

***The Rise of Artisan Cheese in New England:  
A Summer of Travels to Europe and Back, Studying the Roots  
and Future of American Cheese***

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Summer 2009*



## ***Introduction***

After a lot of solitary brainstorming, a flurry of emails, and several cups of coffee with Sarah Gardner of the Center for Environmental Studies and Jane Canova of the Center for Foreign Languages, I decided to truly follow my gut this summer and pursue a research project on artisan cheese. Contrary to many friends' and relatives' inquiries, I am not planning on becoming a cheesemaker after I graduate or even opening my own cheese shop. I am a rising junior and Comparative Literature major, a native New Englander, and an avid traveler, and cheese has been, honestly, a wonderful medium through which to continue exploring the many ways in which I and many other people fit into and interact with the places around us. Whether in familiar or unfamiliar territory, studying local cheese is a wonderfully sensorial way to dig into one's surroundings, to appreciate the nuances of the natural world, and particularly the human connection with it.

Although I live in Williamstown, I have traveled throughout New England, on the West coast, the Bahamas, Costa Rica, Italy, and Norway, and I have found that local and regional foods are one of the most exciting and satisfying means of learning about a new place. Food reflects the land that sustains it and highlights the choices of the people who consume it. While in the Bahamas, conch fritters, conch burgers, and cold conch salads reflected the historical centrality of this creature in Bahamian culture. When I think of Costa Rica, I can smell the cafés-con-leche at the local *cooperativo*, and August blueberries from New Hampshire bumble through the memories of my childhood summers, but it wasn't until a farm internship that I did in Tuscany, Italy during the spring of 2007 that I began to willfully consolidate these delicious experiences into a paradigm that I have broadened and deepened with this project: that different

foods are inextricable from and vital to the environmental and social history, culture, and now, more than ever, the future of the distinct places in our world.

My growing interest in local and artisan foods, along with the classes I have taken in Environmental Studies at Williams and the environmental research that I have conducted on campus for two summers, have merged with and supported this project. Together, they have deepened my appreciation for diverse natural and social communities at a time of increasing globalization and standardization. Most importantly, this project has helped me toward creating and protecting my own niche at a time of rapid change.

***Starting From Scratch: Learning the Basic Process of Cheesemaking at Shelburne Farms in Shelburne, VT, Cricket Creek Farm in Williamstown, MA, and the Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese in Burlington***



**Figures 2,3, and 4.**From left to right: A cheesemaker at Shelburne Farms, demonstrating excellent cheddaring technique; two Brown Swiss cows at the Shelburne Farms dairy; and samples of Maggie's Round, a raw cow's milk cheese from Cricket Creek Farm.

In my project proposal, I stated that I would be comparing how cheesemakers in Spain and New England have both preserved and renovated traditional cheesemaking techniques. Before studying these techniques in a country where I had never been, I decided to first build a base of cheese knowledge here in New England. My first forays into the cheese world—making cheese at Shelburne Farms and Cricket Creek Farm and visiting the Vermont Institute of Artisan Cheese—illuminated the physical process of cheesemaking as well as challenged my definition of traditional cheesemaking.

Shelburne Farms, the first farm I visited on June 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup>, is located on a 400-acre swath of land on the coast of Lake Champlain. Although the property originally belonged to the Vanderbilt family, in 1972 Shelburne Farms became a non-profit center dedicated to farm education; therefore, they welcomed students of cheese like me. From 8am until 5pm, I learned that nearly all cheesemaking follows a basic process:

- 1.) Begin with milk—usually cow's, goat's, or sheep's milk.
- 2.) Add starter bacteria. This bacteria begins the process of acidifying the milk—changing the sugars in the milk into lactic acid. Most starters today are made in a laboratory.
- 3.) After the milk begins to solidify, add the rennet. Rennet is a coagulant that separates the curds (solid parts of the milk) from the whey (the liquid parts) and can be either from animal origin (such as an enzyme from the stomach of a calf) or vegetable origin (such as the cardoon flower). As with the starter bacteria, most rennet today is made in a laboratory.
- 4.) To get rid of moisture and form a firm cheese, stir and cut the coagulated milk.



