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FAST FOOD/SLOW FOOD

The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System



EDITED BY
RICHARD WILK



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Artisanal Cheese and Economies of Sentiment in New England

HEATHER PAXSON



IN THE PAST TWO DECADES, new American cheeses with such names as Humboldt Fog and Hooligan have cropped up in specialty shops and farmers' markets, signaling producers and consumers keen to cultivate novel tastes. Consider Vermont Shepherd: a 2000 American Cheese Society Best of Show winner, it is among America's most distinguished cheeses. "With its golden brown rind and rustic shape," quoting from the farm's brochure, "every wheel of Vermont Shepherd is distinctive. The texture is smooth and creamy. The flavor is sweet, rich and earthy, with hints of clover, wild mint and thyme." The Vermont Cheese Council website adds: "it is only made during Vermont's warmer months, when our sheep are grazing the pastures and fields." The makers' website offers serving suggestions—"As a dessert, pair with a cherry preserve (a French Pyrenees classic)"—and adds a democratic reassurance that the cheese goes well with just about any wine.¹ Not only are we tantalized by the epicurean experience of a slice of Vermont Shepherd, we are invited to imagine the flavors distinctive to this cheese emerging from equally distinctive clover-filled pastures, locating the cheese, and its makers, in the pastoral landscape of Vermont.

It might be easy to dismiss this synesthetic appeal as a mere marketing tool, selling the consumer, at over \$20 a pound, a value-added fantasy of clean rural living with a classy Europhilic twist. One might level at America's artisanal cheese renaissance a critique aimed at Whole Foods Market and the Slow Food movement, that it represents the profit-driven creation of an elite niche market (e.g., Wurgaft 2002:87; Gaytán 2004; Pilcher this volume). In fall 2003, Slow Food USA inaugurated an American Raw Milk Farmstead Cheese Presidium to support makers of cheeses, like Vermont Shepherd, "who face the daily challenges of maintaining their farms, tending to their animals, and finding the time to make cheese."² But critique of such announcements as mere marketing itself rests on a "corporate vision of food as pure commodity"—precisely what the founders of Slow Food hoped to overcome with their "manifesto in defense of pleasure" (Parasecoli 2003:35). As



Melanie Du Puis (2002) notes, academic food fights over value-added agricultural products like organics often come down to how each side views the consumer: as agent of change leveraging the power of market demand, or as corporate dupe animated by a feel-good false consciousness that good shopping can save the family farm and the environment from globalization and agribusiness. Without ignoring the class differentials of taste and purchasing power central to food marketing and consumption, I show here what is missed when analyses, like the Slow Food movement itself, neglect to consider how *all* foods produced for market, “capitalist” and “noncapitalist,” are embedded in cultural and moral economies.

Critics and champions of alternative foods have often assumed that only desire for profit drives the owners of the means of food production. Despite Sahlins’s attempt in *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976:169) to get us to think of capitalist production as “something more and other than a practical logic of material effectiveness,” many of today’s substantivists, speaking of cultural capital if not cultural reason, focus on consumption as a site for cultural production and class differentiation, a location of resistance or complicity. When scholars overlook production in searching for food politics, they may assume capitalists lack not only political goodwill but also “cultural intention” (1976:169). A parallel trend in anthropology, however, has linked cultural histories of production to meanings and operations of “the market” (e.g., Mintz 1985; Carrier 1997). In development studies, scholars employ variations of commodity network analysis to study how Third World production and First World consumption of agricultural products, like specialty horticulture, are linked by codes of conduct (e.g., Barrientos and Dolan 2003; Friedberg 2004). Labelle (2004) entertains Slow Food as a “recipe for connectedness bridging production and consumption.” Bestor, in his study of Tokyo’s fish market, details how “the idiom in which [wholesalers] speak of credit, labor, or capital” is a distinctly cultural one of “kinship, personal connections of mutual obligation, apprenticeships, and myriad ties of self-interest embedded in communal . . . affiliations” (2004:219–20). In *Producing Culture and Capital*, Sylvia Yanagisako proposes “a cultural theory of economic action that treats all social action—including capital accumulation, firm expansion, and diversification—as constituted by both deliberate, rational calculation and by sentiments and desires” (2002:21).

