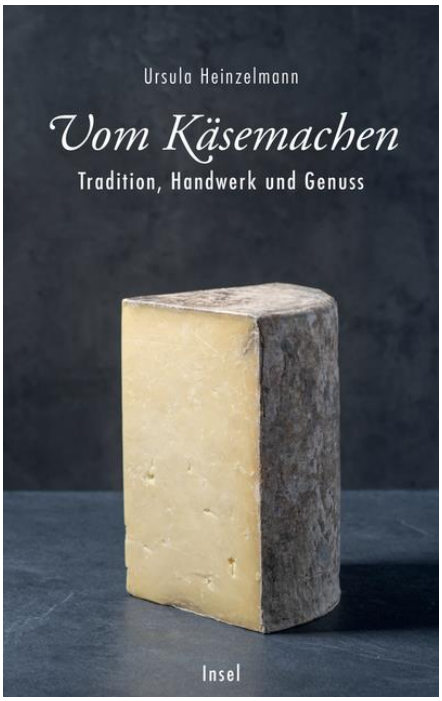

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On Making Cheese

Tradition, Craftsmanship and Taste

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Introduction

Why Cheese?

Why not? For there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby... and they were certainly not keeping watch over their flock just to get warm clothing, meat in their pots and manure on their fields.

Cheese is a basic foodstuff and a wondrous transformation all at once. With the aid of a coagulator such as rennet, salt (in most cases) and through the activity of various microorganisms, milk is turned into a true smorgasbord of different cheeses. Cheese can be unpretentious and down-to-earth, its plain representatives can be found in supermarkets, but on the flipside, cheese can be quite exclusive, a sought-after, expensive, long-matured rarity. Whether it comes in the form of sliced processed cheese or as a hand-crafted original, whether it's produced industrially or manually, cheese is always a concentrate and an expression of a situation. It reflects climate and landscapes, economy, social order, politics, memories and dreams.

With you, every cheese has a story, someone told me recently – it wasn't even meant as a reproach but was uttered with a fair amount of surprise. But that's precisely what interests me: the story behind each cheese. I'm convinced that telling these stories expands our horizons, connects us as people. Milk is our very first food and therefore, cheese is quite close to us in a very special way. At the same time, it takes us out into the world.

I can't even say why and when I took up an interest in cheese and I believe that this is because it came to me. Or rather, because it had always been there in the first place. This is something I have professed openly for a few years now: *Heinzelcheese* is a registered trademark, my trademark. In the English-speaking world they say that the moon is made of cheese. That's not true, of course, but on some nights, when the moon hangs especially low and shines huge and golden yellow, you could believe it.

One thing is certain: Cheese is a wonderful guiding star. Not only has it made me see Germany in a new light, it has also taken me to the farthest corners of Europe, as far as the Lofoten in the north, to Ireland, where the Atlantic merges with the mainland, to Sicily and Sardinia, where Africa seems almost palpable in the distance, and to eastern Anatolia, where Europe blends with Asia. Cheese has let me travel the west coast of North America as well as Vermont in the northeast, I experienced landscapes I didn't know before and saw others from a new perspective. I met brilliant people and understood connections in a new way.

People constantly ask about my favourite cheese, and each time I reply that the answer depends on my mood, the specific situation and the time of year, and that, as with wine, giving

an answer is actually impossible because there are so many great cheeses. It has to be exciting for me to like it!

Since 2014, my monthly *Heinzelcheese* talks see us sitting around a large table in the Markthalle Neun in Berlin-Kreuzberg, tasting and discussing cheese (and wine). These meetings started because I kept bringing back unusual cheeses that no one here knows from my travels and that I wanted to share with other people. It's at that table that I understood how cheese is also a wonderful means of ridding ourselves of many a stereotype spread by the media and by politics. When I put Turkish cheese on the wooden boards I don't say anything about its origins to begin with. Only when the cheese has registered in people's heads via all the senses, I provide the corresponding information. Over and over, I'm able to observe people's way of thinking change: THE Turks are not just the faces we see on the news but people, in this case people who make cheese...

Cheese has the ability to connect people across many different borders. For this reason, I'm involved in organising Cheese Berlin, the international cheese festival that brings together cheesemakers from all over the world under the old, tall roof of the covered market for one wonderful weekend each year in November.

