

PEOPLE

LOVER OF CHEESE

BY MARILYN MCCRAY

Cathy Strange considers food to be one of the few universal languages, much like music. And if food is a language, then cheese might just be interpreted by Strange as the word for “passion.” She’s the cheese buyer for Whole Foods Market, and a fervent advocate for an industry that respects the regions, seasons, animals that contribute and the artisans involved.

A self-described picky eater, Strange didn’t set out to become a turophile (lover of cheese). But a temporary job in a friend’s Northern Italian/French-style restaurant piqued her interest. In 1991, Strange took a part-time job in the wine section of the Chapel Hill Wellspring Grocery; Whole Foods Market bought the store a month later. Strange continued through the transition and quickly moved up to regional coordinator for beer, wine and cheese. Shortly after, the position of global cheese buyer was created specifically for her.

“Cathy is not a traditional buyer for a large organization,” says Jason Hinds, director of sales for Neal’s Yard Dairy in the U.K. “She creates relationships and understands the industry like no one else.” And her buying decisions sometimes have a broader impact than simply culinary. For one small Lancashire, England, farm that’s been producing traditional cheese for three generations, the cancellation of an order by a British supermarket chain threatened to force them out of business until Strange stepped in. “Within three months,” continues Hinds, “Cathy had created a promotion that took 500 wheels of the unpasteurized Lancashire cheese to the U.S.”

Keeping an eye on the larger picture is important to Strange. “I try to learn as much as I can about the product, farmers, organizations and people in a region,” she says. And sharing that knowledge with customers could change everything for the next generation of cheese maker. When the Jeune Montagne dairy cooperative in the small town of Laguiole, France faced a profound decline, Strange—with the support of Whole Foods—helped them reorganize and create a sustainable market for their cheese. “The cooperative is the last and only producer of Laguiole cheese made from the milk of the Grand Aubrac cow,” says Diane Sauvage of importer Interval USA. “Every year, there’s a Whole Foods promotion and they tell the story



of the dairy and the Laguiole cheese to their customers.” As a result, not only is the cooperative making a strong comeback, but Laguiole is now considered a culinary destination.

One of few Americans inducted into the prestigious International Guild des Fromagers de Saint-Uguzon, Strange has pursued her passion to the Roanne, France caves of world famous affineur (cheese ripening expert) Hervé Mons, and to Bra, Italy for Slow Food’s Premier Cheese International Exhibition and Show. “I’m constantly amazed by the number of artisans Cathy knows around the world,” says Laura Werlin, the James Beard-nominated author of *New American Cheese*. “Many of whom are now her friends.”

Still, Strange considers herself firmly committed to U.S. cheese artisans, and to stocking their closer-to-home regional specialties. As a past president of the American Cheese Society, she says she’s encouraged by the recent upswing in popularity of American cheeses, as well as by the burgeoning appreciation of artisan cheese.

“Cathy is a powerhouse for artisan cheeses across the country and right here in Texas,” says Amelia Sweethardt of Pure Luck Goat Dairy in Dripping Springs. “She’s made it possible for many small producers to bring their cheese to market.”

When asked why Americans are embracing artisan cheese now more than a decade ago, Strange says it is partly due to Americans traveling more and being exposed to developed food cultures—especially in Europe. Other reasons include the emergence of the Slow Food movement, the heightened awareness of natural/organic foods and the introduction of the Food Network. “There’s definitely a new culture of food starting to develop,” she says.

Whatever the reasons for the new appreciation, it certainly doesn’t hurt to have someone with a keen eye, an advanced palate and an appreciation for tradition on your side if you’re a cheesemaker. “There’s something in Cathy’s being that lets you know she can and will help you,” says Sweethardt.

A writer and self-confessed foodie, **Marilyn McCray** has cooked at a dude ranch and helped administer the Santa Fe Wine and Chile Fiesta. She is currently on the leadership team of Slow Food Austin.