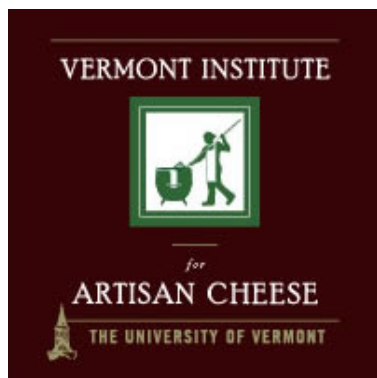
**Figure 5. Excess whey from cheesemaking at Shelburne Farms. After being drained from the curds, farmers often spray the whey on fields as a fertilizer or feed them to pigs!**

- 5.) To form a really firm cheese, heat and cook the coagulated milk.
- 6.) Salt.
- 7.) Age.
- 8.) Eat!

Shelburne Farms makes cheddar cheese—a slight variation of this process. Cheddar cheese is self-descriptive. Cheddaring is a verb. To cheddar means that after step four in the basic process of

cheesemaking (outlined above) the cheesemaker has to cut the curds into slabs and then stack those slabs on top of each other. Stacking helps squeeze out excess whey and accounts for the not-quite-crumbly-but-piecemeal texture of cheddar cheese. If you bite into cheddar or break it apart, you can see where the curds, previously the size of marbles, have been compressed together. Because of this extra step in the process, cheddaring is more labor intensive than, say, making Maggie's Round, a raw cow's milk cheese from Cricket Creek Farm in Williamstown. An average day of cheesemaking at Shelburne Farms lasts eight to nine hours—often twice the time other cheeses take to make.

Because of the time and effort required to make cheddar cheese, larger, more high profile farms such as Shelburne Farms, Grafton Farms in Grafton, VT, and Cabot tend to make cheddar, while smaller farms, like Cricket Creek Farm in Williamstown, make their own, lesser well known varieties. At Cricket Creek Farm, the cheesemaker Amy Jeshawitz makes mozzarella, an Italian-style raw milk cow's cheese similar to an Italian taleggio called Tobasi, and Maggie's Round, a cheese similar to an Italian toma. The day I arrived, we made Maggie's Round—a mere



**Figure 6. Logo for the Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese.**

three hour process in comparison with the Shelburne Farms cheddar. The process and equipment were nearly identical to Shelburne Farms's; the most significant difference was scale.

Watching and learning from these two productions, I quickly realized that my initial hypothesis that cheesemaking has changed dramatically over time was, unfortunately, false. The process of cheesemaking has endured for thousands of years

across countless regions. Small innovations in cheesemaking have come primarily from new technology—phasing out hand-cutting the curds in favor of less labor-intensive machine-cutters,

using computers to test acidity and temperature and to add salt, hydraulic presses to push the curds together instead of hand-pressing, freezing curds to make into cheese later, and milk trucks to transport milk from farms to cheese factories—instead of from new processes. The trend toward mass production of cheese in the United States and abroad has accounted for the greatest changes and often, according to several members of the Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese in Burlington (VIAC), the greatest losses.

When I arrived at VIAC on June 1<sup>st</sup>, I was lacking a sound hypothesis and thus a viable agenda; however, Jody Farnham, the Program Coordinator and Administrative Director, and Monserrat Almena-Aliste (Montse), a professor of Food Science from Spain, received me warmly. I was curious about this recent and relatively large investment of the University of Vermont to study, of all things, cheese. Why was this field of study so important to UVM?



**Figure 7. Classes in cheesemaking at VIAC.**

Jody explained that the Institute's mission is to promote small-farm culture in Vermont by providing cheesemakers with cutting-edge scientific and sensory research of cheese—essentially equipping them with the tools to be competitive in a market dominated by agribusiness. VIAC also believes that supporting small cheesemakers in Vermont is vital to maintaining the economic integrity of the region—a state known for its dairies as well as its rural poverty. Founded in 2004, VIAC is the nation's first and only comprehensive center devoted to

artisan cheese and offers degrees in cheesemaking to many small, aspiring New Englander farmers. Amy Jeshawitz received her degree in cheesemaking from VIAC, attending classes such as Essential Principles and Practices in Cheesemaking, Milk

Chemistry, Hygiene and Food Safety in Cheesemaking, Starter Cultures, Cheese Chemistry, and Basic Sensory Evaluation of Cheeses.

