

Northern California's ARTISANAL CHEESE TRAIL

THIS SPREAD
Cow by Highway 1.

by LAURA SUTHERLAND



WHERE ON EARTH

USA

AS IF ON CUE, a group of cocoa-coloured Jersey calves broke out of their pen and frisked past us as we waited for our creamery tour to officially start. We'd just learned that Jersey milk has the highest butterfat content of all cows... but the black and white Holstein is a more popular dairy cow because it produces the most milk. A few years down the road these cheeky big-eyed babies would provide rich milk to make farmstead cheeses, but for now they kicked up their heels until the farm's canine corps herded them back to their corral with military precision.»

«WE WERE ACTUALLY AT A CREAMERY THAT

specialized in goat cheese but had a small herd of Jerseys used for making blended goat and cow's milk cheeses. And our trip to this part of the world, just a foghorn's blast from San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, was to sample cheese, not enjoy adorable animal encounters, but the calves and the baby goats we saw later were an unexpected bonus.

Northern California's artisanal cheese scene is concentrated in a misty region of rolling hills covered in tender grass where cows, goats, sheep — and even water buffalo — graze year round. Head a valley or two East to hotter hillsides to taste award-winning wines, but stick around these cooler, foggier parts to sample handmade, small-batch cheeses that rival the best in the world.

It all started in the 19th century when Swiss and other European dairy farmers settled just north of San Francisco in Marin and Sonoma Counties and launched small, family-run dairies. A few made cheese but most supplied milk and butter to booming Gold Rush-era San Francisco and its surrounding communities. Fast forward 100 years to the late 1970s when Alice Waters of Chez Panisse elevated top quality local and seasonal food to an art form. Her relationships with local farmers created new ways for small farmers of all types to make a living.

Many creameries have remained in family hands, but now younger generations are finding niches in the marketplace and making specialty cheese — blue cheeses, aged goat cheeses, Basque-style sheeps' milk cheeses, creamy French cheeses, water buffalo milk cheese, and untold more. Newcomers have gotten into the action, too, some retiring from high-pressure tech or elite culinary jobs to find a more relaxed lifestyle, paying homage to Old World traditions while bringing fresh, creative twists to the craft.

One of the area's most famous cheesemakers, Cowgirl Creamery, is often pinpointed as a catalyst in the early years of the artisanal cheese movement, so we thought it the perfect place to start our exploration. You can drop into their creamery/cheese shop in the hamlet of Point Reyes Station anytime, but you'll taste more and learn more if you reserve a spot in one of their weekly education sessions.

As we sat down, we could see through a big picture window into the cheese-making room where rounds of Red Hawk, a robust triple-cream cheese flavoured partly by wild Point Reyes bacteria, were being scrubbed with salt water brine. Later that morning we sampled some, and learned that scrubbing the rind allows more types of bacteria to grow,



THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Tasting sparkling mead; Wheels of Petite Blue; Goats graze year-round in Northern California; Point Reyes farmstead cheeses; Oysters Mornay.

KELLIE DELARIO

giving the rind its red-tinged colour and creating more complex flavours in the lusciously creamy, earthy cheese.

A few cheesemakers are open for drop-in visitors, but if you're serious about learning and tasting as much as possible, pick up an official 'Cheese Trail' map to find out which creameries let you pop in unannounced, which ones require reservations, and which are closed to the public.

Since we could just pop in to Marin French Cheese, we headed there next and helped ourselves to samples of their Petit Breakfast Cheese, a fresh, unripened brie that the company has produced since it opened in 1865. It was tangy, creamy, fluffy and solid, all at the same time, so we bought a couple of rounds along with some aged brie and crackers and headed outside for a light picnic next to the creamery's shady lake.

Nearby, homey Nicasio Valley Cheese Company also welcomes drop-in visitors to its tasting room, so we sampled their prize-winning all-organic cheese before heading to a late lunch at Nick's Cove Restaurant and Oyster Bar overlooking Tomales Bay. Oysters harvested from the bay are another local specialty, and we eagerly slurped up Point Reyes Miyagi and

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Kumamoto oysters sans toppings so we could focus on their fresh briny flavour.