And why these of all cheeses? These countries? And why is French cheese only mentioned as a side note? That's actually a coincidence – France has many truly fantastic cheeses. This is a personal selection, and a very personal journey. It hasn't always been easy to procure these fine specimens, but here they are. My stories are meant to encourage you to set out for yourself and stay on the lookout for cheeses, people and stories like the ones I experienced.

[...]

Love Me Tender:
Stilton, Stichelton and English Stereotypes

Billy Kevan, Colston Bassett Dairy
Joe Schneider, Stichelton Dairy
Nottinghamshire/Great Britain

In the English-speaking world, Cheddar is the cheese of the people. Stilton, on the other hand, is the »King of Cheeses«. I don't want to be called an outright royalist, but I've been a huge fan of this blue cheese from the area around Nottingham and Leicester for a long time, not least because Stilton and Port make for such a perfect pairing. When I was training as a chef at a top restaurant in Berlin in the early 1980s, I was told that »the English« preferred Stilton with Port. I didn't realise that what they were talking about wasn't just a nice piece of cheese accompanied by a glass of great wine, but a much more intimate union: The cylindrical cheese is carved out bit by bit and at the same time filled and mixed with Port … A »fruity-sweet« note on the plate was considered classy, whether it was mango on a salad or veal liver with cassis sauce and many a sauce was given a seductively mild glaze by adding a dash of Port. Yet, as a drink, Port wasn't even a contender back then – sweet wine was generally regarded with scepticism. It took a few years for me to realise that a truly great Port is a complex red wine that happens to have a sweet taste. But even before my twenty years of marriage to an Englishman I knew that the Port-Stilton-mush was nothing but an unappetizing legend.

At the time, it was also said that the English cuisine was horrible and didn't actually deserve to be called a »cuisine«. It's true that a whole generation of Brits has been shaped by the food rationing during and after World War II, which lasted up to 1954 in some parts of the country. But after all, there's no more fog wafting through the streets of London like there was in Sherlock Holmes's times and since the 1990s, a lot has changed in British pots and pans. People who have travelled to the United Kingdom in the last ten years and still claim that a prolonged stay there was equal to a forced diet should have their taste buds checked.

I used to travel to the island often with my husband and we would usually pay a visit to his grandmother. On her 100th birthday, she received the customary card signed by the Queen and up until her death one year later she was extremely fit both mentally and physically. She lived on her own and didn't think it noteworthy that she had to climb a flight of stairs to get to her bedroom on the first floor – »keep calm and carry on«. Occasionally, we would take a quick side-trip to the east coast to see a friend in Aldeburgh who was also quite elderly at the time.

This bachelor had worked in the wine trade all his life, he was a member of the illustrious circle of the *Masters of Wine* and would always find a wonderful old bottle or two for us in his cellar. Over the years, he invited us for dinner at his place many times. He would serve delicacies like fresh crab, pheasant and raspberries he had picked himself. Everything was prepared and cooked by him and served under the eyes of his ancestors, who were looking down on us from their century-old oil portraits in the dining room.

Our friend had a great passion for German Rieslings but Port came right after in his ranking. You can only truly understand Port once you've experienced England in winter. According to the thermometer it's not actually that cold, only rarely does it show temperatures below zero, but then there's the dampness that creeps into your bones. Houses in Britain, the old quaint ones especially, are badly insulated and heaters are typically undersized. Those chilly and damp British winters have become a little more bearable since the 17th century, because when you drink port wine, the result of an accident within trade relations, in front of the fire it warms your bones like the Portuguese sun at the Douro, where in summer 40 °C are not uncommon in the steep mountain terraces. In addition, there're a lot of tannins in a good vintage Port and they need to harmonise, which takes time – and therefore, the wine has to be old.

Port and Stilton are a dream pair, just like Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, and they belong to England like cricket and the Queen. Entirely different from salty Roquefort or Gorgonzola, which is either sweet or quite brittle (depending on whether it's a modern Dolce- or a traditional Piccante-variety), the creamy English blue cheese has a more harmonious taste. It's a little crumbly yet still dissolves on the tongue like butter, ideally facilitated by sweetness, alcohol and the Port's tannins.

