Consuming $30-A-Pound Cheese: the Role of the Retail Cheesemonger As Cicerone

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ABSTRACT
To get artisan cheese from producer to consumer requires a uniquely different channel than for most agricultural products, with a cheesemonger playing a central role. Artisan cheese making, distribution and sale in the northeastern United States are both sufficiently established and rich in regional variation to support examining the cheesemonger/cheese consumer interaction. Through traditional qualitative methods of observation, interview, and immersion, we identify and document the important rituals that accompany the cheese buying process. We explain the pivotal roles of narrative and story and of store atmospherics and staging to the process of making meaning in the cheesemaker to cheesemonger to cheese consumer channel.

“What we need,” a woman said, “is more skilled cheesemongers.”
Adam Gopnik, 1990 American Cheese Society Meeting, NYC.

INTRODUCTION
Cheese is the central object, frequent passion and oftentimes obsession of the cheesemaker, cheesemonger and devoted cheese consumer. The central figure in the commercialization of artisanal cheese is the cheesemonger, who performs an evangelist-like role for great cheese. S/He serves the artisanal producer by consulting on the product, working with the media to present and highlight the novel, and serving as a guide, or cicerone, for purchasers looking for new experiences.

The definitions for categories/types of cheeses among cheesemakers and cheesemongers in the United States are not codified in regulatory language, as they are in the European Union. Some terms, however, are common and important for the cheesemaker, monger, and connoisseur. Farmstead cheese is made of milk from animals owned and husbanded by the cheesemaker. Artisan (or sometimes farmstand) cheese is made from the milk of local animals, hand-crafted in small batches, usually via traditional methods. Specialty cheeses are often made by a cooperative, yet are still of high quality. Industrial cheese is made in a factory, with the aim of producing a cheese with minimal variation in taste or texture from one batch to the next. In the progression from the farmstead through industrial, the proximity of animals, the amount of handwork, and the scale of production all change. Animal presence decreases, handwork is replaced by machinery, and scale rises from community output measured in pounds to industrial output measured in tons. Similarly, regional and seasonal variation diminishes from the farmstead to the industrial and experimentation in process and finishing is wrung from the mechanized, industrial cheese.

Cheese is a more complex product than many other specialty goods because it is a “living thing.” First, if not shipped correctly, the cheese may be destroyed. Second, many cheeses require aging, a component of the process to produce the cheese itself. Aging requires not only a controlled environment—correct temperature and humidity—but also an ecology that allows for the correct molds, such as Geotrichum candidum which gives the bloomy, white, skin of many notable French cheeses (The Cheese Nun 2006). Finally, the aging process may be coupled with a curing process. These curing processes can range from storing the cheese on cedar boughs, wrapping the cheese in grape or chestnut leaves, to washing the cheese in salt, beer, or liqueurs, and turning, brushing, wrapping, waxing or thumping. Part of the art of the cheesemonger is knowing when the cheese is at its perfect state for eating. The role of aging is so critical to preparing the cheese for market that its role has been formalized as affinage.

The cheese revival in America is of recent origin. There is some evidence of American artisanal cheeses made prior to World War II, such as the New York State Poona, a type of Brie, along with the hard cheeses of Vermont, Wisconsin, and California (Roueche 1949). Following World War II, industrial food production accelerated, substituting notions of “nutrition” for food (Mintz 1996) and culminating in products such as General Foods’ Tang or Pillsbury’s Space Food Sticks, emblematic of a future world of food divorced from agriculture. The rise in interest in cheese has followed on the heels of the success of American wines. The development of traditional, agricultural markets seems to have been part of backlash against the futuristic Jetson lifestyle and the mechanization of life’s pleasures that accompanies it (Ritzer 2004). This reaction has included the successes of microbreweries and the ongoing attempts to nurture profitable markets for artisan breads, heirloom vegetables, and specialty livestock (Honore 2004).

The cheese making revival seems to have begun with goats in the late seventies in California with Laura Chenel (Saveur 2005). Cheese making has since incorporated other animals, especially cows—for “back to the farm” types who have rediscovered the need to exploit the added value of cheese making to complement selling milk (Sullivan 2005). Artisan cheesemakers are found in almost all states, with large concentrations in New England, especially Vermont, in the upper Midwest, and in California, notably north of San Francisco.