Later that afternoon, we walked past a group of very pregnant Holstein cows on our way into the milking barn at family-run Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company. This creamery's award-winning blue cheeses regularly grace my table, but I was thrilled to discover their Toma in our tasting session — an aged Italian-style cheese reminiscent of a youthful Asiago with a slightly nutty, grassy flavour. »



SERVES 6-8

Cowgirl Creamery's Red Hawk Potato Gratin

COWGIRL CREAMERY'S RED Hawk is intended as a stand-alone table cheese, and they rarely recommend cooking with it. Here is one exception: a mouthwatering potato gratin infused with Red Hawk's indulgent, creamy boldness.

Butter 2 Tbs

Red Hawk Cheese 10 oz,
cut in 16 wedges
(including rind)

Olive Oil 2 Tbs

Onion
1 medium,
julienned

Yukon Gold Potatoes
2 lbs, peeled,
sliced thin

Garlic
3 cloves, diced

Cream 1 cup

Parmesan Cheese grated,
½ cup

1 PREHEAT the oven to 350°F.

2 HEAT a 9" cast-iron skillet and add butter and olive oil to the pan. Add the onions and garlic and sauté until soft. Turn off the heat and add the cream and half of the grated parmesan cheese.

3 TRANSFER half of the onion-cream mixture into a glass baking dish or casserole dish, and place one layer of potatoes on top. Follow with a layer of Red Hawk wedges. (A customer who prepared this used just 8 oz of Red Hawk and sprinkled black pepper between the layers). Add one more layer of potatoes, Red Hawk wedges and the remaining onion-cream mixture. Sprinkle with Parmesan.

4 COVER with foil and bake for 45 minutes. Remove foil and bake for another half hour or until the top is brown and bubbly.

Reproduced with permission from Cowgirl Creamery Cooks (Chronicle Books, 2013).

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POINT REYES

Visit
&

Achadinha Cheese Company
www.achadinha.com

Bear Valley Inn
www.bearinn.com

Cowgirl Creamery
www.cowgirlcreamery.com

Farmshop Restaurant
www.farmshopca.com

Heidrun Meadery
www.heidrunmeadery.com

Marin French Cheese Company
www.marinfrenchcheese.com

Nicasio Valley Cheese Company
www.NicasioCheese.com

Nick's Cove Restaurant and Oyster Bar
www.nickscove.com

Northern California Cheese Trail
www.cheesetrail.org

Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company
www.pointreyescheese.com

San Francisco Farmer's Market
www.ferrybuildingmarketplace.com/farmers_market.php



COWGIRL CREAMERY

THIS PAGE FROM TOP LEFT Northern California farmland; Cowgirl Creamery's Peggy Smith and Sue Conley; Cowgirl Creamery cookbook; Dungenes Crab Mac 'n Cheese; Waiting to be milked.

«It had been a packed day of cheese tasting and something light and bubbly sounded like a perfect counterpoint, so we turned into Heidrun Meadery. Their crisp, slightly tart sparkling meads are made in the champagne method, and the flavours of whatever the bees have feasted on come through subtly in the different meads — macadamia nut blossoms; radish flowers; orange blossoms; and our favourite, the local Point Reyes wildflowers.