VIAC's commitment to supporting local dairy-based economies extends far beyond the region of New England, however. Since its opening, VIAC has drawn cheese experts from around the world who bring to Vermont wisdom from older food cultures, where artisan foods are, historically, more central. Montse is currently one of nearly a dozen international cheese experts who have helped bring historical context to the relatively infant artisan cheese industry in Vermont. To help put American artisan cheese in perspective, the vice president of Murray's Cheese in New York City, Liz Thorpe, has recently published *The Cheese Chronicles*, a journey toward understanding this new artisan industry as something original yet inextricably tied to its European roots. "Most American cheesemakers," Thorpe notes, "...have gone abroad or brought in European cheesemakers to help establish their operations" (96). Despite funky names such as "Constant Bliss," the majority of American artisan cheeses are based on European models, such as those at Cricket Creek Farm. Knowing where American artisan cheese came from is vital to understanding where our industry is headed.

On VIAC's website, Montse states: "One of the things that surprised me most about Americans (in a positive way) is their renewed interest and appreciation for gourmet foods - especially their passion for artisan cheeses!" This relationship between the long and rich history of cheese in Europe and the sudden fervor for local and artisan foods—particularly cheese—in the United States became the focus of my explorations when I arrived in Spain on June 16<sup>th</sup>.



*Siguiendo Un Camino del Queso Por Las Regiones de España (Following a Trail of Cheese Through the Regions of Spain): Cataluña, Extremadura, El País Vasco*



**Figures 8,9, and 10. From left to right: Me, posing next to the cheese vat at Pujol; Jane, me, and Santiago Pajuelo, a founder of the Pajuelo production, touring his Torta del Casar factory; Amy-Louise Turner, a volunteer from the UK, helping with the night milking at Pujol.**

I could have chosen many countries in which to travel and learn about the grandparents of American cheese; however, since I have been studying Spanish, I figured it would be easiest to travel and conduct interviews in Spain. I used three distinct types of cheese to structure my time in Spain: a cow's milk cheese from a farm called Pujol in Cataluña that agreed to host me as a volunteer, a D.O.P. sheep's milk cheese called the Torta del Casar from Extremadura, and another D.O.P. sheep's milk cheese called Idiazábal from the Basque Country.

D.O.P refers to a system called the Denominación de Origen Protegida in Spanish, or the Protected Denomination of Origin. Spain, along with other countries in the European Union, as well as a few other countries such as Mexico, has implemented this system (also called the Denominazione di origine controllada in Italy, and in France the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée), which regulates the origin and production of certain specialty foods—from wine to cheese to olive oil and even to baked goods, fruits, and tequila. Rigid rules, unique to each type of Spanish cheese that bears the D.O. seal, control everything from the type of animal, the steps in the cheesemaking process, and, most importantly, the region in which the cheese is produced.



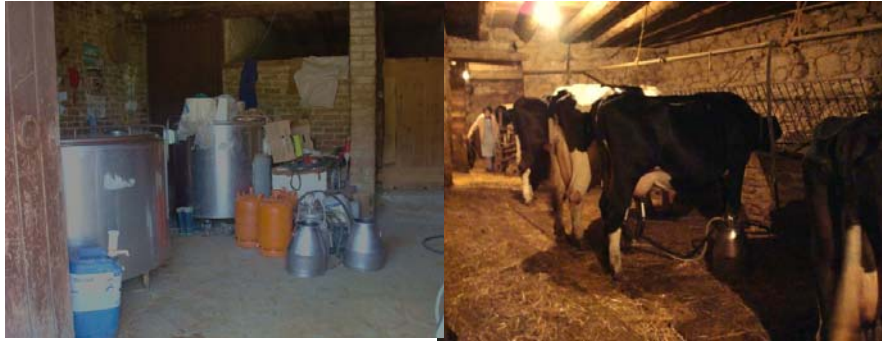
A fundamental principle of the D.O. system is that certain foods are native to certain regions, and while reproducing a certain process with similar ingredients in another place (such as making Spanish Manchego cheese in California) will often yield a tasty product, it is inherently different than what is made in the Spanish region of La Mancha. A whole range of place-based factors—what the animals eat, how they have adapted to a particular region over time, human interactions with the animals and the landscape—influence the appearance, texture, smell, taste, and pairings of a type of cheese and cannot be duplicated elsewhere. The D.O. system ensures that when a consumer buys Manchego cheese, for example, that the cheese has been made from the milk of the Manchega sheep in the La Mancha region of Spain and not by another producer piggy-backing on the label.

