

**IN SEARCH OF GOOD FOOD**

## **Atlas is a vital guide for cheese lovers**

**By Marty Rosen**

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Not so long ago, the words "American cheese" meant yellow slices of factory-made processed stuff carefully engineered to do two simple things: 1. fit neatly between two slices of factory-made bread; 2. melt fast.

If you were eccentric enough to be interested in un-American cheeses -- the weird ones with moldy rinds, odd shapes and strong flavors, you had to head for Europe (or Quebec).

And by the way, you'd better not try to sneak any of that dangerously un-American cheese back into the country.

Not anymore. In the last generation or so, artisanal American cheesemakers -- like artisanal bakers, winemakers and brewers -- have rediscovered the art and craft of making great cheese.

These days, a cheese connoisseur can spend a lifetime investigating the great cheeses of America -- but only if he or she can figure out where to look. And that's the rub: Many of these great cheeses are produced in tiny lots on small farms in out-of-the-way places by folks whose passion for cheese doesn't necessarily translate into a passion for marketing at the national level.

That's where Jeffrey P. Roberts' new book, "The Atlas of American Artisan Cheese" (Chelsea Green, \$35) comes in.

Roberts, one of the founders of the Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese at the University of Vermont, has compiled an attractive, informative directory of 345 American cheesemakers from 43 states that fills an enormous gap in the cheese literature.

To put it simply: There is no other comparable guide to the rich variety of cheeses made in America. And though it's an imperfect book, it's certainly an essential reference for cheese lovers who are traveling, shopping or just dreaming about cheese.

Regarding the imperfections, it's an "atlas" only in the sense that it's arranged geographically. The country is broken down into seven regions (New England, Pacific Rim, Upper Midwest, etc.), and each region is divided into states. Within each state, cheesemakers are listed alphabetically.

The sole map in the book illustrates the regional breakdown.

Expecting to find a map of Vermont with dots showing the locations of the cheesemakers? Sorry.

Hoping that the informative two-page entry for Capriole Goat Cheese in Greenville, Ind., or the single pages that discuss Kenny's Farmhouse Cheese or Gethsemani Farm might include a convenient regional map so you can decide whether to stop in on your road trip across country. Sorry.

To plan a driving tour, you'll have to resort to a conventional atlas, or mapping software.

Still, this book is a huge step forward for cheese lovers. It's a remarkable guide to the best cheesemakers in the country. Each entry gives a concise summary of the maker's history and focus. Most entries are illustrated by a photo or two. Addresses, telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, Web sites, hours and the like are clearly stated, as are visiting policies and hours.

And if you're trying to figure out how to get your hands on a piece of raw sheep's milk cheese wrapped in vodka macerated nettles from Wisconsin, the entries include information about retail, on-premises and mail-order options.

As for the core content: Each entry lists and describes each maker's products, highlights cheeses of special distinction (from this region, special mention is given to Kenny's Bleu Gouda and Capriole's O'Banon, cave-aged cheese that's wrapped in bourbon-soaked chestnut leaves), and indicates which cheesemakers have won awards in the American Cheese Society's annual competition.

A very brief introduction describes the characteristics of various styles of cheese, and folks interested in particular types of cheeses will find indexes that identify the folks who make their cheese from cow's milk, sheep's milk and goat's milk -- and the two outfits that use the milk of water buffalos. Other indexes identify sources for organic and raw milk cheeses.

Whether you're planning a trip to Alaska (home of Cranberry Ridge Farm, specializing in goat's milk cheeses) or Indianapolis (where Dutch-born cheesemaker Fons Smits is crafting award-winning raw milk, washed-rind cheeses at Trader's Point Creamery), this book will add a delightful element to your tour.

And if you're an armchair traveler just trying to make sense of the fascinating American cheeses showing up in your local dairy cases, this book will be a gustatory guide for years to come.