LITERATURE REVIEW
An artisan cheese producer has four primary options for selling cheese: a retail outlet at the point of production, a farmers’ market, a website, or a retail store owned by someone else. While specialty food retailers seem not to have been much studied, farmers’ markets have.

Farmers’ markets are a growing phenomenon in the US and elsewhere. In 2005 US consumers spent $1 billion shopping at 4,400 farmers’ markets across the country (USDA 2006). In the UK, 30% of consumers report having shopped at a farmers’ market (IGD 2002). Some (c.f., Hinrichs et al. 1998) have characterized this preference for local production as “Jeffersonian idealism,” and argue that the perception of locally produced food being better, both ecologically and socially, is inaccurate (c.f., Born and Purcell 2006). Nevertheless, it is a growing movement.

While the original motivations for shopping at farmers’ markets centered around price and food quality (Walton et al. 2002), today consumers purchase from farmers’ markets for nutritional, social (Kalck 1984), and personal reasons. Consumers seem to make the assumption that food sold at these markets is organic, that it has been raised in an agriculturally responsible manner, and therefore is better tasting and fresher than what they can purchase from a supermarket (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000; Lev and Stephenson 2001a, 2001b; Szmigin, Maddock and Carrigan 2003).
Social factors also come into play. Consumers report enjoying the interaction with producers and other consumers (Lev, Brewer and Stephenson 2003). They get to know the farmers and learn about how and where the food was produced. Consumers also interact with other consumers and may discover different uses for the produce (Archer et al. 2003). At the same time, consumers are acquiring stories about the food and about the producers that they can, in turn, tell to their families and friends (Greenberg 2006). These stories become part of the discourse and part of the consumption of the food stuffs. Finally, consumers come away from these interactions with their own positive feelings about supporting local producers (Youngs and Holden 2002). In all these ways, shopping at a farmers’ market becomes a reflection of a consumer’s own identity and an expression of one’s values (Schaefer and Crane 2001).

First, the cheesemonger helps artisan cheese producers understand the realities of the market and also helps cheese consumers understand the realities of artisan production, such as seasonality. Goats, for example do not produce milk year-round; when cows are grazing in the pasture, their milk will take on a different color and flavor than in the winter when they are eating hay in the barn. The cheesemonger also works with cheesemakers to understand the importance of scale—in this case, of not over-producing and becoming too industrialized—and working with the cheese consumer to understand the value of variability in cheese—that variation from wheel to wheel is a desirable quality.

Second, the cheesemonger authenticates and guarantees the product (McCacken 2005). This is an important role, because artisan cheesemakers do not have the national marketing muscle of large industrial cheese brands. Accordingly, cheese consumers need help in assessing the options: which ones are truly artisanal and which are counterfeit. In this way, the cheesemonger influences the “perceived genuineness” (Rose and Wood 2005) of the offerings. As Lewis and Bridger (2000) explain, “One cannot mass produce authenticity. Rather, it has to be introduced on an almost person-to-person basis, with individual needs, desires, expectations and interests being fully accounted for.” (p. 198). In Beverland’s work on perceived authenticity in high-end wines (2006), heritage and relationship to place were deemed strong indicators of products being the “real thing.” A major role for the cheesemonger is to convey the pedigree and place of cheese for the consumer.

The claim of authenticity also requires trust. Morgan and Hunt (1994) advocated for the importance of trust in marketing relationships; the cheesemonger must likewise develop the trust of his/her customers. The consumer is no longer purchasing directly from the cheese producer, but rather from the producer’s agent. The cheesemonger also takes on the traditional retail roles of assortment, merchandising, and the like. In performing each of these functions, s/he is making choices for the consumer and the consumer has to trust those decisions. Trust also comes into play when consumers try new and different cheeses at the monger’s recommendation. The personal touch from a trusted advisor gives consumers the courage to try something new.

