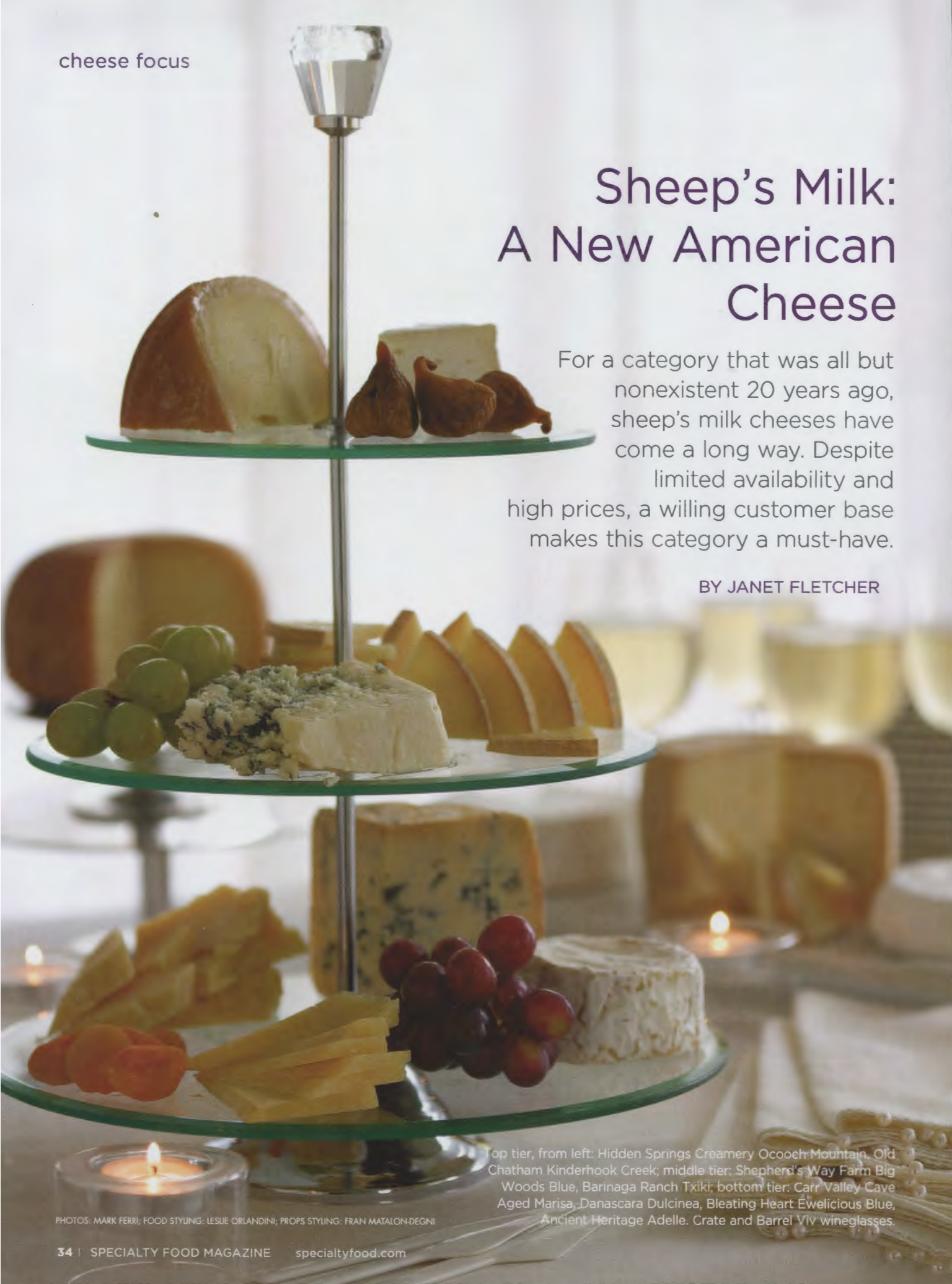


Sheep's Milk: A New American Cheese

For a category that was all but nonexistent 20 years ago, sheep's milk cheeses have come a long way. Despite limited availability and high prices, a willing customer base makes this category a must-have.

BY JANET FLETCHER



Top tier, from left: Hidden Springs Creamery Ocooch Mountain, Old Chatham Kinderhook Creek; middle tier: Shepherd's Way Farm Big Woods Blue, Barinaga Ranch Txiki; bottom tier: Carr Valley Cave Aged Marisa, Danascara Dulcinea, Bleating Heart Ewelicious Blue, Ancient Heritage Adelle. Crate and Barrel Viv wineglasses.