Our friend didn't keep the Stilton in all its cylindrical glory on a sideboard, nor did he carve it out in order to pour Port into the hollow. If he had, a zesty »We are not amused« would probably have slipped from his ancestors' mouths. Instead, he would buy a piece of Stilton from Salters Family Butchers in Aldeburgh the morning of our visit. It was only natural that a premium butcher would sell the best of all Stiltons: Colston Bassett. Needless to say that they also sold tins of water biscuits, thin, crispy crackers that keep to the background discreetly and leave the grand stage of flavour to the two main characters: both enchanting, full of character and most notably: autonomous, like Tracy and Hepburn in their best movies.

The origin of the Port-and-Stilton-legend is found in Victorian times, the time of Queen Elizabeth's great-great-grandmother Victoria. Her economically better-off subjects were forced to plan with more foresight on their estates, since port wine was generally ordered by the box, Stilton by the wheel. Despite diligent consumption and insufficient heating – which is very

cheese-friendly – the last third of the eight-kilo whopper would undoubtedly have been quite strong and dry. So, it was »revived« quite pragmatically with a bit of Port – what else? An ideal combination. Just like Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. And since we're already talking about movies: hardly anyone in the UK has heard about *Dinner for One*. Nobody on the island actually finds it funny, while most Germans think of it as a prime example of British humour. Over there, they prefer to drink in real life. Port, among other things. With Stilton. Served separately.

A brief intermission from there facts to describe the basics of Stilton production at the Colston Bassett dairy, i.e. in the optimal way: Milk, as fresh as possible, is heated to 30 °C in a large, rectangular stainless-steel vat, while *Penicillium roquefortii* cultures (a dark-green liquid), lactic acid starters and rennet are stirred in. After that, one must keep stirring with a large paddle until the milk starts to curdle so that the fat won't settle on the surface (and will drain away with the whey later). After about ninety minutes (which is relatively long compared to other cheeses), the very soft gelatinous mass is cut into 1-cm cubes by hand with a short-handled cheese harp. The cubes rest and acidify in the whey for about two hours. After that, the whey is drained and the curd rests for roughly another hour before it is scooped into a second vat covered with a perforated sheet and cloths in many layers carefully by hand with shallow, round ladles. That's where it stays overnight, keeps acidifying gently while the whey continues to drain. Roughly twenty-four hours after being put into the rennet, the curd is shredded into pieces approximately the size of a walnut, mixed thoroughly with salt, again by hand, and filled into tall, cylindrical, perforated moulds which are then piled into shelves in the *hastening room*, the first, rather warm and dry, ageing room. As with every cheese, regular turning is extremely important at this early stage (back in the day, the cheeses were additionally bandaged until they formed a rind and those bandages also had to be changed continuously). After three to five days the cheese is taken from the moulds and smoothed all round with the flat blade of an ordinary dinner knife. This »rubbing up« looks like someone spreading butter, but it is hard work and takes some practice, because the cheeses are in no way as soft as butter and rather elastic and tough instead. However, a smooth surface is important so that no oxygen can get in and a consistent rind can form. The next ageing room, the *conditioning room*, is a little cooler and smells fruity and like browned butter, whereas the third smells more like soured quark. The cheeses on the shelves of that room begin to sport a brown rind after about six weeks and their sides are pierced by a machine, a process that is repeated after a week. The time of the piercing and the diameter of the needles influence the ageing process significantly. Now, grey-white cultures begin to grow slowly on the brown rind which needs to stay vibrant and soft instead of

turning hard and dry. Over the course of all those weeks the head cheesemaker keeps tracking the cheeses' development with a cheese borer – simply examining the cheese's firmness when pierced speaks volumes, then he looks at the colour and texture of the inside, the spreading of the mould, the bitterness, the acidity, how nutty or tropically flavoured the cheese is, then at umami, sweetness and butter … Finally, the cylinders are wrapped in paper and packed into cardboard boxes. On the whole, this entire process can't be called anything but elaborate – in the early 20th century, one Mrs Musson from Wartnaby remarked how Stilton wasn't making any noise but otherwise caused more nuisance and trouble than children.