Third, the cheesemonger orchestrates the consumer’s cheese experiences. Store décor, atmosphere, and layout, as well as the rituals between consumer and cheesemonger are all important. As Molotch (2003) explains, “The artistic—including the subtleties of detail—creates markets, …. the sensual makes people want things” (p. 62). Thus the way in which the cheeses are displayed and presented, the non-cheese products that also are offered, the signage, and even the store location all are critical elements under the cheesemonger’s control. Creating the right setting enhances the consumer’s willingness to try something new (King et al. 2007).

Further, artisan cheese is a high involvement product (Kupiec and Revell 2001) purchased by consumers who are on a quest for unique products and unique experiences (TASTE Council 2004) that help express their individuality (McCarthy, O’Reilly and Cronin 2001). At least initially, consumers are not familiar with the different artisan cheeses and depend on the cheesemonger and his/her staff for recommendations. Thus the level of individualized service also is an important component of the shopping experience.

Sampling is another important aspect of the cheese buying process (Reilly 2003). Important, too, is the environment in which the sampling takes place: unhurried, friendly, low-pressure. Consumers are sampling not only the cheese itself but also the narratives about how and where the cheeses are made and by whom. This knowledge (about the maker, the process, and the origin of the cheese) leads to a perception of superior quality as well as to a higher level of satisfaction. Stefani, Romano and Cavicchi (2006) conclude that when consumers know the place or origin of food, they are willing to pay more for the product, but only if they can be assured that the product is authentic/genuine and that it is of high quality. The former attribute is provided by the cheesemonger and his/her retail store; the latter attribute is co-provided by the cheesemonger and customer via the rituals of tasting and storytelling. These narratives and rituals also facilitate the movement of meaning from the cheese to the cheese consumer (McCacken 1991). As the cheesemonger tells stories about the cheese, s/he is transferring specialized knowledge to the consumer—who, in turn, may use this knowledge to convey insider status to friends and family via the retelling of the stories. The importance of telling the “cheese story” is an oft-repeated admonition in the literature about artisan cheese (c.f., Gloy and Stephenson 2006).

With these ideas as background, we set out to investigate further the cheese consumer-retailer interaction.

METHODS

While the data gathering process was inextricably linked to the data analysis process, we have separated their respective descriptions for the readers’ convenience.

Data Gathering

Data gathering is ongoing for the project, but the data collection associated with this report took place from the fall of 2004.
through early 2007. We began with a curiosity about why consumers would pay up to five times the price for this cheese versus more standard, mass-market cheeses (we observed that some cheeses approached $30 per pound). From there we quickly moved to a goal of developing expertise about artisan cheese making and consumption. Two of the authors had previously studied non-mass-market cheeses in France (Roberts and Micken 1996), so there was some initial familiarity with the category. We started this project by reading deeply from fictional and nonfictional accounts of high-end food sales and consumption, including regular food sections in newspapers (the New York Times Wednesday Food section, for example), specialty food trade publications, cheese-focused publications, and bulletins from state extension services. Then we began visiting and interviewing owners and managers of several cheese specialty stores in northeastern United States cities, including Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, and Providence. The visits included participant and nonparticipant observation of the buyer-seller interactions. We also took note of store layouts, décor, ambiance cues, staff, customer mix, and in particular, the cheeses (merchandise mix and merchandise layouts) offered for sale. If the stores had storage caves for affinage, or aging, we toured those. Additionally, we also visited a prominent farmers’ market in New York City, which featured ten artisan cheese vendors. We also visited several more casual summer markets that featured a number of regional producers. We visited and interviewed three cheesemakers onsite, two of whom had a small retail space as a part of their operations. We ate at cheese-themed restaurants and interviewed waiters and maître d’ s. One of the authors attended a class on cheese and beer pairings. We videotaped many of these encounters, though not all of them. We took pictures of shops, consumers, retail staff, farm animals, the cheese making process, and the context of all things cheese as we made these data gathering visits. A prior paper reports our efforts at understanding online cheese retailers (Roberts, Micken and McKenzie 2006), and those findings informed this study as well. Less formally, we have become more self-conscious of our own cheese purchases and become more aware of cheese offerings in restaurants and in grocery stores.