More than consumer protection, however, the D.O. system is a means of asserting regional culture. Spaniards are fiercely proud of what region they are from (often referring to themselves as Basque or Catalán instead of Spanish), and producing and selling food that can only be made in the region where they live gives many small farmers a strong sense of identity.

### *Pujol*



**Figures 11 and 12. On the left, the view of Pujol from the driveway, along with one of the Holsteins; on the right, a stable-view Pujol's main house with the milking barn attached on the right.**



**Figures 13 and 14. On the left, the milk vat and milking machines at Pujol; on the right, the night milking, with Josep's mother in the background.**

To arrive at the farm Pujol, located about twenty minutes from Ripol, the last stop on the train from Barcelona, in the region of Cataluña, took the entire day from Madrid.

After a train ride, a bus ride, a long wait as I sat on my luggage outside of the station, and then a jerky car ride into the foothills of the Pyrenees (*antepyraneos* in Spanish) later, and we finally pulled up to an old stone barn, emerging from a hilltop .

My first impressions of Pujol as dirty—far dirtier than the farms in New England I had previously visited—did not change throughout the week, and because the *quesería*, or cheesemaking facility, was broken, my perceptions were solidified as I spent the week shoveling cow dung out of the barn. Along with Amy, another volunteer who hailed from the UK, I watched the herd of thirty four cows walk through the main door of the house (see the archway on Figure 12) twice a day, splattering poop into the kitchen, and then walk back out after being milked, to the *bosque*, or woods, to pasture, while we cleaned up after them.

What soothed my queasy stomach after a day of shoveling, however, was farm's cheese. It was spectacular! Although Cataluña boasts a popular D.O. cheese, Garrotxa (pronounced Garotch-a), Josep was not interested in publicity. His cheeses, simply called Pujol after the farm, are made in his own style. Pujol comes in both pasteurized and unpasteurized (raw) forms, are aged for a minimum of sixty days, and exude all of the wonderful, earthy qualities of his farm, completely erasing wet cow pies from my mind.

When I casually mentioned sanitation standards for cheesemakers in the United States,



**Figures 15, 16, and 17. From left to right: Me, trying to bring the cows in from the *bosque*; milk for cheesemaking; mold-formed Pujol cheese and clothwrapped Pujol cheese.**

Josep

scoffed, saying that his cheese is cleaner than many of the cheesemakers he knows because he takes such good care of his animals that their milk needs no sterilization; in fact, the only reason he pasteurizes some of his milk is to soften the taste of the cheese. In an interview with José Martín, a purveyor of Spanish and French cheeses at the Mercado de San Miguel in Madrid, I asked about the strict sanitation controls in the United States. Martín believed that in the United States, cheesemakers work against their milk too much, pasteurizing away strange tastes and trying to make as consistent a product as possible. In Spain, Martín believes, cheesemakers understand that animal milk will change with the seasons, the availability of pasture, and the level of stress the animals face. I rememberd that Josep used individual milking machines to ensure that he knew how much milk each cow was producing and if the milk appeared or smelled differently. For Sr. Martín, choosing a cheese required knowing the cheesemaker personally and thus assuring the quality of his product. In particular, Sr. Martín stressed that some of the finest cheeses he sells are from cheesemakers who do not try to standardize their product—that is, they allow for seasonal variability in milk quality and the process of aging the cheese. Josep’s Pujol cheeses certainly fit this description.

In *The Cheese Chronicles* Liz Thorpe elaborates on the difference between cleanliness and sterilization in cheesemaking: “To sterilize food, it must be aggressively heated or irradiated...destroying a lot of nutritional value and flavor in the process...Bacteria, molds, and yeasts are not inherently bad. Pathogens that result from sick animals, unsanitary milking conditions or cheesemaking conditions, or careless milk handling are...they are kept in check in a healthy creature” (291). Josep knew this—not because he studied it, but because his family has been in the dairy business in the *antepyraneos* for over three hundred years. He knew his animals better than any cheesemaker that I encountered during my research and allowed their ever-changing qualities free reign in his cheese. Although the cheeses from Shelburne Farms and Cricket Creek both hinted at certain aspects of their respective environments (the dark yellow of Shelburne cheddar suggests a grass-based dairy), to me the thick, chalky, barny cheese at Pujol was a direct reflection of Josep’s family and his farm.

