

Lowcountry chefs say cheese

CHEESE from Page D1

As Cypress' Craig Deihl puts it, "It is a common misconception that every restaurant serving a cheese plate should have a cheese cart and a cheesemonger. That's expensive. We are not a cheese plate restaurant. People are just looking for some nice cheeses to pair with charcuterie."

Fortunately for connoisseurs with higher cheese hopes, the situation is improving. An increasing number of restaurants are outsourcing cheese plate design to Goat Sheep Cow, which, according to Cohen, can obtain "things that nobody south of D.C. can get their hands on."

"Charleston is definitely moving forward with cheeses, and Goat Sheep Cow has a lot to do with that," says Jacob Hudler, The Macintosh's new chef de cuisine.

Price of great cheese

When Hudler was promoted to his current position, he immediately prioritized a cheese plate redo. "I thought the cheese plate was something we needed to work on," he says. Since The Macintosh already prints its menu on a daily basis, he asked Goat Sheep Cow to start supplying the restaurant with a changing selection of compelling cheeses.

"Putting cheeses on the menu starts a conversation with the servers," Hudler says. "It definitely seems to sell more."

Although Hudler leaves the cheese scouting to Goat Sheep Cow — "cheese is so complicated," he concedes — he's learned from Cohen and co-owner Trudi Wagner how the right cheese can inspire excitement. A few weeks ago, he was eagerly awaiting the restaurant's first shipment of Flagsheep, an American Cheese Society Best of Show winner from Beecher's Handmade Cheese. (The Macintosh typically receives its cheeses in half-pound portions, which last about a week.)

Flagsheep isn't cheap, retailing for just under \$30 a pound. But it's impossible to put together a collection of superior cheeses for the cost of an average dessert plate, Cohen says. "It's an expensive artisan product," she explains. "Most of our cheeses are not made in factories."

At The Macintosh, the cheese plate sells for \$15, nearly twice as much as the banana mousse and the buttermilk pie.

Cohen is sensitive to chefs' worries about the affordability of cheese plates. She suggests they balance two or three "reasonably priced" cheeses with one expensive showstopper.

"We try so hard to impress upon the chefs that you should wow with at least one cheese," Cohen says.

Another way to control a cheese plate's price is to populate it with European cheeses, she adds. Because the U.S. artisan cheese infrastructure is still in its nascent stages, exceptional cheeses from countries where an artisan cheese industry is supported and streamlined are relative bargains.

"People want to limit themselves to American cheeses, and we are big proponents of that, but Europeans have been making cheese for 1,000 years," she says, pointing to the Old World's established network of affineurs, or cheese agers, who allow cheese makers to focus on production. "Don't trap yourself. Use one awesome American cheese and a beautiful Comte."

Garnishing the plate

Although Cohen says Ken Vedrinski of Lucca and Coda del Pesca is genuinely thrilled by the chance to serve Italian cheeses with gripping



PAUL ZOELLER/STAFF

Slightly North of Broad: Cheese plate with Valdeon (clockwise, from center), Thomasville Tomme, and Merry Goat Round cheeses served with fruits and toasted baguettes.

backstories and expertly rubbed rinds, it's not unusual for a chef's mind to dart to accoutrements when planning a cheese plate.

"For me, it can't just be 'Here's cheese we bought,'" Deihl says. "We're a restaurant. We're going to put little details. We're not going to put pimiento cheese on a cheese plate, but pepper jelly brings in that Southern charm. Or we'll do local honeycomb from Wadmalaw and Savannah."

Cohen wholeheartedly supports fresh touches on a cheese plate. But she believes the foundation of a plate, whether served in a restaurant or assembled at home, is a soft, semi-soft and hard cheese. Her shop's name provides another guiding principle: Ideally, goat's milk, sheep's milk and cow's milk should be represented.

"The only other thing missing is a blue," she adds.

Pungent, fragrant mold-veined cheese isn't always popular with customers, Deihl says, though he always includes "something bold and funky." For now, Cypress Fog's Humboldt Fog and Roaring Forties Blue from Australia are taking turns on the plate.

But he is cautious about serving cheese that could be classified as too old or too "goey."

"I'd rather stick with something that the customer base is very good with," he says.

Once a restaurant comes up with a cheese plate that does resonate with customers, it may have trouble limiting orders to the dessert course. Hudler is now weighing whether to offer The Macintosh's cheese plate as a pre-meal snack.

"We've been in a long-running conversation about putting it on the appetizer menu," he says. Customer demand may ultimately trump Hudler's worries about cluttering up the menu.

Cohen says, "I personally feel like it's more enjoyable after dinner, but I'm not going to fight it."

So long as the trend in Charleston holds, eaters can look forward to plenty of opportunities to figure out for themselves whether they prefer spectacular cheese before or after the triggerfish.

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GRACE BEAHM/STAFF

McCrary's: Selections include (top, from left) Grayson cow's milk, Thomasville Tomme and Battery Park cheeses served with blood orange jam, green tomato compote, chervil pesto and red fife wheat thins.



PAUL ZOELLER/STAFF

Cypress: Cheeses on a plate at Cypress include Humboldt Fog, Fiscalini, Point Reyes Blue and Green Hill Camembert, accompanied by crackers and ramekins of honeycomb and pepper jelly.