

## FOOD

A cult destination in London has revolutionized cheesemaking, winning converts as far afield as Vermont.

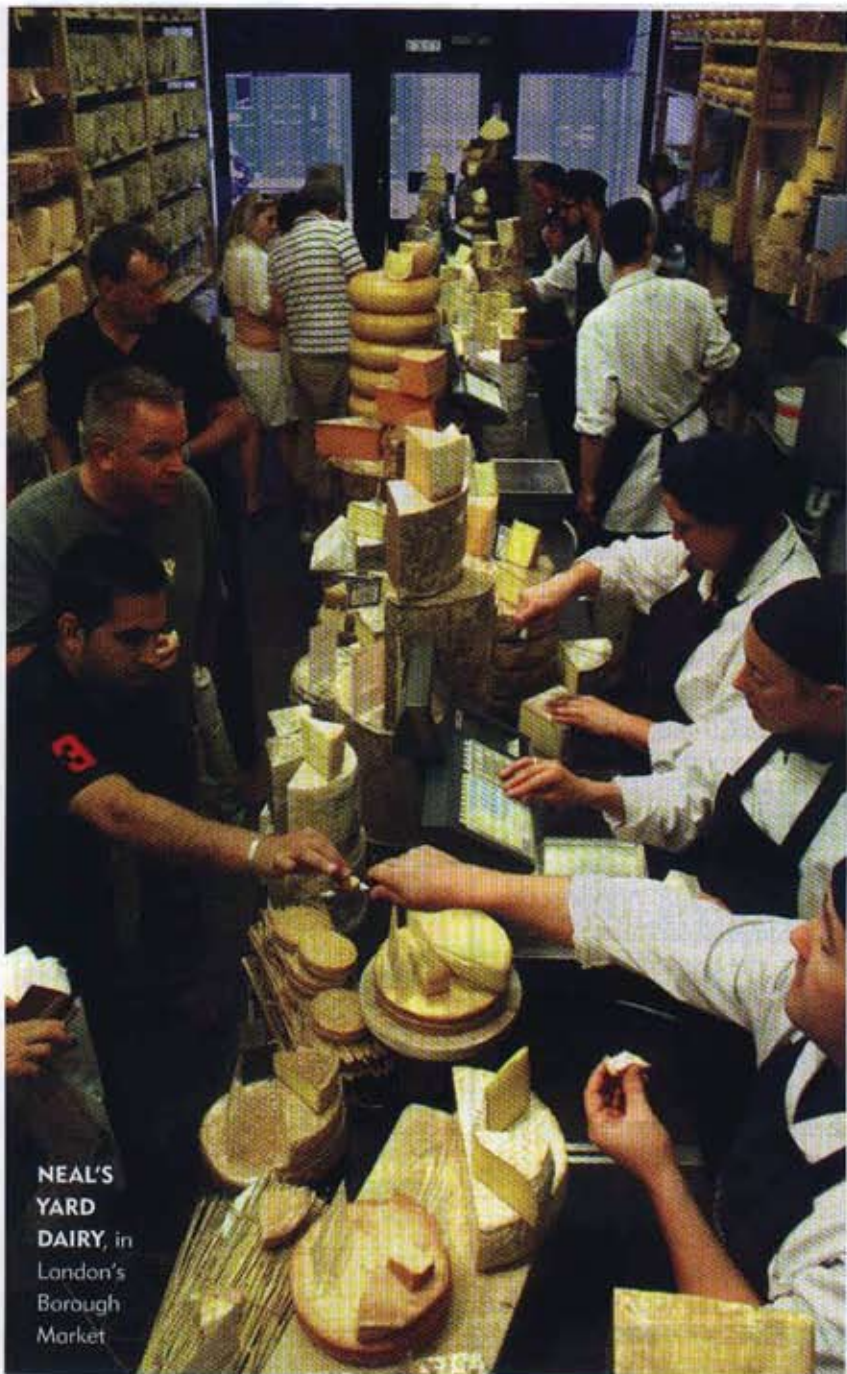
# The Art of Aging Well

BY CORBY KUMMER

Great cheese is always a collaboration. So I thought at the opening-night tasting at the annual conference of the American Cheese Society in Burlington, Vermont. In 1996, Allison Hooper, the society's president, whose Vermont Butter & Cheese makes famous crème fraîche and marvelous butter, called Vermont the "Napa Valley of cheese." At the time, it was an outlandish claim: When she first set up shop, as she recounts in her introduction to the new *Atlas of American Artisan Cheese*, "if it wasn't cheddar, it wasn't a business." Now it is hard to dispute.

Ten years ago at an American Cheese Society conference in Madison, Wisconsin, the feeling was intimate, and many of the cheesemakers looked like the ex-hippies they proudly were. This year the sessions on making and marketing cheeses, held in ballrooms at a Sheraton conference center, were overflowing with people looking more like well-heeled retirees who thought cheese might be easier to get into than wine.