The Colston Bassett cheese is sublime, especially when you buy it from Neal's Yard Dairy. By now, I've also travelled to its place of origin, the dairy near Harby on the border of Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire. Considering this cheese's worldwide distribution, the operation seems surprisingly small and indeed, there are significantly bigger ones among the producers that joined forces as the Stilton Cheesemakers' Association in 1936. The association was formed on the initiative of a local doctor, but the history of Stilton cheese reaches back much further. Of course, it wasn't »invented« either but has been developing out of regional practices and traditions since the late 17th century. The details are unclear, but Quenby Hall in Hungarton plays just as big a role in this process as various farmers' wives and the Bell Inn near the village of Stilton itself, a major posting house near Peterborough next to the Great North Road – which has been the main connection between London and Edinburgh since Roman days. Stilton was located precisely one day's journey north of London, travellers changed horses, stayed overnight and recovered their strengths there with local beer and cheese. In a travel account published in 1725, English writer Daniel »Robinson Crusoe« Defoe reports: »We pass'd Stilton, a town famous for cheese, which is call'd our English Parmesan, and is brought to table with the mites, or maggots round it, so thick, that they bring a spoon with them for you to eat the mites with, as you do the cheese.« There had always been good milk available in the region thanks to the lush meadows of the East Midlands around Nottingham and over the course of the 18th century quantities also rose due to targeted breeding. Originally, Stilton had probably been pressed, harder and shelved longer, but ultimately it prevailed as a »cream cheese«, produced from whole milk to which a sizeable amount of cream is added. A luxury, therefore, that could be sold for more money than Cheddar and was extremely sought-after in London, then as now an important, financially strong market. When the mail coaches were suddenly displaced by the railway after the 1840s, London was even closer and the local markets were teeming with commissionaires and merchants (a lot of cheese, by the way, also meant a lot of nutritious whey which was fed to pigs. As a result, Melton Mowbray Pie, virtually

a by-product of the Stilton production, became a regional specialty. It's a pork pasty in a wonderful lardy-crumbly pastry crust that is sold in highest quality by Mrs King's at London's Borough Market).

With its success, the general production conditions for Stilton changed. For a long time, recipes and knowhow had been passed on from mothers to daughters on the farms and in many cases they only produced one cheese a day during the season from April to October (at most). In 1875, the first cheese factory with thirty employees opened, which processed the milk from various surrounding farms. In 1935, the last farmer's dairy gave up. During and after World War II, in the years between 1939 and 1954, no soft cheese was allowed to be produced due to the food rationing measures implemented by the Ministry of Food – and therefore no Stilton. All the milk was turned into hard cheese, so-called *Government Cheddar*.

Other than with Cheddar, efforts were made to protect the name »Stilton« and to define production standards: It must only be produced in three counties and with locally-sourced milk, in traditional cylindrical moulds without any presses, with natural rind-formation and fine blue veins radiating outwards from the centre and with the »typical« flavour profile. It's safe to assume that Stilton, like so many blue cheeses, was a »white« cheese originally and that the soil rich in iron fostered the formation of blue mould, which then became a unique feature. In 1936, factory owners formed the Stilton Cheesemakers' Association and production was resumed after 1954. »Stilton« was registered as a trademark in 1966, followed in 1996 by the Protected Designation of Origin introduced by the EU. What is unusual is that this calls for the milk to be pasteurised – which makes the modern history of Stilton especially interesting. In 1988, Colston Bassett was the last producer to use nothing but untreated, i.e. »raw«, milk. But it was that year that saw numerous cases of food poisoning in southeast England, which were traced back to the consumption of Colston Bassett Stilton, during the peak season for Stilton towards the end of the year. Only one of the 155 patients was briefly treated in hospital, everyone had recovered after a few days, but the incident was widely reported as a food scandal in the media. This caused Colston Bassett to announce a recall of all their cheeses. A facility to pasteurise milk was installed and the Association decided on a pre-emptive self-censorship: Ever since then, the cheese can only be produced from pasteurised milk for it to be sold under the name of Stilton.