Social relations of small-scale agriculture and food production in the United States are driven by sentiment, affiliation, and politics as well as by economic rationality (Barlett 1993; Jarosz 2000; Duram 2000). Cabot Cheddar, the industry giant of the Vermont Cheese Council, is a widely distributed, plastic-wrapped supermarket cheese available in such flavor-added varieties as “pizza cheddar cheese with pepperoni”—*not*, perhaps, a slow food. However, the Cabot cheese factory has been farmer owned since 1919, merging in 1992 with Agri-Mark, New England’s

largest dairy farmer cooperative. Milk from Agri-Mark’s owner farms is collected daily and pasteurized collectively to be marketed as fluid milk or to be sent to a processing plant, including the Cabot cheese factory. This is far from farmstead production, but neither is it corporate buy-out. Grafton Cheddar, another Vermont cheese sourced from a dairy cooperative, is produced in a factory owned by the not-for-profit Windham Foundation. Established in 1963 by an investment banker with local family roots, the foundation is devoted to the historical restoration and economic revitalization of Grafton village and to “the general welfare of Vermont and VermonTERS.” Ben and Jerry, finding in their premium ice cream another value-added product to support Vermont’s dairy farmers, did not invent the sentiment of worker-owned, local-minded, philanthropic capitalism.

Farmstead cheeses—handcrafted in small batches from milk produced from a herd on the same farm as the cheese—are located in this cultural economy. Who are the new cheesemakers, producers of this slow food? What are the kinds and sources of affiliation through which cheesemakers develop their product and bring it to market? I am interested in how the cultural capital of socially conscious or gastronomic foods is not exclusive to consumers. The values that make artisan cheeses taste “good” are related to those values that make such cheeses “good” to make. “Taste” is relevant to production, economic efficiency is a consideration in consumption, and in both, class difference is reproduced while individual class mobility remains a possibility.

This chapter reports from fieldwork undertaken in spring and summer 2004 to chart the cultural economies of New England artisanal cheese production and consumption. Drawing from interviews with cheesemakers and purveyors, I offer examples of how the sentiments of New England small-scale family farmers are variously attached to the cultural capital generated by the artisanal products of their labor.

The Rise of American Artisanal Cheese

Vermont supports more farmstead cheesemakers per capita than any other state (Howland 2004), selling itself as a “green mountain” state of rocky hills and open pastures that depend on grazing sheep and cows. Across the country, the development of commercial dairying has meant fewer and larger farms are producing more milk, sold at cheaper prices (Lyson and Gillespie 1995). Smaller operations have been forced out of business owing to increasing health regulations (e.g., 1950s mandates for concrete-floored milking parlors and replacing metal milk cans with bulk tanks), higher production and equipment costs, and decline in milk consumption. In 1953, at the time of the first bulk tank, Vermont had 10,637 dairy farms with an average herd size of 25 milking cows yielding a total production



of 1.5 billion pounds of milk. By 1999, Vermont had only 1,714 dairy farms, with an annual production of 2.6 billion pounds of milk (Albers 2000:278). But rocky New England farms cannot compete in today's fluid milk economies of scale, calibrated to California's vast valleys, mild winters, and pro-agribusiness political climate (Du Puis 2002:202). In 2002 half of Vermont's dairy farms held seventy cows or fewer. Their survival is said to lie in niche farming—instead of selling commodity [fluid] milk to agribusiness dairies, state legislators and academic consultants encourage farmers in Vermont and Maine to add value to their milk by processing it for specialty markets (Albers 2000:281–84). But it is reductionist to explain that Vermont leads the dairy niche market *because* rocky hillsides are not accessible to large machinery (Hall 2001). This answer, to begin, cannot account for why another state where artisanal cheese is flourishing is California, home to the very largest industrial dairy farms.

Indeed, a bit of state rivalry may inspire Vermont Cheese Council founder Alison Hooper's declaration of Vermont as "the Napa Valley of artisanal cheese." Likening the blossoming of American artisanal cheese to the California wine revolution of the 1970s, industry experts and journalists assert that growth in cheese, particularly strong since the middle 1990s, has been fueled by *novelle cuisine* chefs and consumers with a taste for locally sourced, nonindustrial foods such as those found at the country's increasingly popular farmers' markets (Berry 2003; Burros 2004; Howland 2004). Tasting booths promoting local cheeses are appearing at New England fairs, like Brattleboro, Vermont's annual "Strolling of the Heifers," following a long tradition of American boosterism celebrating local food specialties (e.g., Gilroy, California's famous Garlic Festival). But the connection between California cuisine and today's artisanal cheese movement runs deeper than cultivation of taste for fresh, unprocessed foods with known origins.