Conference attendees nearly filled the stupendously large and equally beautiful building where the opening-night tasting was held: the Shelburne Farms breeding barn, for nearly 50 years the largest open-span timber structure in America (it was built in 1891 with Vanderbilt money). The enlightened agricultural center created by the family in order to keep the estate whole produces a highly regarded cheddar. I was struck by the quality of most of the cheeses being sampled, all of them from Vermont, and was particularly taken with three aged goat cheeses from Twig Farm that I, a dedicated goat-avoider, couldn't stop eating.



NEAL'S  
YARD  
DAIRY, in  
London's  
Borough  
Market

The story of the attractive young couple that makes them, Michael and Emily Lee, is par for the Vermont course. They met at Hampshire College as art students; after several years as a bike messenger, Michael got a job at Formaggio Kitchen, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Emily got one with an international publisher. Three years ago, they decided to buy a farm in Vermont and make cheese.

Ihsan and Valerie Gurdal, the owners, were among the first American cheesemongers to install a ripening cave (actually, a humidified room in the basement), and they encouraged and guided the Lees at every step. At Formaggio, Michael had come to understand the central role that thoughtful aging plays in bringing cheeses to their fullest expression; today Twig Farm's aging makes the difference between a perfectly good cheese and an exceptional one.

The cheeses I tasted in the awe-inspiring barn crystallized my thoughts on what makes cheese become great: constant communication between cheesemaker and cheesemonger, and very careful attention to *affinage*, the art of tending cheese as it ages. I came to the conference with the taste of a lovely new English cheese fresh in my mind. It was the result of just that kind of collaboration.

Borough Market is the thriving heart of the food scene in London, a city that has taken to the buy-local mantra with an enthusiasm rivaled only by that of—well, Vermont. Cheese lovers board the Tube for London Bridge to visit the large headquarters of Neal's Yard Dairy—a mecca, even if its cheeses have long been sold at other shops. Whole Foods, which sells them too, has begun building showplace cheese-aging rooms—some under the guidance of Neal's Yard staff, notably at its long-anticipated first United Kingdom store, in Kensington.

*Affinage* was crucial to the cheese that captured my imagination: Oglesfield, made in Somerset by the Montgomery family, renowned for its cheddar. The milk for my new discovery came from Jersey cows, which the family keeps alongside its Friesians, the classic cheddar

cow. They had never used it for cheese. Jersey milk is unequalled for clotted cream, a Somerset speciality, and the cows are an amiable breed. But the milk is much less suited to cheesemaking: The large fat globules, marvelous in cream, deter proper setting, and the excess fat can detract from the desired texture in a hard, matured cheese.

At first Jamie Montgomery, the renowned cheesemaker in the current generation, made a Jersey cheese that Randolph Hodgson, the owner of Neal's Yard, nicknamed Montgomery's Lite—a blander, fattier version of the cheddar, which is famous for keeping its tang and deep flavors in exquisite equipoise. (Montgomery called it "Shield," for a shield found on the farm under a hill some believe to have been the original Camelot; he had the motif stamped at the bottom of wooden molds.) It struck Hodgson as too mild and too hard.

The Neal's Yard cheese whizzes went to work. Hodgson and William Oglethorpe, the master *affineur* of Neal's Yard, relentlessly think of ways to improve even already-great cheeses, like Montgomery cheddar. Hodgson regularly visits Somerset and selects his favorite wheels to bring back to the Arches, an aging cave he built under train tracks about a mile down the railway line from Borough Market.

Better to go soft, the team decided. Oglethorpe thought of raclette, a mountain cheese famous in Switzerland and France but almost unknown in England. Raclette is unctuous and pliable where cheddar is dry and crumbly. It seemed far better suited to Jersey milk. And introducing England's first artisan raclette might be just the way to celebrate Neal's Yard's 25th anniversary, which was coming up.

Swiss friends brought Oglethorpe a raclette machine (he collects cheesemaking equipment on the side)—a grill-rotisserie that continually melts the surface of a half-wheel of cheese. The oozing cheese is scraped over boiled potatoes and sometimes smoked ham (*racler* means "to scrape"). In the French Alps the dish is a cult, a street and country-fair food almost as popular as crêpes. Making it could be a jolly activity that

would give market-goers some lively fun and be a nice sideline too.

Oglethorpe hauled out the heavy artillery—resalting the Shield wheels, massaging them regularly, letting them sit for weeks in an unusually moist room. Jamie Montgomery took the hint. He decided to set aside a room just for aging, drawing inspiration from two Wisconsin cheesemakers he had recently visited: Willi Lehner, of Bleu Mont Dairy, who built his own cave, and Mike Gingrich, of Uplands Cheese, a maker of washed Goudas. He got hands-on advice from Marcel Petite, a renowned French *affineur* who sells Comté to Neal's Yard. (Comté is my new candidate to vie with Parmigiano-Reggiano as the world's greatest cheese; I've come late to the club, which seems to

Borough Market is a challenge. Everything about the raclette stand is good fun and hard work: washing and boiling some 175 pounds of potatoes, manning the heater, avoiding burns from dripping cheese. Lockwood, an amiable fellow, and Oglethorpe, a passionate eccentric who was raised in Zambia, cheerfully and sweatily do most of the work. Oglesfield comes into its glossy glory when it is melted, and it makes a marvelous bubbly glaze for anything gratinéed—potatoes, of course, but it would be ideal too for mac and cheese, the comfort dish to which whole books have lately been devoted.