Heating the milk to at least 72.5 °C for twenty seconds definitely changed the flavour of the cheese – unfortunately, I have never tasted it before 1988. It must have taken a couple of years until the recipe was in balance again. Today, Colston Bassett is once more at the top of the Stilton hierarchy. Billy Kevan is its current general manager and head cheesemaker (the

fourth in the company's history). He is an extremely dedicated person and probably has Stilton instead of blood pumping through his veins. He is very aware of his responsibility for the present owners, four farmers with approximately 400 cows – his aim is to produce the best-possible quality while taking as little risk as possible and reaching the largest possible market. Which, since 1989, means using microbial rennet to win over vegetarians as customers; only the cheeses meant for Neal's Yard Dairy are produced with calf rennet.

For a long time, I've been writing that the best Stilton was made by Colston Bassett as though this was self-evident. But now there's competition. And it's not called Stilton, but Stichelton. This cheese is very similar to Stilton and tries to live up to the times before pasteurisation was required by law. It's being produced from untreated organic milk since 2006 and was created on the initiative of Randolph Hodgson, founder of Neal's Yard Dairy in London. He launched this project and found a congenial partner in Joe Schneider, a native New Yorker.

Feeling their way back to the roots wasn't and still isn't easy, because since 1989 no Stilton had been made from raw milk, as I mentioned earlier, and Colston Bassett seemed a very convincing example for the fact that great cheese can be made from pasteurised milk. I also held that opinion and when I tasted my first Stichelton in 2007, this didn't change straight away. It was nice and creamy, but where was the wonderful mushroom flavour I was used to, the earthy aroma that lingers for so long? These days, however, Stichelton offers an incredible depth of flavour on top of the creamy opulence. Contrary to the imposing, chocolaty-nutty complexity of Colston Bassett cheeses, it seems more delicately caramel-buttery and fruity. The best Stichelton deserves the best Port, but preferably a LBV, meaning a Late Bottled Vintage with less tannins, than the full power of a vintage Port matured in the bottle.

That this new cheese can't be called Stilton and is forced to fall back on the historical Anglo-Saxon term for the place instead shows that bureaucracy is absurd and that people can be astonishingly small-minded sometimes. Joe Schneider takes it in his stride. He had previously worked in the building industry and only became interested in cheese during a stay in the Netherlands in the mid-1990s. In 1998, he had an epiphany in Neal's Yard Dairy in Covent Garden: He wanted to make cheeses that deserved a place on those shelves. Subsequently, he successfully established Daylesford Dairy in Gloucestershire, about a three-hour drive northwest of London. Arthur Cunynghame, at the time owner of the traditional cheesemongers Paxton & Whitfield, considered him one of the best British cheesemakers even back then. Then Randolph Hodgson turned up with the idea of going back in time and making Stilton from raw milk once more. The two of them looked for a suitable location for a long time

and eventually they settled on Welbeck Estate, a property owned by the Duke of Portland in Nottinghamshire. Not only would they have their own herd of black and white Holstein cows there but also an old dairy facility they could renovate. Many other things, however, had and still have to be acquired anew. The cows produce great drinking milk (sold as raw milk in the Welbeck Farm Shop, which is well worth a visit – featuring an adjacent café and a fantastic art collection), but no one on the farm had experience with the requirements of making cheese. The initial success was soon followed by gruelling set-backs. For two years the cheeses aged way too quickly, the rind would grow into the wheels. Joe Schneider checked all the steps of the production process, scrutinised everything and experimented with different cultures until he found out that palm oil in a concentrated feed-mix was the cause of the problem.

The problem of the cheese's name, on the other hand, appears to be unsolvable. »One of the oldest and most distinguished British cheeses,« Joe Schneider says with noticeable frustration in his voice, »can be sold mixed with cranberries and apricots, but it can't be made from raw milk, which had been the tradition for centuries – nobody has ownership of the Stilton-tradition, all today's producers have to do is maintain and cultivate!« In his opinion, the Protected Designation of Origin in Great Britain makes no sense. Still, he keeps working persistently using his »very slow« recipe. You can really taste that the curd, for which exclusively animal rennet is used and very little at that, is hand-ladled very carefully. There are many things Joe Schneider has initiated and he has inspired many others, such as Mike Thomson in Northern Ireland with his Young Buck (more about him in the next chapter). It shouldn't come as a surprise that occasionally, he seems to live in his own world with his wonderfully eccentric way (a characteristic that has been ascribed to the islanders for just as long and with just as much persistence as the bad weather): Where other cheesemakers introduce their charges using many words, he simply serenades his Stichelton with *Love Me Tender*. The king of cheeses prevails against bureaucrats, it blazes its trail. Pass me the Port!

