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By Cheese Possessed

By DANA BOWEN

DIANE STEMPLER is a clinical psychologist. But each Thursday she steps away from her practice in Port Washington, N.Y., to work at the counter at Murray's Cheese shop in Greenwich Village.

When the restaurant Artisanal opened four years ago with a list of 200 cheeses, Dr. Stemple worked there as an intern. "I was the weird woman from the suburbs who wanted to work in cheese," she said.

Dr. Stemple, who said she became enchanted with cheese when she sampled varieties she had never tasted while on her European honeymoon in 1985, once dragged her family on a 12-day trip to Scotland, where she made cheese. She also has taught cheese classes for her local school district.

"It's not normal," she said of her cheese obsession.

Increasingly, though, it's not that unusual. As the variety and quality of American cheeses have blossomed in recent years, the passion of American cheese lovers has intensified. The American Cheese Society, a trade organization, has more than doubled in membership, to about 1,000, in four years, but only 25 percent make cheese.

So who are the rest? People like Dr. Stemple. They treat good cheese stores like temples. They visit cheese makers. They take classes in cheese appreciation, cheese making and affinage, the art of maturing cheese, which some practice at home. They seek out unusual, even illegal cheeses.

"I think there's a lot of similarities to where wine was 30 years ago," said Terrance Brennan, owner of the restaurants Artisanal and Picholine, and of the Artisanal Cheese Center, where more than 1,700 students have studied subjects as varied as cheese-plate arranging and cheese aging since it opened two years ago.

With places like Murray's, Artisanal and the Bedford Cheese Shop in Brooklyn, and with scores of cheese makers within a day's drive, New York City is a center of cheese enthusiasm.

Ken Liss left his wife and two young sons in Minneapolis earlier this year for a three-month, 20-hour-a-week unpaid internship at the Artisanal Cheese Center on West 37th Street, a leading center of affinage and cheese education. Mr. Liss quit his job as an academic adviser at the University of Minnesota and is thinking of opening a bed-and-breakfast, but he said he is working at Artisanal to pursue his love. "I'm still learning how to taste the cheese," he said.

One recent morning, Mr. Liss transferred Fleur-de-Lis, a triple cream from Louisiana that looks like a large white Hershey's Kiss with the top lopped off, onto racks in one of five Artisanal's aging caves, which are like walk-in coolers with a funky aroma.

In the caves, Mr. Liss and other interns and workers ready the cheese for sale in stores and at Mr. Brennan's restaurants by rotating and flipping them to age evenly over periods of 10 days to 3 months. They spray some with brines and bathe others with brandies to finish what the cheese makers started in their own caves.

With its varied allures, cheese feeds a variety of obsessions.

For some it provides a connection to the land. Kate Brady, a marketing consultant who lives on the Upper West Side, visits farms on her days off. Tim Tonjes, a second-generation dairy farmer, sells his robust Welsh-style Caerphilly at the Union Square Greenmarket alongside pictures of his farm in Callicoon, N.Y., and his Holsteins. "There are those that are very interested in the fact that it's a small farm," he said.

Anne Saxelby, a part-time painter who works behind the counter at Murray's, helped out at Cato Corner Farm, a Connecticut cheese maker, last year. In her kitchen hangs a painting she did of the milking barn. "That's Greta," she said, pointing to a pretty Jersey heifer.

Paintings of cheese she helped make at Cato Corner - a Muenster-style Hooligan and a somber portrait of Swiss-style Vivaces - hang in a classroom at Murray's.

In the last decade women in particular have been dropping their day jobs to devote their lives to cheese. Diana Pittet, now working on a dissertation about American cheddars at New York University, quit teaching Latin to work at Neal's Yard Dairy, London's foremost cheese store. Lori van Handel was a full-time art conservator in Williamstown, Mass., who became a freelance to free up time to take cheese classes in Manhattan and Vermont. Daphne Zepos was a restaurant cook before becoming director of affinage at the Artisanal Cheese Center and one of the most respected voices in the field of American cheese.

Rob Kaufelt, the owner of Murray's, one of the top cheese shops in New York, said the women behind his counter are part of a "new guard": effusive, knowledgeable and nice. The "old guard," he said, was made up of "the kind of guys you'd find in a butcher shop." Now about 75 percent of his staff members are women. "Well educated, reasonably well dressed," he said with a laugh.

"It used to be a little bit combative," Liz Thorpe, director of wholesale operations for Murray's, recalled. "You didn't go to Murray's and not be on your toes."