### *La Torta del Casar*

The land of Extremadura is best described as *agostado*—literally, augusted. As if August had swept through, torched the landscape, and left the harsh, wheat and dark green plains of southwestern Spain behind. The hot, dry expanse is the where *toros*—fighting bulls—are raised, where stone churches cut into the horizon, and where the mythical Torta del Casar cheese originated. In Spanish, *torta* translates as a pie or flat cake. The Torta del Casar literally means the cake of Casar—Casar being a small town near the Portuguese border where shepherds supposedly created the Torta by accident and where my advisor Jane, her husband, and I spent three nights, touring and tasting.

Despite the barrenness of the region (Extremadura is one of the poorest areas of Spain),



**Figure 18. The *agostado* landscape of Extremadura.**

the Torta del Casar industry is thriving. Not only are the thirteen producers that bear the D.O. seal churning out cheese at high rates, but also the tourism that accompanies this artisan cheese industry was widespread.

Museums peppered the region around Casar, drawing

unexpectant travelers and foodies alike to learn more about the importance of the Torta to the history and economy of the area.

Our first stop was Pajuelo, a shiny new farm/cheese factory/museum/store that, for an artisan producer, was a far cry from the quiet, unobtrusive farm of Pujol. Pajuelo was glitzy—built within the past year and milking 3,000 ewes—and Santiago Pajuelo, one of the family members who gave us a tour of the production, knew it. After showing us his flock of Merino sheep (According to D.O. standards, Torta del Casar producers must only use milk from Merino or Entrefino ewes), we toured the recently constructed *Centro de Interpretación*, a museum about the *trashumancia* shepherding routes across Spain. Emerging from the black-lighted *Centro*, we then toured the multi-chamber cheese factory and aging rooms, and ended the grand tour with a complimentary tasting of four cheeses, a local wine, and *bombones de higo*, chocolate covered figs.





Figures 19, 20, 21, and 22. Clockwise from top left: Merino ewes with their new lambs; mechanical milking station; Jane, me, and Daniel, wearing germ-protective garb, next to the aging rooms; inside of the factory.

The second Torta del Casar production, El Castuo, was also large—2,000 Entrefino ewes—with cardoons—thistles that provide the rennet for the Torta del Casar—sprouting

everywhere. Because he was so proud of his Tortas, I asked the cheesemaker, Ricardo Regalado Olmos, why he thought certain cheeses were better than others. His reponse, which I will never forget, can be translated roughly as: “Cheeses are like women.



Figure 23. A photograph of life during the *trashumancia*.

They are all different, but all beautiful, and all tasty.”

After Jane and I chuckled at this subtle compliment, I thought about this characterization of cheese in the context of the farms of varying sizes that I had seen. Was there a point at which the

size of the production compromised the quality of the final product? Throughout the next two days, as I learned more about the historical importance of the *trashumanica* in Extremaduran culture and the shift to a more sedentary industry, my definition of an artisanal producer was in flux: If Pujol was an artisanal producer with thirty four cows, then could Pajuelo be one as well with 3,000 sheep? Was it simply enough to comply with D.O. standards of milk quality and cheese production, regardless of size and profit?

These were questions that I brought to the *Consejo Regulador*, or the director, of the D.O. for the Torta del Casar, in Cáceres, Extremadura. With Jane helping to translate, I asked if the D.O. had a cut-off size for their producers. To my surprise, he said no. As long as a producer is able to meet the D.O.'s rigid standards of quality, the *Consejo* believed that size is irrelevant. This intrigued me, because in the United States, the buzzwords artisan, local, and gourmet call to mind farms like Pujol and products that are made individually, by hand, with utmost attention to detail. From these visits, I began to think more broadly about what artisan means, expanding my definition to include a more practical connotation, based on the economic success of the Torta del Casar.

After visiting several large yet impressive cheese factories in the United States, Liz Thorpe notes that “Artisanal cheese can’t be relegated to the domain of the little guy. We have to remember that there are some factories, driven by principles that really matter, that...produce cheese on a scale that *can* meet the demands of hundreds of supermarkets...” (142). The Spaniards seemed to have realized that quality production need not limit itself to small producers with limited resources—especially in a country where the demand for good food is high. The D.O. system is a means of supporting what many people in the United States are currently



craving—real food made with integrity—in a way that is more mainstream and economically viable.