The California culinary movement epitomized by Alice Waters and her Berkeley restaurant, Chez Panisse, shares with the Slow Food movement political beginnings in 1960s leftist student movements (Belasco 1993; Kuh 2001; Parascoli 2003). Similarly, Vermont's self-proclaimed eccentric values—small government and homesteading individualism combined with ecological sensibility—are conducive to artisan farmstead production. Compared with Wisconsin, another state with a significant history of cheese production (and boosterism), Vermont legislators stipulate less demanding regulations for farmstead cheese facilities. Rural Vermont is also within a few hours of metropolitan Boston and New York, key markets for high-end niche products. Formaggio Kitchen early on promoted regional farmstead producers; the cheese shop is located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, home to elite institutions of higher education that nurture political liberalism and a Europhilic palate. In 1995, owner Ihsan Gurdal was the first cheesemonger in the United States to create a French-style cave, a damp basement room for ripening cheeses.



I spoke with Gurdal about the growing interest in artisanal cheese. From his perspective, it began with the strong economy and dollar of the 1990s, which encouraged weekend trips to Paris. In Europe, "people were exposed to cheese" and to the way Europeans eat cheese, as a course in itself. Meanwhile, they realized the 1980s "cholesterol scare was overdone." Restaurant diners started requesting cheese plates. Middle-class consumers have since flocked to educational cheese-tasting workshops. Cheese is becoming the new wine—a mark of educated, yet wholesome, good taste. The recent low-carb diet craze has done more for hedonistic cheese consumption than news of "good" cholesterol. Awake to this new market, New England state legislators and agricultural activists herald artisanal cheeses as value-added commodities that might save small dairy farms from collapse or consolidation.

Gurdal grew animated talking about new American cheesemakers, and he revealed that the majority are *not* traditional farmers making the transition to niche-market production but successful businesspeople who retired early, bought land in the country, and started making cheese. Among the earliest were Miles and Lilian Cahn, former owners of Coach Leather, who bought farmland in New York's Hudson River Valley twenty years ago and make Coach Farm goat cheese. At a New York City Slow Food event in 2001 I heard Miles Cahn tell his story, retold in the photo-filled *Perils and Pleasures of Domesticating Goat Cheese* (2003): "We had this idea about moving to a farm. We were Manhattanites. I definitely had a particular image of a farm in my head. I had seen this cartoon, with a red barn and a silo and Farmer Brown on his tractor, talking to a cow. And that's how I thought of it, as me and the animals talking to each other." Behind this playfulness is a successful businessperson who brought a wealth of economic and cultural capital to farmstead cheesemaking. Cahn is not the only millionaire cheesemaker. Tom Clark, behind Old Chatham Shepherding Company and their exceptional ewes' milk Camembert, remains president of an equity investment firm in Greenwich, Connecticut, and commutes to his Hudson River Valley farm. The newest of this cohort is David Muller, who has a Wharton MBA and chemistry PhD and made a fortune selling medical equipment in Cambridge before moving to Vermont, where he has invested \$1.5 million, plus an additional million loaned by the state, in a farmstead water buffalo mozzarella operation, Star Hill Dairy. These stories map a möbius strip of upscale urban consumers and producers, suggesting a translation of the family farm into a sustainable retirement project.

Gurdal pointed out that these pioneering cheesemakers have made a name and market for American farmstead cheeses, paving the way for newcomers with less start-up capital. Some of the younger urban transplants, he said, really are "becoming farmers," invested in their land and local communities. If the native farmer is not the average cheesemaker, neither is the former CEO. I traveled to Vermont and visited



(among others) two cheesemakers whom Gurdal singled out to me as exemplars of this new cottage industry, and whose cheeses he sells at Formaggio. Like these two, the majority of New England's artisanal cheesemakers are college graduates who either have returned to family land with new class dispositions and business sensibility, or have adopted Vermont as a land of ecologically sound economic opportunity.

Vermont Shepherd

My first stop was Major Farm in southern Vermont, a region of rolling hills, quaint general stores, and cozy B&Bs. David and Cindy Major, makers of the award-winning Vermont Shepherd, are often cited as the vanguard of New England's farmstead cheese movement. Arriving shortly after 1:00 P.M., I roused David from a nap. It was lambing season and he had been spending nights in the barn, ready to assist difficult deliveries.