Together, these exercises have yielded many hours of videotape, as well as some audio files, and several notebooks full of handwritten and word-processed field notes from our encounters. Additionally, we have a file full of artifacts, such as brand-imprinted serving napkins, business cards, cheese guidebooks purchased at the stores, and the like.

The following is a list of retailer settings we have analyzed for this study.

Data gathering trips to the artisan cheesemakers (Connecticut, Massachusetts, Utah), two of whom sold to consumers at their locations. Each of these visits lasted over two hours.

Data gathering trips to seven cheese specialty shops: Cambridge/Boston, NYC-3, Philadelphia-2, Providence, and Tiverton (RI). The Providence owner has become a “key informant,” defined by Tremblay (1957, p 688) as one who is “interviewed intensively over an extensive period of time for the purpose of providing a relatively complete ethnographical description of the social and cultural patterns of their group.” He has been nice enough to let us visit him on at least a half-dozen occasions. These shop trips have lasted from one-half hour to nearly three hours, depending on the investigational climate and the busyness of the store.

Data gathered at a cheese-pairing seminar.

Data gathered at two cheese-themed restaurants, including interviews of staff.

Data gathered at farmers’ markets.

Data Analysis

Data gathering and analysis have been ongoing and iterative since the very beginning of the project. As the data set grew to include new types of data, or additional data of the same type, we incorporated that material into our understanding of artisan cheese. As one author would read something new or interesting related to expensive or interesting cheese or other foods, that reference was shared with the other authors. As our files grew fatter, we developed a working bibliography, with 31 pages of annotated entries. We took these early ideas with us as semi-structured questions to ask our first two retailer informants.

An early attempt at an empirical study was to content analyze a set of cheesemaker websites/online retailers published in Saveur magazine (2005). In that analysis, we employed traditional qualitative methods in addition to two computer programs (NVivo and Tinderbox), comparing and contrasting the results from the different analytical approaches. This yielded some early insight and competing models for how sellers make their cheeses more valuable, but did not help us with the consumer side of the equation.

As we delved more deeply into data about cheese consumption and marketing processes, and as the meanings in the data began to unfold, it occurred to us that the cheese retailer, and more particularly, the highly knowledgeable cheesemonger, holds the key to the mystique and the value of these artisan cheeses in the eyes and the wallets of the consumers. Our next round of analysis, then, included more data gathering specific to the model of the retailer as cicerone, or guide. In other words, our analysis led to another iteration—we sought to confirm an emerging model of the central role of the retailer/cheesemonger by conducting additional data gathering trips to retail outlets and through additional interviews. It is part of this data-derived model that we report on in the following sections.

**FINDINGS: CHEESEMONGER AS CICERONE**

Cicerone: (ci-ce-ro-ne) 1: a guide who conducts sightseers
2: MENTOR, TUTOR (Webster’s American Dictionary).

The Oxford English Dictionary (2nd Edition, 1989) provides the following explanatory note for the origins of cicerone: “A guide who shows and explains the antiquities or curiosities of a place to strangers. (Apparently originally given to learned Italian antiquarians, whose services were sought by visitors seeking information about the antiquities of a place; subsequently usurped by the ordinary professional ‘guide’.)”

Just as the oenophile learns the practices of the wine connoisseur’s world with its swirl, sip, and spit activities, and its specialized vocabulary of “nose,” “legs,” or “mouth feel,” and its heightened descriptions of “plummy,” “oaky,” or “undertones of cinnamon,” the cheese aficionado inhabits a specialized world. The cheesemonger is often the guide to this world. This role is more crucial as a cheese provides more immediate gratification and it cannot be forgotten in one’s basement with the expectation of reaching a peak some years in the future. What follows is a discussion of the many different examples of cheesemongers taking on the cicerone role that we encountered in the investigations and observations described in the Methods section above. We present these as our own “cheese narratives,” and hope that the readers enjoy this tasting.
The leading cheese stores, at least in the Northeast, are located in traditional neighborhoods. They may have secondary stores in the more upscale, urban neighborhoods, as Murray’s Cheese (NYC) has its Grand Central stand, DiBruno Brothers (Philadelphia) its Rittenhouse Square store, and Formaggio Kitchen, its South Boston expansion. The original stores, Murray’s on the edge of Greenwich Village, DiBrunos in the Italian Market, and Formaggio in Cambridge, are located in areas where many older families still live. Rent control in New York allows the remaining members of the World War II generation to continue to shop for their familiar items. The triple-deckers and two-family residences surrounding Formaggio allow the academic community walking access to the store. Even though Farmstead, in Providence, is a more recently founded store, it is located in a traditional shopping area, close by a residential apartment complex for the elderly. Farmstead still caters to the customer who comes once a week for “a half-pound of Black Diamond” (Cheddar) that she has purchased weekly in the neighborhood prior to Farmstead’s replacing the previous “Cheese Shop,” a store that stocked English food stuffs.