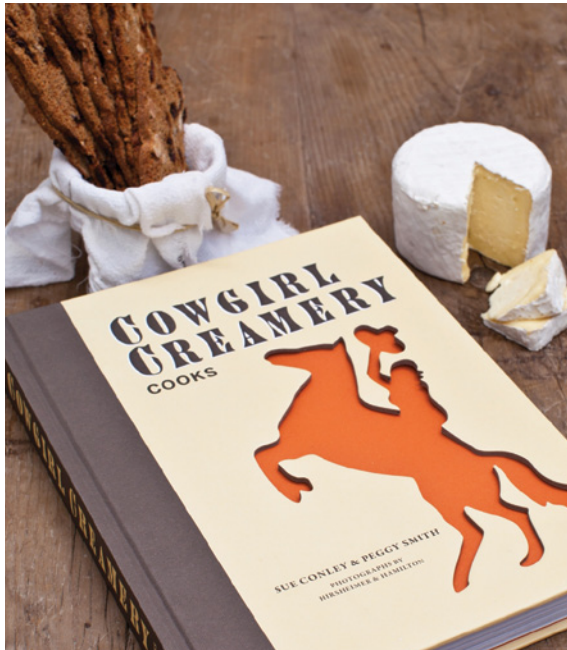
Since many of the creamery tours requiring reservations are in the morning, you get to taste more cheese if you stay a few days. That lets you take advantage of the hiking trails and kayaking opportunities that make this region a popular getaway for San Francisco city dwellers. There are plenty of small bed and breakfasts and house rentals — we headquartered at the Bear Valley Inn, a few blocks from the tiny downtown of Olema where we could easily walk to dinner.

Restaurants tend to emphasize local cheese — take the cheese plate at our first dinner at the Farmshop Restaurant in Larkspur on our way into the area. We wanted to prep our palates with a sampling of local sheep, goat, cow, and water buffalo cheeses and we happily checked off each type... except water buffalo. Luckily for us, water buffalo gelato was on the dessert menu in chocolate and vanilla, as well as exotic flavours like fennel pollen, fig, and candy cap mushroom, which had a heavenly maple flavour.

After a breakfast at the Inn that included home made yogurt and organic milk from local legend Strauss Family Dairies, we headed out for a tour of family-operated Achadinha Cheese Company. On our way into the cheesemaking barn with its ripening room packed with shelves of aromatic golden rounds, we could see hundreds of goats happily grazing on green hillsides. Three babies had already been born that day, and while the cheese tasting (four goat cheeses, two goat/cow blends — some young and supple, others aged and distinguished) was undeniably a highlight, witnessing the birth of baby number four on our tour of the farm was downright extraordinary.



USA



In our two days of exploring, we hardly scratched the surface of the more than 30 artisanal cheesemaking operations in the area. So we were delighted to discover that in San Francisco on any Saturday, the Farmer's Market at the Ferry Building has tables of cheeses from all of the small creameries we loved and most of those we didn't have time to visit.



LAURA SUTHERLAND is a travel writer based in Northern California.



SERVES 6-8

Dungeness Crab Mac 'n Cheese

DELICIOUSLY RICH AND indulgent, this rib-sticker from Nick's Cove Restaurant and Oyster Bars is no ordinary mac n' cheese.

Dungeness Crab Meat 1 lb
Dried Elbow Macaroni 2 lbs
Unsalted Butter ½ lb
Flour ¾ cup
Whole Milk 8 cups
Heavy Cream 8 cups
Leeks 2, white part only, sliced
Point Reyes Toma shredded, 1 cup
Spring Hill Cheddar shredded, 1 cup
Parmigiano Reggiano Cheese shredded, ½ cup
Salt to taste
Tabasco to taste
Fresh Lemon Juice from ¼ lemon
Parsley chopped, to garnish
Toasted Breadcrumbs to garnish

- 1 BRING** a large pot of water to a rolling boil. Add the pasta and boil, stirring occasionally, 6–8 minutes. Drain, add to a large mixing bowl and set aside.
- 2 MELT** the butter in another large pot. Add the leeks and sweat 5–10 minutes, until soft. Add the flour. Stir constantly; cook until the mixture bubbles for 2–3 minutes and smells like shortbread. Add the milk and bring to a boil; reduce to simmer.
- 3 ALLOW** the mixture to reduce while simmering, approximately 5 minutes. Add the cream and again allow to simmer for 5 minutes.
- 4 ADD** all the cheese, whisk until incorporated. Add salt to taste; add 3–5 drops of Tabasco sauce and the lemon juice.
- 5 POUR** over the pasta and add the crab meat, stirring to incorporate. Serve with toasted breadcrumbs and parsley.