David, forty-three, grew up in a farmhouse across the road that his parents bought when they started a family and where they live still today. David's family raised sheep for meat and wool, but the farm wasn't "sustainable"; his mother taught kindergarten and his father, while serving as state legislator, sold real estate. David and his three siblings were well educated. David graduated from Harvard, where he studied international development and engineering. In 1983, he returned to his parents' farm with the goal of making it economically sustainable. He was working in the wool industry when he met Cindy. It was Cindy's father, owner of a dairy processing plant in Queens, New York, who suggested the newly married couple milk the sheep—this had never occurred to the Majors, who regarded sheep as meat, wool, and pets. With a USDA grant and financial support and encouragement from Cindy's parents, they built a cheesemaking facility next to their new farmhouse. By 1993 Cindy and David were making Vermont Shepherd, a value-added product that now sustains their family of four and a handful of paid, mostly part-time or seasonal, employees. In summers their children help on the farm. The operation includes a barn and milking parlor on David's parents' property and a larger barn and parlor on an adjacent farm that Cindy's parents bought. In terms of capital investment it is an extended family farm.

David Major is a sheep dairy farmer who also makes cheese. He does the shearing. During lambing season he sleeps in the unheated barn. He takes shifts in the milking parlor. The Majors cut and bale their own hay, family and neighbors pitching in, and nourish the pastures with composted manure and whey. Following his politically active parents, David serves as a farmer representative on numerous local and state agricultural committees.



During my initial visit David led me on a tour of the cheesemaking facilities before crossing over snow-covered fields, trailed by a pair of working border collies, to feed sixty-five ewes at his parents' barn. For David this is not foremost about the cheese. Cheese is what allows him to spend his days on the land and with the sheep. His favorite part of the enterprise is grass pasturage, maintaining clover, wildflowers, and grasses through rotational grazing. As I learned during a two-week stay on Major Farm, moving into the barn apartment as resident anthropologist/volunteer laborer, a significant portion of the day-to-day work on a sheep dairy farm entails "making pasture" by moving electrified plastic fencing to create fresh grazing zones. The Major family is fond of the sheep, direct descendants of animals David helped tend as a child. He pointed out to me ancestral traits, like a brown speckling on some of the ewes' faces. This sentimental focus on the origins of the milk, rather than the eventual product of the milk, may help explain why in more than a decade Vermont Shepherd is the only cheese they make from their sheep's milk.

Today, three days a week, David makes most of the Vermont Shepherd while Cindy oversees accounts and shipping, but it was Cindy who first applied her energy to cheesemaking, experimenting with recipes before seeking the advice of British cheese writer Patrick Rance. One stormy evening over a cup of tea, Cindy showed me Rance's handwritten reply to her initial plea for help. He suggested the family travel to the French Pyrenees, where climatic and geographic conditions were similar to Vermont, to learn about making sheep's milk cheese and to solve their "crust problem," a difficulty they were having with their rinds. Cindy safeguards this letter along with photographs of the Basque cheesemakers who generously took the Majors under their wing and taught them their craft.

In Europe the Majors picked up more than cheesemaking skills; they were drawn to the regional designation and collective sentiment of a cheese consortium. Sandra Ott (1981) describes one such consortium in her ethnography of a Basque shepherding community. Indeed, when I first explained my ethnographic project to David Major, he replied, "You mean like Sandra Ott?" and pulled down from a kitchen shelf, near the *Moosewood Cookbook*, a copy of Ott's (1981) *The Circle of Mountains*. Inspired by France's cheese guilds, in the late nineties Cindy and David developed a consortium of neighboring farms "hooked together for curing and marketing." With funds from a federal grant they established a residential internship program. American bureaucrats, unlike those in Europe (Terrio 2000; Hertzfeld 2004), do not view artisans as "backward" obstacles to modernization; here, artisans are figured as harmless hobbyists or as quintessentially American entrepreneurs. Cheesemakers like the Majors have won educational grants to train others in craft skills that might translate into economic capital. But if the *cultural* capital of artisan cheesemaking is subsidized, the economic capital of farmstead



production is not. Indeed, the strong dollar that helped develop an American palate for artisanal cheese also made it difficult for American cheeses to compete with state-subsidized European originals—the cheeses Americans were adopting and adapting for new geographical, economic, and gastronomic realities.

David and Cindy Major trained cheesemakers who went off to milk sheep on their own farms, craft Vermont Shepherd, and send the “green” wheels to Major Farm to be collectively aged, labeled, and marketed. Nine farms have been involved in the Vermont Shepherd guild. Most of those interested in learning to make cheese were themselves entrepreneurial types. Once they got the hang of Vermont Shepherd, they developed their own cheeses and labels. Although the consortium has dissolved, it was instrumental in training nearly all of Vermont’s ewes’ milk cheesemakers.