The significant departure from store bought cheeses is that artisan cheese shops will always cut cheese to order. While there might be some prewrapped smaller sections of a cheese, unless the cheese is a small wheel and the wrapping is integral to the cheese, the cheese buyer is never dissuaded from requesting a slice from a larger wheel. Many cheese shops will also wrap the fresh cut cheese for purchase in a more natural wrapping, such as butcher paper or waxed paper, rather than plastic. This is explained by the cheese needing to breathe: a plastic wrap suffocates the cheese. The cheese is also almost always cut as a single piece, with slices being rare, although some of the Wisconsin and Pennsylvania cheeses from square molds may be sliced.

A primary practice of cheese lovers is tasting cheese prior to a purchase. This is the cheese equivalent of wine tasting at a vineyard. To outsiders, it appears to be a ritual of the buying process. To the initiated, however, it is central to the experience. Unlike wine, where consistency from one bottle to the next of the same vintage is expected, cheeses by artisan manufacturers can vary from wheel to wheel. For many, this variation is celebrated because it often reflects the season of production, with the summer cheeses having a richer color and more grassy flavor for example. With some cheese, especially those with mixed milk of cows, goats, and sheep, the cheese will vary by the production cycles of the cheesemaker and his/her methods. Tasting a cheese is so essential, that Saveur (April 2005, p. 75) notes: “Signs of a Good Cheese Shop #2–You can sample cheeses before you buy them.”

Tasting cheese follows a similar pattern in most cheese shops. A small slice of cheese is presented on a knife or piece of paper. Sometimes, the cheesemonger will share in the tasting, remarking on the flavors. It is also not unusual for a tasting to be offered to another customer at the same time, although that is less frequent in the larger stores. One cheese store has a variation on the tasting presentation where the cheese is scrubbed with a dull knife, like a butter knife, to draw up a small ball on the knife end, which is then scraped against the buyer’s finger. This process warms the cheese, thereby enhancing its flavors. It also increases the intimacy with the cheesemonger because the cheesemonger in this instance comes from behind the counter, bearing the wheel of cheese, and displays it more fully than if the consumer were watching the process from across a countertop.

Tasting a cheese usually involves a conversation with the cheesemonger. This is the chance for the cheesemonger to guide the buyer. (As one cheesemonger said, “You have to help people learn to love the things you love.”) S/He may suggest a more pungent cheese, or a cheese with a different finish. The conversation may also develop into the expected uses for the cheese, either as a cheese board for a dinner, with different recommendations to follow a beef dinner as opposed to something lighter. Increasingly, cheesemongers are recommending accompaniments for the cheese itself, beyond wines or beers. Formaggio Kitchen is noted as much for its confettura, mostarda and cotognata which are different fruit based jams or paste condiments for cheese. A regional cheese maker has specifically marketed its cheese in combination with regional condiments and suggested means to serve and present the cheese.

The cheese cutting process is in full view of the customer. If one tastes the cheese, and approves, one generally purchases from the wheel one has tasted. Like the cheese tasting, cutting the cheese is often a collaboration between the purchaser and the cheesemonger. Commonly, the knife is laid against the cheese, with words “Is that it?” so that the purchaser approves the quantity.