PHOTOS: MARK FERRI; FOOD STYLING: LESLIE ORLANDINI; PROPS STYLING: FRAN MATALON-DEGNI

cheese focus

Anyone who becomes a cheese lover becomes a sheep's milk cheese lover," claims Amy Thompson, cheesemonger for Lucy's Whey in New York City. A generalization, to be sure, but few in the specialty cheese world would dispute it. Ask a cheese professional about his or her favorites, and sheep's milk wheels—from Italy's aromatic pecorinos to France's Basque beauties—often head the list.

Now, finally, the U.S. has some of its own worthy sheep cheeses to add to the mix, and merchants report robust demand for them. As the domestic supply of sheep's milk grows, more cheeses will surely debut, helping populate a category that 20 years ago hardly existed.

Slow Start

When the *Atlas of American Artisan Cheeses* was published in 2007, the compendium listed only 40 sheep cheese producers. Five years later, the number had climbed to 60, says Jeff Roberts, the book's author. Amish farmers in the Midwest, Pennsylvania, and New York are adding dairy sheep to their operations and supplying milk to established creameries like Old Chatham Shepherding Company in New York's Hudson Valley.

The slow beginnings for sheep cheese production in this country reflect both history and economics. Until recent times, America's ovine breeds were those valued for meat and fiber, such as the Merino and Churro (also known as Churra) sheep from Spain and the French Rambouillet. European dairy breeds, such as the East Friesian and Lacaune, didn't show up until the mid-1990s. But by 2001, the USDA had closed the door on imported livestock to prevent the spread of mad cow disease and scrapie, a similar disease that affects sheep.

The ongoing livestock ban has ham-

Rob Graff from Venissimo Cheese sees the whole sheep's milk category as wide open for would-be cheesemakers—especially the unfilled niche of fresh, soft-ripened cheeses.

USDA ORGANIC

Torie & Howard™ © 12 cal ea.

all natural satisfaction

• **Organic** •
HARD CANDY
natural fruit flavors

At last... unique, sophisticated sweets brimming with fresh flavors that taste of real, luscious fruit picked straight from the garden. Carefully crafted from all natural ingredients, our candies have distinctive, refined flavors that truly transport you. No additives, no artificial flavors or colors. **Just Pure. Fresh. Delicious satisfaction.**

torieandhoward.com • 888.826.9554

KJ PARVE 0624J

Summer Fancy Food Show Booth 1551

Farm to Table






Coach Farm's goat milk yogurt is made by hand on our Hudson Valley Farm. The milk comes from goats born right here and are fed what we grow. Our yogurt contains only the good stuff!

- ✓ Grade A Milk
- ✓ 100% Natural
- ✓ Probitics
- ✓ No Preservatives



Available in Strawberry, Honey, Vanilla, Maple Brown Sugar or Traditional Plain.



   CoachFarm.com

Summer Fancy Food Show Booth 2368

cheese focus



Shepherd's Way Farm Burr Oak

pered efforts to make sheep cheese a viable business. Without the higher-production dairy breeds, creameries struggle to get enough milk to meet demand and to keep prices reasonable.

"The biggest limiting factor in the U.S. has been the lack of milk," says Tom Clark, co-owner of Old Chatham with his wife, Nancy. "We haven't been able to bring in any new genetics in about 10 years. If we had better genetics from Europe, we could totally change production and make it more attractive."

Despite Obstacles, Appeal Grows

Sheep are notoriously stingy milk producers. David Major, whose pioneering Vermont Shepherd Cheese debuted in the early 1990s, says a good ewe from his flock will produce 400 to 500 pounds of milk a year, enough for 80 to 100 pounds of aged cheese. A dairy cow, in contrast, may yield 20,000 pounds of milk in the same period. Sheep's milk is considerably higher in solids, so a pound of sheep's milk yields more cheese, but not enough to bridge this vast difference. With cow's milk currently at 22 cents a pound and sheep's milk—if a producer can find it—fetching a dollar a pound, "the extra solids content doesn't offset the pricing," says Clark.

The seasonality of sheep's milk complicates a creamery's business plan. Unlike cows, which breed and lactate year-round, ewes are more sensitive creatures. They are more fertile in fall and winter, difficult to breed at other times. At Vermont Shepherd, Major can produce Verano, his all sheep's milk wheel, only from April—shortly after the ewes give birth and begin lactating again—until November, when the ewes dry off.