Jasper Hill Farm

The second farm Gurdal pointed me toward represents this young entrepreneurial spirit. Engaged in collective enterprise, Mateo and Andy Kehler are brothers who think big. To reach the Kehlers’ Jasper Hill Farm, I drove north through economically depressed areas. Many farms up there, at least when covered with spring snow, seem more desperate than quaint. Lacking a major waterway, the Northeast Kingdom, a trio of optimistically named counties, missed out on the region’s logging boom and remains a land of struggling farms and open frontier. I was greeted by Andy, the brother in charge of the cows, and directed to pull on hospital booties before entering the stainless steel cheesemaking room where Mateo, his wife Angie, and Andy’s fiancée Victoria—all in their early thirties—were at work. They were in the cheddaring stage of a cheese they call Aspenhurst, fashioned after an English Leicester. They make cheese every other day, alternating this variety with Stilton-style Bayley Hazen Blue and a luscious mold-ripened cheese called Constant Bliss.

Mateo pitched me his vision: “We wanted to make some money and live in Vermont, the most beautiful place in the world” and where the brothers used to visit their grandmother during childhood summers. After studying international development at Friends World College in New York, Mateo became committed to sustainable agriculture. Googling Mateo, I found him pictured at an anti-globalization rally with Public Citizen’s Global Trade Watch. Vermont, he told me, is in need of agricultural development the same as any struggling farming region. The brothers’ first business model explored the market potential for organic tofu. But then they looked around and said, “Why not cows?” Cows, they explained, are not only part of the existing landscape but are central to Vermont’s identity. As with the Majors, artisanal cheese has provided the Kehlers with a means of becoming rural entrepreneurs; it is not the reason for it.

What sentiments motivate this economic action: buying land in an isolated, depressed rural area, mortgaging it to add to an old barn a new cheese room, working seven long days a week, and giving up any social life? It is the sentiment of left-leaning college graduates who have developed a business model, as they call it, that I view as a hybrid of an ecologically minded critique of capitalism and a middle-class family ethic. Andy, a University of Vermont graduate, told me that after years in carpentry he realized the only way he could make a decent living was as a contractor. But then, he said critically, “You make money off of other people’s labor.” With the aim of supporting two families without engaging in exploitive labor relations (since our initial meeting, Angie has birthed a baby), the brothers turned to cheese. As they have calculated it, “A family here can make a good living with twenty-five cows” if they make artisanal cheese. The Kehlers plan to expand their herd of twenty-eight to fifty because “we’re two families.” While the brothers initially intended to go it alone, Victoria and Angie left their jobs to work full-time in the new family business.

The Kehler brothers, in keeping with an ethical business sentiment, are committed to “keeping the money in town.”³ They buy hay from a neighbor and wooden packing crates from a local carpenter instead of “getting on the Internet” to find the cheapest price. This is why they are not organic; to be organic they would have to bring in hay and grain from further away. They also keep the price of their cheese within reach of local consumers. At the Greensboro general store Bayley Hazen Blue sold that spring for seven-fifty a pound (it went for more than twice that in Cambridge). Thanks to networks of personal affiliation (Victoria made Vermont Shepherd as part of the Majors’ guild and Mateo interned at London’s Neal’s Yard Dairy during a college year abroad) and to exposure afforded by Slow Food, their product is sold at a larger profit margin to restaurants from Atlanta to San Francisco.

Mateo and Andy are young entrepreneurs who speak of business models; their vision includes developing northeastern Vermont’s economy without compromising the “working landscape” or local “culture.” As we lunched on grilled sandwiches Mateo made with their Bayley Hazen Blue, English chutney, and Angie’s homemade bread, he told me Vermont lost four hundred dairy farms last year, exclaiming “That’s more than most states have!” The problem, as he sees it, is that Vermont will not abandon fluid milk, important to the state’s self-image. “To do so would be to admit that it’s a failed industry. But we can’t compete with the economies of scale in California.” Mateo cited a dairy farm in Barstow with ninety thousand cows and predicted, “California is going to bury Vermont in a tidal wave of cheap milk.”

Their project is to demonstrate how Vermont dairy farms can prosper by making cheese. Dairy sheep and goats are on the rise, and the state is providing



economic support to try llamas, ostriches, and buffalo. But at the moment, Mateo said, the notion that traditional farms are being “saved” through cheese is more ideal than reality. Most Vermont cheesemakers are, as he put it, “like us”—well educated, not truly local. According to Mateo, this is because local farmers are not comfortable taking risks, a distinction he identified as a matter of “class” disposition. Their neighbors would never do what they are doing because it is too risky economically. He gestured out the window, “That farm is just scraping by. The land they own is worth a bundle because it’s near a resort lake, but to them it’s not worth that because it’s not for sale.” While annual income may not be a pressing concern for his immediate neighbors, who own their farm outright and have low overhead costs, Mateo is convinced that struggling farmers could go from poverty level to earning \$100,000 a year if they crafted artisan cheese from the milk they are already producing from the animals they already own.