When I asked Montse if the United States has a system such as the Spanish D.O., she replied that “the concept of DO...is based in history and tradition...This country doesn't have history and tradition to create a DO designation like [that of] the European model. But maybe in the future there is another ways to protect the origin and Terroir of our local products.” By Terroir, Montse meant the French concept of a place, with distinct climate and soil properties, animals and their food, and microorganisms that live on milk and thrive in aging caves, shaping the color, texture, smell, and taste of a cheese. This concept, so intrinsic to many Spanish cheese producers, is catching on quickly in the United States. As I continued my tasty travels, Montse’s reply unearthed more questions: Is the United States so far behind in history and tradition that we cannot catch up to the European D.O. model? Is a system such as the European D.O. the future of our fledgling artisan cheese industry, or are we headed in a different direction?

#### *Vitoria and La Universidad de País Vasco*

The final type of cheese that I studied in Spain was Idiazábal, an uncooked pressed sheep’s cheese from the Basque Country that is mild unless smoked. Interestingly, Basque shepherds, including the ones that I visited one morning with the *Consejo Regulador* of Idiazábal, still move their flocks to higher pastures in the winter and then back to the verdant lowlands in the summer—a modern version of the *trashumancia*. This constant supply of fresh pasture, supplemented with small percentages of grain, accounts for the fresh earthiness of Idiazábal at all times of the year.



**Figures 24 and 25.** The smallest D.O. Idiazábal producer; the couple that produces Idiazábal in their home quesería.

Perhaps because of the food-revering nature of the Basque people, or perhaps because the Basque Country boasts one of Spain's only sensorial labs at the Universidad de País Vasco (University of the Basque Country) to test—on a biochemical as well as qualitative level—the composition of D.O. products such as cheese and wine, the standards for producing Idiazábal cheese are some of the strictest in Spain. I was able to spend four days with Dr. Pérez Elortondo (Paxti), a professor of Food Quality at the Universidad de País Vasco as well as a visiting lecturer at VIAC in its first year of operation, learning about the science of food and food quality testing. Paxti runs this sensorial lab, where he, along with a panel of trained experts, test certain products such as Idiazábal cheese to ensure that the producers are following the D.O. guidelines. Using an extremely long checklist, the panel notes the size, coloring, shape, rind texture, core texture, and textural gradient of the cheese and then moves on to items such as the number of seconds it takes the cheese to reform after pressing a thumb into the rind, and finally to the taste wheel: Earthy? Fruity? Tangy? Butterscotchy? Apricot-ey? Meaty? The possibilities and combinations were nearly infinite—and infinitely fascinating.



**Figures 26, 27, and 28. The sensorial lab at the Universidad de País Vasco.**

The existence of a Center for Food Quality at the Universidad de País Vasco impressed me. Although I have not had the time to research different nutrition programs at American universities, I suspect that while the methods used to test the chemical composition of foods is similar, the vision behind the testing is not. In “Unhappy Meals,” Michael Pollan describes the American obsession with breaking down real and processed food into groups of molecules that contain nutritional value, and using only these parts evaluating how healthy certain foods are. What is missing in American nutritional science, Pollan claims, is the understanding that food is more than the sum of its parts—that the way one’s body interacts with food, what the food is paired with, even the atmosphere of the meal add another dimension to eating and overall health that has escaped the microscope (2). This is the vision behind Dr. Elortondo’s lab: in addition to ensuring that the products that pass through consist of correct chemical compositions, the smelling and tasting and touching of the products, in a group, with discussion, ensure that the product is also enjoyable—a facet of American health that is often overlooked. The notion that Dr. Elortondo, husband and father of two boys, with a family so similar to my own, had devoted over thirty years of his life to food quality research seemed so...Spanish! It was not a rogue hobby but a well-respected, mainstream professorship. The Spanish are serious about the quality

of their food and the quality of their lives, and the presence of Dr. Elortondo's lab supported this. The link with VIAC as well, another center for the scientific pursuit of quality food, seemed to bode well for American cheese.