There's a bond behind the counter and among the many facets of cheese work. "All in all it's a very small community," Ms. Zepos said. Even those who leave Murray's counter for other jobs stay in touch.

Last week Ms. Saxelby had several co-workers and former co-workers from Murray's over to her apartment for a weekly dinner where they chat and sometimes dish about cheese.

The kitchen was packed. The guests swapped tasting notes on an intensely anticipated washed-rind cow's milk cheese, "Winnamere," to be released by Mateo Kehler of Jasper Hill Farm in Vermont. Heidi Exline, who left Murray's to make cheese in Vermont, mixed fourme d'Ambert into a batch of blue cheese brownies.

They dipped knives in an Époisses-style cheese from Lazy Lady Farm, which Ms. Saxelby had washed periodically with brine after getting it at the farm in Vermont.

While there she took a day trip to Montreal and sneaked back some young raw-milk cheeses that are prized by fans. (The Food and Drug Administration bans the sale or import of cheese aged less than 60 days because government scientists say it takes that long for cheese to develop acids and salts that prevent pathogens.) "I was so paranoid," Ms. Saxelby said.

David Arnold, a database designer on the Lower East Side who organized an exhibition about country ham at the Javits Convention Center last year, said he brings back raw-milk cheese every time he travels abroad. "As soon as the plane hits the ground I'm in a cheese shop," he said, buying as much cheese as his wife will allow. He said he sets up a salt bath in the bottom of a wine refrigerator to store the cheese at the proper humidity.

Another cheese lover, Frederic W. Melendez, the chief executive of the Garden State Fund, a hedge fund in Wyckoff, N.J., said he is thinking of installing cheese caves next to the 750-bottle wine cellar in his basement. "It would be a cheese closet, not a cave," he said, and it would keep the \$100 worth of cheese he buys weekly from soaking up flavors of other foods in his refrigerator.

Efforts to find unusual specimens can lead to a competitive craving.

Heather Ramsdell, a copywriter who lives in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, argued with an acquaintance at a dinner party recently when he cold-shouldered the goat cheese chevrot and questioned her taste when she said she didn't like Humboldt Fog, a goat cheese from Cypress Grove in California. "He needed to enforce his tiny little cheese wisdom on us all," she said.

Mr. Arnold, whose latest obsessions include herbaceous cheeses made with thistle rennet like Azeitão from Portugal, said his friends don't even try to compete. "No one brings cheese to my house," he said.

Hard-core enthusiasts may seek out formaggio di fossa, an Italian sheep's milk cheese that is aged in the ground, but few would go as far as Cielo Peralta, a worker at Murray's since 1995 who has had one buried in his backyard in Bushwick, Brooklyn, for a year. He lovingly slathers pumpkinseed oil on its mottled surface every few months.

Along with the humble obsessives, the cheese world also has its stars, and its stargazers. They meet at cheese blogs like cheesediaries.com, which has as many as 600 daily visitors, according to its founder, Anne Pinckard. And, of course, they meet in person. Recently about a dozen people gathered at Spuyten Duyvil, a beer bar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. They included a red-haired woman in a retro dress, a man in a suit and the rest in T-shirts and jeans. They awaited the night's guest of honor, a Swiss affinage expert named Rolf Beeler. The bar reeked of his work: a cheese platter that included the rare soft-ripened Stanser Röteli.

"I joke with my friends that I have a crush on Rolf Beeler," said Rachel Vessey, development director at St. Mark the Evangelist School in Harlem, who volunteers as a class assistant at Murray's Cheese in exchange for cheese.

"Is that him?" one woman asked as the door swung open. It was not. It turned out that Williamsburg, that hipster pocket of Brooklyn, had lost out to fancier precincts. Mr. Beeler was dining at Café Gray at the Time Warner Center in Manhattan and couldn't get to Brooklyn in time.

Devoted as they are to people like Mr. Beeler, the cheese-obsessed recognize how difficult it is to achieve the ultimate goal: making cheese.

Greg Blais, the manager at Bedford, has worked in cheese shops since college and has managed many of the New York City's better cheese counters. Ultimately, though, he would like to make cheese.

But he said: "I don't think I've learned enough to make cheese. I think I'd have to live somewhere for a couple of years and get the lay of the land, see how the seasons change." Even so, for now, like so many people who live and breathe cheese, he's just happy to be around it. "It's nice to work with my hands and work with the cheese," he said. "That puts me in a very good place, mentally."

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