Accidents, Coincidences, Serendipity:
The Blues

David Gremmels, Rogue Creamery *Oregon/USA*
Arturo Chiriboga, *Bad Hindelang/Allgäu*
Lyndell Findlay, Blue Harbour Cheese *Halifax/Canada*
Mike Thomson, Mike's Fancy Cheese *Newtonards/Northern Ireland*

The Blues ... Sometimes it gets you just like that, out of the blue. Imagine the cheesemaker's knife gliding through the new wheel of cheese expectantly, their mouth watering as they remember the last batch's sweet aroma of concentrated milk... And then: The Blues. Mouldy veins spreading inwards from an unintended tear in the cheese rind. A whole wheel spoilt, the concentrated milk from many animals ruined – the opposite of a happy day. Various scenarios are possible in the aftermath: Anger, and the wheel is sent flying into a corner. Hunger, and the fault is ignored desperately. But also: Curiosity. Openness. Despite everything. Maybe it would taste nice? What would it taste like?

Looking at mouldy cheese as something special and potentially delicious isn't the obvious reaction. How would the shepherd in southern France have felt? According to the Roquefort legend, he forgot his fresh cheese and some bread in a cave because he was chasing a girl and remembered them only weeks later. The blue mould that had spread over bread and cheese by then surely didn't make him cry with joy on the spot. Hungry and curious as he was he ate some of the cheese and let others try it too. Like so many traditional cheeses, Roquefort originated from an »accident« where someone recognised the positive in what seemed to have been a negative at first and then attempted to recreate the mishap, in this case the fabulous balance between the creamy-sweet opulence of sheep's milk and profound savouriness. Admittedly, aside from the visual barrier, this can be too much of a good thing for some palates, just like the mineral-salty aromas of certain wines. And what do we tend to do when we find something too spicy, too salty, too tangy, too bitter? We sweeten it. Blue cheese and sweet wine are a classic combination: Roquefort and Sauternes from Bordeaux, Stilton and Port, Gorgonzola and Marsala – or Syrah grape leaves soaked in pear liqueur and Rogue River Blue produced by David Gremmels in Oregon, on the west coast of the USA.

It's for a reason that the amiable 50-year-old American is called Mr Blue by his employees, friends and colleagues. He approaches the topic head-on: »For cheese tastings, I always start with the blue varieties and everyone is happy.« He took over Rogue Creamery in

2002. Not only is this small creamery in southern Oregon, halfway between San Francisco and Portland, one of the oldest of its kind in the USA, it has also been specialising on the production of blue cheese for many years. David Gremmels continues this tradition.

Rogue River Blue is a great cheese, truly spectacular and offering the maximum concentration of aromatic milk. Less crumbly and salty than a Roquefort, it can be crushed with the tongue, then melts almost like browned butter that has been allowed to reset. And on top of all that it has the crunch of many small crystals. It brings to mind fragrant hay and straw, but also hazelnuts and fried cabbage, with a hint of umami, this fifth gustatory sense for savoury deliciousness, which in turn makes you think of smoked bacon and maybe a hint of Marmite, the yeasty English food spread. In addition to all that there is a very pleasant, fruity sweetness – in *The Book of Cheese*, my colleague, the cheese expert Liz Thorpe, describes Rogue River Blue as a »*flavour cascade*«. It is only ever produced around the time of the autumnal equinox, because that's when the milk of the cows grazing in the Rogue River valley is especially rich. In winter, David Gremmels and his team continuously check which batches of the roughly two-kilo wheels qualify for the creamery's premium product. The chosen ones are then wrapped in pear liqueur-soaked grape leaves and are left to age another year.