While the cheese purchasing process develops as a conversation between the cheesemonger and the buyer, the cheese buyer’s interactions with the cheesemonger begin prior to approaching the counter. The tradition in New England seems to be to present the “cheese wall” (see Figure 1). This is an edifice of cheese built on top of the cooler cases where other cheeses are kept. The cheese wall can extend well above the heads of the counter staff, obscuring them from direct view. The cheese wall not only allows more cheese to be displayed, but allows the harder cheeses to stay closer to room temperature, the better to judge them in a tasting.

The dizzying heights of some cheese walls does not end with the cheese itself, but is often surmounted by identifying tags. Unlike the simple tags of a botanical garden that would list a common name and Latin specification, these cards are stories in themselves. Most often, they are handwritten, sometimes ornamented with little sketches or perhaps a flag (see Figure 2). The text usually names the cheese, describes a more familiar family of cheeses, then identifies the cheese uniquely, often employing story-like vignettes that tell of the cheesemaker and his/her methods. Usually only the cheesemonger or a trusted employee is allowed to write these tags. Our key informant told us that, “I still do most of the signs. I’m kinda anal about this. I want to keep the hand-crafted look.”

**DISCUSSION**

Consumers can now draw upon a dizzying range of considerations, as ethical, ecological and health issues are brought to bear upon product choices. Is this product safe? How was it produced, and who by? And, of course, these questions complicate a more fundamental one—what does buying this say about me? Signifiers of social status and personal identity are more complex and nuanced ... and more almost universally considered in everyday consumption (Willmott and Nelson 2005, p. 105).

In the end, it is clear that the cheesemonger, in explaining the processes, characteristics, and potential uses of specialized cheeses, is performing an essential function for both the cheese producer and the cheese consumer. The cheesemonger’s *cicerone* role is an especially important one in an economy teeming with choices and in a society of consumers seeking to fulfill not only functional needs but hedonic ones as well. The cheesemonger and his/her shop are repositories of specialized information and stories that seem ideally suited for twenty-first century “foodies,” who tend to be both variety seekers and information junkies (Becker and Wright 2006). The telling of cheese stories accompanied by personalized tasting rituals conducted by the trusted cheesemonger in a carefully staged setting combine to make the cheese buying experience nigh irresistible to the consumer.

There is an interesting parallel in another specialty agricultural product: wine. Oenophiles have publications such as the *Wine Enthusiast* and critics such as Robert M. Parker, Jr. (and his own...
FIGURE 1

FIGURE 2

TWIG FARM
Turning Passion into Art

Michael Lee, our former cheese buyer in the South End Formaggio, took his passion for food & art to a most delicious level. He and his wife Emily started Twig Farm, a goat farm, last summer. Located in West Cornwall, Vermont, Michael & Emily have not only built their dwelling, but they have also built their cheese facilities at the same time. They acquired half a dozen Rubian & S家住 goats this spring & will have pure goat milk cheese shortly. Currently, Michael buys Jersey Cow milk from a nearby dairy to make the current selection of cheeses. They are excellent. Buy them & thank the heavens for the passion of a former cheesemonger. — RYA
newsletter the Wine Advocate) to serve as guides. Parker has been particularly influential. His role has been to demystify wine for a public unsure of trusting their local liquor salesman or other writers suspected of being industry insiders. Through telling stories about vintners and their wineries and by providing his own opinions, he has influenced wine preferences and production on a global scale. In fact, his ratings are now suspected of driving the wine industry to adapt their products to match his palate (McCoy 2006). The cheesemonger, who operates on a much smaller scale with a more fragile product, provides a similar mediating role between the consumer and producer. The cheesemonger explains the cheese to the consumer and the provides consumer’s response to the cheesemaker, possibly influencing future production.

McCracken (2005) suggests that marketers are just beginning to understand the full extent of the retailer’s role in making meaning. Perhaps the close relationship between the cheese producer and the cheesemonger as well as the cheesemonger’s role as cicerone-guide, raconteur, and authenticator—may make for an analytical scheme that helps uncover the ways in which consumer-retailer interactions co-create meaning in other specialty food areas as well. Understanding the deeper relationship between the retailer and the producer and the feedback loop may also help uncover the growth of the network around artisanal and authentic foodstuffs.

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