Even more glorious is the Oglethorpe grilled-cheese sandwich, made with grated Montgomery cheddar heaped between slices of Poilâne bread, the

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include every important cheese expert.) Petite pointed out that Montgomery's ventilation needed to change. The goal in an aging room, he said, is to get moisture into the cheese, not into the air; temperature and ventilation must go hand in hand with simple humidification. The collaboration between maker and *affineur* continued with such intensity that the cheese took on a new name to reflect it: Oglesfield.

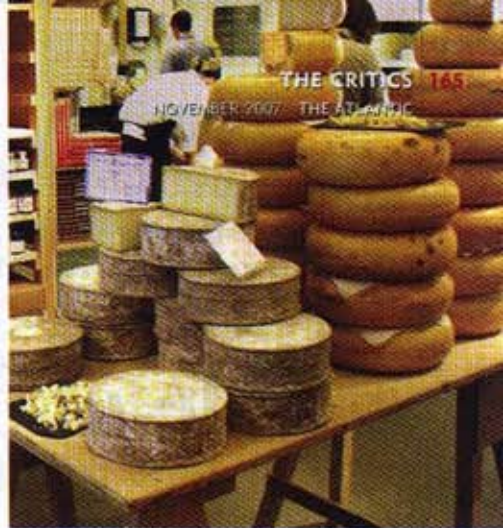
England's own raclette has caught on with customers—but only very special friends get any to sell. In the United States, that mostly means Zingerman's, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which has a decades-old collaboration and exchange program with Neal's Yard. It is also where the American-born David Lockwood, a partner and manager at Neal's Yard and the major-domo and co-owner of the raclette stand, began his career. For now, almost all the 40 wheels Montgomery can make in a month go straight to the raclette stand in London that Lockwood and Oglethorpe established as a separate business.

The lines start early on Saturdays, when just passing through the aisles of

French country bread that sets the international standard, along with five types of onion and a bit of garlic. I took one big bite and the sandwich immediately went onto my list of best things I've ever had.

The taste of that stellar sandwich fresh in my mind, I found aged Vermont cheddars at the conference to make it with, including Shelburne's own. I found, too, the only American artisan raclette, made by the Leelanau Cheese Company of Suttons Bay, Michigan, an area so scenic (as any visitor to Traverse City knows) that most of what it produces is sold to tourists and locals who visit its shop. John and Anne Hoyt, he from Detroit and she from a farm in France, met when John was working with a Swiss mountain cheesemaker. He learned techniques for the only cheese made there—raclette. Eleven years ago, the Hoyts started producing their own aged raclette. This year, it won the cheese society's grand prize. Leelanau Raclette is very good. So is Oglesfield. I wanted to take a wedge of each one home to (literally) toast the results of great transatlantic collaborations. **A**

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## CHEESE WHIZZES

**Formaggio Kitchen**, Cambridge, Massachusetts ([www.formaggiokitchen.com](http://www.formaggiokitchen.com), 888-212-3224), is as notable for its Italian and French candies and oils as for its cheese.

**Artisanal** ([www.artisanalcheese.com](http://www.artisanalcheese.com), 877-797-1200) brought *affinage* on a large scale to New York City after Terrance Brennan and Max McCalman made the cheese course at Picholine (where Brennan was—and remains—chef and owner and McCalman was *maitre d'*) a city legend. Now they age and sell cheese for restaurants and mail-order customers all over the country.

**Zingerman's**, Ann Arbor, Michigan ([www.zingermans.com](http://www.zingermans.com), 888-636-8162), is the national leader in educating apprentice cheese-lovers. Its co-owner, Ari Weinzwieg, long ago formed a partnership with Neal's Yard Dairy, in England, and still gets the best selection of the cheeses it ages (and often transforms through aging).

**The Cheese Store of Beverly Hills** ([www.cheesestorebh.com](http://www.cheesestorebh.com), 800-547-1515) has become a Los Angeles favorite. It is prized for its discoveries of farmhouse cheeses in both Europe and America, and the care it takes in presenting and selling them.

**The Cheese Board Collective** ([cheeseboardcollective.coop](http://cheeseboardcollective.coop), 510-549-3183) is a Berkeley institution that predates even Chez Panisse, which is directly across the street. Its members are owners and are unusually generous in their enthusiasm for the cheeses they all help to select and age.