class tackles kefalotyri. Merryl points out pH readings and guides the class in how the cheese press works while juggling the beginnings of a ricotta. Because kefalotyri is an aged, dry cheese, Merryl brings out a round that was made during a class several weeks ago. The taste is cheddar-like at first, then another layer blooms and you taste something similar to Asiago. Then we taste the ricotta. Its freshness and clean flavor is delicious. I duck my head and try to look inconspicuous while I cut another slice. I give Merryl a smile, sappy with cheese love.

Though most cheese made in the United States is a version of European cheese recipes brought over by immigrants, Merryl shrugs at myths about cheese making. “People didn’t really invent it,” she says. “Milk does this by itself.”



Bring on Missouri Dairies

The turning point for cheese history turned out to be rennet. Rennet, an enzyme that coagulates milk, traditionally comes from the stomach of a ruminant animal two to four weeks old that has had only milk to drink.

“Obviously,” Merryl says, “the first time someone slaughtered a young ruminant animal they found good tasting curdled milk in the stomach, and putting two and two together, they figured out that milk plus stomach makes cheese.” There is now artificial and vegetable rennet available on the market, which create different types of cheeses. This and other cheese-making variations create a world of flavor—a good thing according to Merryl.

“People always like to play with their food.”

For more information on Merryl Winstein’s cheese-making classes and her book, *Making Cheese is a Breeze*, see www.cheesemaking-CLASS.com or call 314-968-2596.

There is a growing trend toward small commercial dairies in the state. With Missouri’s grassy acres, artisan cheese making is natural. The American Cheese Society lists 38 members in Missouri. Not all of those are cheese sellers, some are enthusiasts, distributors, and suppliers, but all are joining a nationally burgeoning trend that has consumers, chefs, and grocery managers looking out for locally made products. Some farmers see cheese as a way to insulate themselves from fluctuating milk prices. In a sense, cheese, especially dry, aged cheese, makes milk immortal. The Missouri State Milk Board has seen applications rise for small-scale cheese-making operations and, though struggling, a group of Missouri farmers founded Big Rivers Dairy Artisan Guild to help support and promote farmstead cheeses.

Ken Muno, president of the Guild and co-owner of Goatsbeard Farm with wife, Jennifer, manages their commercial goat dairy in rural Boone County to make and sell artisan cheese. Ken, the primary cheese maker, has a background in environmental science, apprenticeships in two acclaimed goat dairies, and a love of fine cheese.

All of Goatsbeard Farm’s cheeses are made from goat milk, both pasteurized and raw, produced on the farm by 56 goats. The farm’s cheeses—plain rounds of goat milk cheese, pepper rounds, herb rounds, tubs of the same plus chipotle and garlic, soft-ripened Prairie Bloom, Feta-style Franklin Island, raw milk Walloon, Moniteau Blue, and Osage Orange—can be found at the Columbia Farmer’s Market on Saturdays and at the Maplewood Farmer’s Market in St. Louis on Wednesdays. Goatsbeard Farm also supplies selected grocers and restaurants in the mid-Missouri area.

For information on Goatsbeard Farm and where to find their cheeses see www.goatsbeardfarm.com.

Check out www.MissouriLife.com for a bonus yogurt recipe.

THE NUTRITION OF GOAT CHEESE

How do goat cheeses stack up against cow’s milk cheese?

Per ounce of goat cheese compared to cow’s milk cream cheese:

	Fresh Goat Cheese	Cream Cheese
Calories	69.4	99.5
Protein (grams)	4.0	2.1
Fat (grams)	5.5	10.0
Cholesterol (mg)	17.6	30.5
Sodium (mg)	83.4	84.5

From www.goatsbeardfarm.com, information made available by the American Dairy Goat Products Association.