Sustainability for the Kehlerts, as for the Majors, means not only living independently on land they love, it refers to the economic and cultural viability of a region. This is neither romantic nostalgia—the Kehlerts want to change how Vermont dairy farms are conceived—nor the forced change of classic development. Mateo is applying the lessons of a liberal arts education. From his perspective, the Majors’ consortium ran into difficulty because David and Cindy imported from France a social model based on a sentiment of collectivity and shared tradition that does not exist in Vermont. It produced what he sees as a “culture clash” among dairy producers. I would elaborate that while *dairy* collectives, like Agri-Mark, have long operated in New England, artisan *cheese* collectives are different in organizational and economic ways. More, the craft fashioning of cheese is imbued with sentiments of proprietary pride that may not obtain with fluid milk. This may lead American cheesemakers to want not only to mark the products of their labor with traces of personal identity—wheels of Vermont Shepherd, like the Basque cheeses the Majors studied, are stamped with the logo of their maker—but to develop and name their own distinctive recipes. “Culture” is productive of economics, and vice versa; it is not merely a “viewpoint” from which to describe and value economic processes (Wilk 1996).

Motivated to show their neighbors how to exploit a niche market without compromising a sense of independence, the Kehlerts’ long-term plan is to help reverse engineer a kind of regional appellation for the Northeast Kingdom through which producers could collectively benefit from regional branding without having to conform to a particular product. In just forty years California’s wine industry went from churning out undifferentiated “tank car wine” to cultivating a patchwork of renowned valleys celebrated for particular varieties. In developing a sense of Californian *terroir*, or place, bottles were reduced in size and relabeled to feature place-names rather than name brands. Evoking place “gives the drinking of that



wine an emotional dimension” (Kuh 2001:144). If the California wine industry is precursor to American artisanal cheese, it is no surprise that discussions have begun in the cheese community regarding *terroir* (Binchet 2002). Cheesemakers like the Kehlerts, and consultants like Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese’s Jeff Roberts, are considering which elements of the European Union’s Appellation of Origin Control may, or may not, translate to the United States, where innovation rather than tradition is the national value embodied in artisanal cheeses.⁴ Grounded in the pragmatics of local cultural economies, the producers of American artisanal cheeses deploy economic, social, and political knowledge that overlaps with, but extends beyond, that of their consumers, who are freer to romanticize “local imaginaries” for foods (Gaytán 2004).

Neighborly Farms

New England farmstead cheeses encompass European-style cheeses, like Vermont Shepherd and Bailey Hazen Blue, requiring months of care to ripen (what the French call *affinage*), but also “everyday” cheeses (Colby, Cheddar, Jack, Feta) that are vacuum-packed and sold soon after manufacture. The former, with labor-intensive “natural” rinds and strong, distinctive flavors, are sold at high-end shops and appear on restaurant cheese carts; they retail as high as \$29 a pound. The second type is sold at farmers’ markets, food co-ops, and local groceries; they retail at \$6–9 a pound. A third Vermont family cheesemaking farm I visited turns out “everyday” cheeses in a variety of mild flavors. Linda and Rob Dimmick made the transition from dairying to cheese. Their story reveals sentiments that overlap with the Majors’ and Kehlerts’ but that are not backed by the same economic and cultural capital.

Fourteen years ago, Linda and Rob bought the picturesque farm in Randolph Center, Vermont, where Rob grew up and his parents raised dairy cows. The farm grew to 180 milking cows but, Linda told me, “it burnt the family out,” and in 1986 Rob’s family sold the farm. In 1990, as Rob and Linda were starting a family of their own, Rob grew determined to give his three children the kind of childhood he enjoyed, on a working farm. They bought back the farm and tried to make it as a traditional dairy, selling milk, but the commodity price was too low to turn a profit. They sold the cows and Rob started a waste disposal business. In 2001, after Linda attended a state-sponsored workshop on cheesemaking, they decided to give cheese a try. They bought a new herd. Rob sold his business and, with federal grant money to support agri-tourism (again, while the federal government subsidizes the economic capital of agribusiness, it subsidizes the cultural capital of small-scale farming), in 2001 they built a cheese facility with a public viewing area. “My mother in Michigan thinks we’re nuts,” Linda confided. “Normal people



wouldn't sell their life savings and put it into a failing business." But for her husband, "not farming was not an option."