### ***Wrapping Up: Visits With Other New England Cheesemakers and the Vermont Cheesemakers Festival***



**Figure 29. Mold forms on Great Hill Dairy's Blue Cheese.**

When I returned from Spain, I was eager to visit more up-and-coming cheesemakers back in my home region of New England. As much as I enjoyed the elegant cheeses of Spain and their more established role in Spanish culture, I was curious about the future of American cheese. To me, the notion that many

American cheesemakers have not simply adapted European recipes but have been carving out a niche for artisan cheese in the American economy, independent of the old world and more suited to our nation's character, was exciting!

My first stop was Great Hill Dairy in Marion, Massachusetts—the first blue cheese producer I had visited. The difference between blue cheese and other cheese is that during the basic process of cheesemaking, the cheesemaker will add bacteria to the milk along with the starter culture. Later, after the cheesemaker pierces holes in the cheese, oxygen will infiltrate the wheel, reacting with the bacteria to create veins of bluish or greenish mold. Because Great Hill Dairy pasteurizes their milk, their blue cheese, called Great Hill Blue is less tangy than many traditional blue cheeses. This creamier taste and texture has attracted the interest of many local chefs in the Marion area, who use Great Hill Blue on salads, burgers, and chese plates. In addition to occupying this restaurant niche, Great Hill Dairy purchases milk from surrounding

dairies, swelling their cheese production. The opposite of a farmstead cheesemaker such as Cricket Creek Farm, in which the cheesemaker uses milk from his or her own animals, the model of Great Hill Dairy represents an increasingly popular method of artisanal production in New England: a cheese cooperative.

Perhaps the most famous of these cheese cooperatives is Cabot. With 1,300 participating dairies in Vermont, New York, and throughout in New England, Cabot pushes the envelope of what it means to be an artisanal producer; however, like Pajuelo, Cabot maintains strict standards of quality, particularly with its quality of milk. In addition, despite its current \$350 million business, Cabot is an umbrella over the dairy industry in Vermont, without which many small dairies would not be able to survive. Because the entire Cabot production is mechanized, cheese connoisseurs often dismiss its cheese; however, in 2006, Cabot and another farm in Greensboro, VT called Jasper Hill, collaborated to make what is now called Cabot Clothbound Cheddar—one of the most highly sought-after cheeses in America.



**Figure 29. Cabot Clothbound Cheddar on sale at the Cabot Factory.**



**Figure 30. Zoe Brickley in front of wheels of Cabot Clothbound Cheddar the the Cellars at Jasper Hill.**

While the taste of Cabot Clothbound Cheddar is superb—thick and butterscotchy—the story of its creation is, for me, even more intriguing. After entering the cheese industry with four instantly successful cheeses—Constant Bliss, Bayley Hazen Blue, Aspenhurst, and Winnimere—the Kehler brothers, who founded Jasper Hill, decided that they

wanted to create a way for other struggling Vermont cheesemakers to succeed. So they built the Cellars at Jasper Hill, an enormous underground cave in which to age cheeses. Because the taste of any cheese depends on both the cheesemaker's craft as well as the molds and rinds and washes and yeasts and bacteria that cling to, burrow in, and live on the cheese long afterward, the Cellars at Jasper Hill decided that they would take credit for the aging process while producers that they selected would take credit for the initial product. Cave-aging a cheese can be a long and expensive process without adequate resources, but thanks to the Cellars at Jasper Hill, many small Vermont cheesemakers are now realizing their market potential. And, again, these small



**Figure 31. A sampling of six New England artisan cheeses at the Vermont Cheesemakers Festival.**

cheesemakers owe a great deal of their impending success to Cabot.

With some of Cabot's finest cheese, the Kehlers have filled the majority of their cellar space with Cabot

Clothbound cheddar, aging it by placing a cloth around each

wheel and painting over it with a layer of lard. This lard

attracts certain molds that latch onto the cloth and form a

delicious, ash-colored rind. The demand for Cabot Clothbound Cheddar is escalating, and riding this wave are the dozens of smaller cheesemakers that the Cellars at Jasper Hill are aging and shipping out on pallets along with Cabot Clothbound Cheddar. In Liz Thorpe's words: "Small cheesemakers need the volume and distribution system of big guys, and factory cheesemakers need the cachet, craft, and flavor represented by the little guys. The Cellars at Jasper Hill is the first vehicle to enable this symbiosis" (352). For a nation that began by borrowing from European tradition, this model of the Cellars at Jasper Hill represents a self-reliance on the part



of Americans than many other nations, including Spain, should give us credit for. Such a cooperative vision of cheesemaking should make American cheesemakers very proud.