Fortunately, consumers seem willing to pay a premium for domestic sheep cheeses, merchants say. Few American producers can compete on price with popular imports like Spain's Manchego and France's Abbaye de Belloc. "But I don't think they have to because everyone wants local," says Rob Graff, a cheesemonger with Venissimo Cheese, a San Diego retailer with three locations. "And in San Diego, local means West Coast, or even domestic."

AMERICAN SHEEP CHEESE PRODUCERS TO WATCH

Joining veterans like Bellwether Farms, Carr Valley, Old Chatham Shepherding Company, Vermont Shepherd, and the Wisconsin Sheep Dairy Cooperative, these relative newcomers are making cheeses worth discovering.

ANCIENT HERITAGE (OR)

Adelle: mixed milk, bloomy-rind disk

BARINAGA RANCH (CA)

Baserri: Basque-style, raw-milk, 4-pound wheel

Txiki: Baserri in a smaller format

BLEATING HEART (CA)

Fat Bottom Girl: 2-pound, raw-milk wheel, lightly washed

Shepherdista: raw-milk, 1½-pound wheel with natural rind

DANASCARA (NY)

Dulcinea: Spanish-style wheel rubbed with cocoa and olive oil

HIDDEN SPRINGS CREAMERY (WI)

Driftless (pictured): spreadable, tub-packed fresh cheese

Ocooch Mountain: raw-milk, washed-rind wheel aged 3 to 4 months

Bohemian Blue: rindless blue made at Hook's Cheese with Hidden Springs milk

MANY FOLD FARM (GA)

Brebis: creamy, fresh, unripened cheese

MEADOWOOD FARM (NY)

Rippleton: beer-washed cheese; aged a minimum of 2 months

Ledyard: bloomy-rind disk wrapped in grape leaves

Lorenzo: cider-washed wheel resembling raclette

SHEPHERD'S WAY FARM (MN)

Shepherd's Hope: fresh, moist, spreadable; tangier with age

Big Woods Blue: 6-pound rindless blue; buttery and spicy

WOODCOCK FARM (VT)

Summer Snow: 12-ounce Camembert-style disk

Hidden Springs Creamery Driftless in cranberry cinnamon



Weston Wheel: Manchego-style 5- to 6-pound wheel

Hand-Selling and Education Create Fans

A nudge is sometimes all it takes to get consumers to try—and love—sheep's milk cheeses. At Venissimo and Lucy's Whey, mongers may suggest customers familiar with Manchego try Dante from the Wisconsin Sheep Dairy Cooperative. "It's the flavor profile they're looking for," says Thompson, "really rich and nutty and savory."

Graff says his stores also do well with Bellwether Farms San Andreas, Hook's Cheese Company Little Boy Blue, and several selections from Old Chatham, including the bloomy-rind Kinderhook Creek and Ewe's Blue. Graff also takes all he can get of Shepherdista and Fat Bottom Girl, small-production aged cheeses from Northern

California's Bleating Heart.

At Wedge, a specialty cheese shop in Reno, owner Laura Conrow says she regularly stocks Bellwether's Pepato, a peppercorn-studded version of San Andreas; and Carr Valley's Cave-Aged Marisa, a staff favorite. "We pop in others from small producers as available, but those are our standards," says Conrow, who notes that customers accept the relatively high pricing when she explains the differences in scale between, say, the family-owned Bellwether Farms and an industrial Manchego.

Thompson, another Bellwether fan, is also taken with the cheeses from Meadowood Farm, near Syracuse, N.Y. The beer-washed Rippleton, cider-washed Lorenzo, and leaf-wrapped, soft-ripened Ledyard have all sold briskly at both Lucy's

Whey shops in Manhattan. Another sheep's milk newbie doing well for Thompson is Dulcinea, a cocoa-rubbed aged wheel from Danascara Cheese in upstate New York.

What's missing in the domestic sheep's milk niche? Fresh and soft-ripened cheeses, says Thompson. "Getting them to market is difficult," admits the merchant, "but if someone could do it, there would be a great response." Graff sees the whole sheep's milk category as wide open for would-be cheesemakers, who occasionally come to him for insights. "If you can get your hands on sheep's milk," says Graff, "that's what the market wants right now."

Janet Fletcher is the weekly cheese columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle and the author of Cheese & Beer.