A long corridor runs alongside the sterile cheese room partitioned by a glass wall through which visitors can watch production. On the facing wall hang framed photographs of the Dimmicks' kids showing cows at county and state fairs. Each child has raised a pet calf from birth. Linda and Rob hope their eldest son might eventually take over the farm. In addition to several flavor-added varieties of cheddar, Neighborly Farms makes Monterey Jack and Feta. With the exception of a raw milk cheddar, they pasteurize their milk because it provides quicker cash flow. While the FDA requires raw milk cheeses to be aged at least sixty days before sale, pasteurized cheeses can go on the market immediately. The Dimmicks package their cheese the day after it is made. All the cheeses are organic. Like deciding on which varieties to make, choosing to go organic was a "business decision, not out of a philosophy"; market research revealed an unmet demand for raw milk, organic cheddar, and this has become their best seller. Impressed by reductions in organic cheddar, and this has become their best seller. Impressed by reductions in their veterinarian bills since the cows have been "eating well, with no chemicals and antibiotics," Linda has been converted to the virtue of organics; "seeing is believing." Each year has seen a 300 percent growth in production. They milk forty-eight cows.

Linda started out as the cheesemaker, but in 2004 they paid five full-time employees, including a cheesemaker and a farm manager, who is Rob's brother. Linda spends much of her time on the phone with retailers, arranging deliveries and securing new accounts, but she enjoys the escape of the cheese room, finding the physical labor distracting: "You're not taking any calls, not worrying about the grain bill that's due." They do their own packaging and sell everything cryovacuum packed, with one exception: every two weeks someone from the farm drives more than five hours each way to deliver forty-pound blocks of Monterey Jack to an organic Mexican restaurant in Manhattan. When they started, Linda visited delis and supermarkets and was appalled at how cheese was handled. Before she married, she worked as a dental hygienist and so she's "picky about germs" and sells her cheese pre-packaged because she's "picky about who touches my cheese." She admires the work that the Majors and Kehlrs do to age cheese, work she likened to "babysitting." Natural rind cheese tastes wonderful, she said, but she is not going to do it. It's too labor intensive. "In every way we're a little guy," she said—then added, "but then in some ways we're like a big guy," pasteurizing and packaging.

Linda feels the tension between little guy/big guy status in marketing and distribution. With Whole Foods she has "run up against a corporate wall." The national chain carries the corporate Horizon brand organic cheese and, in competition, their own private label. Linda has been working to convince the Whole Foods buyers of the distinction of her cheese, which is not only organic but farmstead, but to no



avail. Trader Joe's, meanwhile, drives down retail prices so low she would be left without "wobble room"; it has no place for "little guys." Dimmick is already selling her cheese as low as she can, at the \$7–8 per pound at which they calculate they will need to sell to turn a profit once they are up to full production and selling their entire inventory. Linda finds herself caught between two sentiments. On the one hand, she and her husband share with the Majors and Kehlrs a love for the land, for farming. But on the other, she is a populist who wants to make cheese for people who do not think of food as a marker of social distinction. As she put it to me, "We're an everyday cheese."

In many respects, Linda and Rob Dimmick are taking precisely the path Mateo Kehler hopes to encourage: they are a family dairy farm that, after failing with milk, turned to cheese. But when Mateo speaks of farmers making significant money with just twenty-five milking cows, what he has in mind is upscale "boutique" cheese representing American innovation on European themes, not the "everyday" cheese Linda wants to make. Linda, struggling to find a market niche to sustain their suite of sentiments with forty-eight cows, is finding it difficult to be a farmstead and a quotidian cheesemaker, to be "little guys" catering to customers (and tastes) often served by "big guys." Consumers who are happy eating a mild pre-packaged cheddar or Monterey Jack may not go out of their way to buy an organic farmstead version—at least that is what the big retailers assume. Meanwhile, consumers who care about organic farmstead production might also favor—and be able and willing to pay for—the stronger, sophisticated taste of a cured cheese: a Slower cheese.

As of May 2004, the Dimmicks made 1,600 pounds of cheese a week and sold to regular clients 1,000 pounds. Underselling their product, they had yet to turn a profit. And while Rob is the one who really wanted to work the land as a farmer, it is Linda who works full-time with the cheese. Five months after opening the cheese plant, their one-year grant ran out, and Rob was forced to return to his outside business to subsidize the farm. They hope the cheese will make the farm self-sufficient—"all we want is for it to support itself"—so Rob can return full-time to farming. Despite their financial difficulties, Linda Dimmick is committed to keeping her cheese affordable. She does not want people to "wait for the holidays" to buy her cheese as a "treat." Linda sent me off with a gift assortment of eight-ounce packages of cheese to enjoy at home.