The grand finale of my research was a trip to the Vermont Cheesemakers Festival at Shelburne Farms—coincidentally the exact place where I had begun. Over fifty artisan cheese producers from New England were present for the daylong celebration, along with many regional wineries, breweries, and other

food producers. It was a showing that would make any cheese lover—actually, scratch that, any human



**Figure 32. Vermont Butter and Cheese Company at the Vermont Cheesemakers Festival.**

being—salivate. Although I had traveled for a month in Spain and had tasted some of the finest cheeses and wines that Europe has to offer, I was fiercely proud during the weekend of August 23<sup>rd</sup> to be from a region that was producing such incredibly delicious and fun food. It is very difficult to compare Spanish and New England cheeses. Montse's response to this question was: "Sorry this is too complex to answer. Don't have the expertise and time to do it." They are different, because they are from different regions, and they are different, because they are from different cultures, and they are different, because they are from different eras. In my mind, New England cheeses are edgier, because they are relatively adolescent, because the cheesemakers are have had to be more innovative, and because Americans desperately need to discover onto artisan foods from economic, environmental, and health perspectives. Even the names are flashier. A short list of my favorites: Vermont Butter and Cheese Company's Bijou and Coupole, two fresh goats' milk cheeses (The Coupole will be one of just three American cheeses present at Slow Cheese, an international Slow Food event in Bra, Italy this year.); Gore-Dawn-Zola, from Green Mountain Blue Cheese; Ascutney Mountain, from Cobb Hill Dairy, Weston Wheel, from



Woodcock Farm; Square Wheel, from Twig Farm; and perhaps my favorite, the Von Trapp Farmstead Oma. The sheer number of producers present, along with four excellent tasting seminars, and over 1,100 people present is, in my mind, a testament to the present and ever-growing buzz that is American cheese. And this ever-growing buzz represents a desire on the part of many Americans to live in a slower, more appreciative, and more conscious manner.

### *Final Thoughts*

I would like to thank, more than anyone, my advisor Jane Canova for helping me at every step along the way with this project—from initial meetings, when I thought I might study Spanish hams instead of cheese, to contacting Spanish cheesemakers, to traveling throughout Spain, and even driving me while I was on crutches up to the Vermont Cheesemakers Festival. Jane’s Spanish connections as well as her passion for delicious food has been invaluable to me. I would also like to thank the Center for Environmental Studies at Williams and the donors who so generously contributed to this summer fund. This project has been so wonderful for me and has opened many doors to opportunities for food writing and traveling and tasting at Williams and beyond.☺



**Figure 33. Jane Canova, the Administrative Director for the Center for Languages, Literature, and Culture at Williams College, and the advisor for this project, outside of the Cabot Cheese Factory, with a strange, unnamed male bystander.**

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Appendix A. List of Cheesemakers, Cheese Shops, and other Cheese Institutions.

Shelburne Farms in Shelburne, VT. [www.shelburnefarms.org](http://www.shelburnefarms.org)

Cricket Creek Farm in Williamstown, MA. [www.cricketcreekfarm.com](http://www.cricketcreekfarm.com)

The Vermont Institute of Artisan Cheese in Burlington, VT. <http://nutrition.uvm.edu/viac>

The Mercado de San Miguel in Madrid. <http://www.mercadodesanmiguel.es/>

Rafael Pajuelo. <http://www.aqueseros.com/web/rpajuelo.html>

Laboratorio de Análisis Sensorial. <http://www.lasehu.com>

Granja Modelo de Arkaute. [www.quesoidiazabal.com](http://www.quesoidiazabal.com)

Wasiks Cheese Shop in Wellesley, MA. [www.wasiks.com](http://www.wasiks.com)

Formaggio Kitchen in Cambridge, MA. [www.formaggiokitchen.com](http://www.formaggiokitchen.com)

Murray's Cheese in New York City. [www.murrayscheese.com](http://www.murrayscheese.com)

The Chatham Cheese Company. [www.chathamcheese.com](http://www.chathamcheese.com)

Great Hill Dairy in Marion, MA. [www.greathilldairy.com](http://www.greathilldairy.com)

The Vermont Cheesemakers Festival in Shelburne, VT. [www.vtcheesefest.com](http://www.vtcheesefest.com)