Conclusion: Sentiments and Their Limits

While it is true that most, although not all, new cheesemakers are sophisticated urban transplants bringing bourgeois economic and cultural capital to farmstead production, this should not stymie us as social analysts, for their sentiments are far from uniform. Some are engaged in politically conscious rural revitalization.



Others are “hippie” homesteaders working modestly out of their kitchens, making only as much cheese as they feel like, even when the market could absorb more. Some are really into the cheese. Mark Gillman, a young Connecticut cheesemaker I visited, is having fun experimenting with a dozen cow’s milk cheeses, including the delicious washed-rind Hooligan.

Examining the sentiments that, alongside profit motive, mold small-scale cheese production, promises to enrich our understanding of family farms and artisanal foods. Juxtaposing just three Vermont farmstead cheesemaking concerns reveals varied configurations of sentiment and capital: with the support of extended family, makers of Vermont Shepherd milk family sheep to produce a single high-end cheese while training new cheesemakers and engaging in farm politics. Jasper Hill Farm is the collective enterprise of two brothers and their spouses working from a business plan to provide for their growing families as well as to revitalize local economies. Neighborly Farms is a resurrected dairy turned cheesemaking enterprise catering to popular tastes that, through the exercise of economic reason, has discovered the virtues of organic farming. Clearly, farmstead cheesemakers “engage in both the deliberate, calculative pursuit of profit and the fulfillment of other culturally meaningful desires” (Yanagisako 2002:21).

What can attention to moral economies linking production and consumption tell us about artisanal foods? To begin, we must realize that the economies at issue are capitalist ones (socialist economies might entail a different suite of sentiments). Insofar as farmstead cheesemakers are usually landowners and employers as well as farmer-craftspeople, this produces the sort of embodied contradictions anthropologists have documented for French winegrowers (Ulin 1996) and chocolatiers (Terrio 2000). Individualistic sentiments of greed and pride are a lurking worry, with their potential to undermine community, locality, and neighborliness. Finally, success in craft production entails, in part, the successful selling of sentiment: images of the bucolic family farm help sell high-end cheeses. Success thus runs the risk of “selling out” one’s values—ecological, anti-corporate, “little guy.” That organic milk and produce are being mainstreamed at levels of production and marketing raises concern that the community-focused values that instigated the organic movement will be swamped by rationalized industrial practices (Allen and Kovach 2000; Klonsky 2000; Campbell 2001; Guthman 2004). Corporate consolidation of organics calls into question the long-term viability of niche-market production as a means not only of alternative agriculture, but of alternative sociality, an organizing sentiment for many cheesemakers.

If success runs the risk of compromising sentiment, the Dimmicks’ story raises the inverse question: What are the limits of sentiment in driving market success? Opening up picturesque, organic, family-owned and -operated Neighborly Farms to visitors is proving insufficient to sell their “everyday” cheese to retailers catering to

foodies.⁵ The Dimmicks are in search of a market to sustain what Sidney Mintz calls in this volume a “food of moderate speed.” Ethnographic attention to sentiment in practices of production and consumption over the span of social reproduction will reveal how elastic “sentiment” might be in social action and, therefore, how explanatory it might be in social analysis.

Notes

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1. <http://www.vtcheese.com/vtcheese/vtshepherd/vtshepherd.html> and <http://www.vermontshepherd.com/>. Accessed 4/19/05.
2. http://www.slowfoodusa.org/ark/farmstead_cheese.html. Accessed 8/7/04.
3. There is a long history of ethical business models in British and American capitalism, going back to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Quaker building of iron bridges in lieu of casting cannonballs and producing “non-slavery” sugar. But utopian thinkers who go into business to do socially beneficial work have often been accused of “selling out” when they attain financial success. Philadelphia Quakers who grew wealthy on family businesses that succeeded owing to thrift and a reputation for trustworthiness have been popular targets for derision—as if ethical business must preclude the possibility of profit.
4. One possible model they are developing is a regional trust charged with overseeing that standards of quality and possibly some elements of artisan technique are met, as well as providing technical assistance and the marketing umbrella of a regional appellation. The trust could be funded by a percentage of gross sales from member producers.
5. At the 2006 American Cheese Society competition, Neighborly Farms won two second place awards, for Monterey Jack made from cow’s milk, and for flavor-added cheddar. These awards may well boost Neighborly Farms’ visibility among retailers and, hence, their sales.

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