It's not really possible to imagine more passion transformed into taste than there is in this cheese. Everything about it speaks of the idyllic valley of the Rogue River that flows from Crater Lake towards the Pacific. In Grants Pass, a thirty-minute drive westward from the creamery in Central Point, the 130 cows owned by Rogue Creamery, a mixed herd of Holsteins, Jerseys, Brown Swiss, Shorthorns and Ayrshires, feed on the pastures surrounding the tall, airy, open stable from March until November. Over the years, in-house cultures have settled in the ageing cellar, among them *Brevibacterium linens* that provide the cheese's unusually »meaty« notes. The pears come from the surrounding orchards, for which the valley is famous, and they macerate in a liqueur that is also produced locally. In spring, the Rogue team picks the leaves off the Syrah vines on Cowhorn Winery a little further south. It's the combination of all those individual factors that creates the exciting complexity of this cheese.

David Gremmels has a wide range of interests. He keeps chickens, bees and dogs and feels just as comfortable in a tweed jacket and bowtie as in a racing cycle tricot or standing at the cheese vat wearing a white hairnet. He grew up on a cattle farm in Washington State and wanted nothing to do with farming originally. He worked as a designer and artist as well as in advertising, but ultimately, he set up his own organic-certified farm in Grants Pass so that he could work with reliably high-quality milk – »and so we come full circle over and over again,« he says with a smile as he ruffles a calf's head.

Initially, he didn't come to Oregon, where his family used to holiday, because of milk and cheese but because of the pears. Many Americans are familiar with the slogan *»Pears you can eat with a spoon«*, and those pears are grown here, in southern Oregon. The same company offered David Gremmels the position of Art Director in 1999 and so he moved to nearby Ashland, bought a dilapidated historic house and renovated it from the ground up. »We used to have great parties there. I wanted to turn the place into a proper wine and cheese bar and so I was looking for good cheese,« he tells me. He did some research, drove to creameries as far as Vermont – only to discover Rogue Creamery, one of the oldest creameries on the west coast, right on his doorstep.

Its story began in 1933 during the Great Depression, at a time when making ends meet was difficult for everyone in the valley. Some farmers joined forces to process and market their milk together and founded a small milk cooperative in Grants Pass, which was taken over by Tom Vella two years later. The Vellas arrived in California from Sicily in 1849 during the Gold Rush and in 1931 they established a creamery called Vella Cheese Company in Sonoma, north of San Francisco. Tom Vella later built Rogue Creamery in Central Point, Oregon, ensured sales with determination, provided jobs and was always open to new things: After World War II, Rogue Creamery was one of the biggest producers of cottage cheese in Oregon. But then Tom Vella discovered blue cheese. In the early Fifties, he went to the Holy Blue Grail in Roquefort and immediately got on well with the local farmers and cheesemakers. After he had inspected everything very closely in France, he built ageing rooms modelled after the caves in Roquefort in his own creameries. At the beginning of 1954, the moment had finally arrived: Oregon Blue was born, soon followed by the creamy Oregonzola. Tom Vella died aged one hundred in 1998, after which his son Ignacio became the head of the family business.

I met the sturdy, imposing figure of Ignacio Vella, whom everyone calls Ig, in Sonoma, on my first research trip to California in 2002. He told me about his childhood, how fresh vegetables from her own garden had been a matter of course for his grandmother and that this was the reason why he had quickly recognised the importance of the new food movement that tended towards the regional and artisanal. Vella Cheese Company still operates manually. It is housed in a former brewery, the cheesemakers there work in long, white rubber aprons and prepare Cheddar, Asiago and Toma Piedmontese, so-called »ethnical varieties« from the home country of the immigrants, in large vats.

The long-reigning star of the Vella range (and my favourite) is Dry Jack, which goes back to a cheese first produced by Franciscan monks in Monterey, south of San Francisco, at the end of the 18th century and which is omnipresent at the west coast nowadays, albeit in

extremely varying quality. At Vella's, the cheese curd is pressed into cotton cloths, dried and then brushed with a mixture of cocoa powder, pepper and oil to protect it from tears and unwanted bacteria. It ages on wooden shelves for seven to twelve months among the cool, fragrant stone walls of the old building. The result is fantastic, an expressive, delicately crumbling and tender cheese whose consistency is reminiscent of old Edam cheese but tastes fruitier and reflects the rusticity of Sonoma County. Because unlike in the sophisticated Napa Valley with its wine monocultures, here pastures alternate with mighty redwood, fragrant eucalyptus and graceful cedar trees on the mountains and in the valleys, and orchards and vegetable fields are still to be found. »Napa Valley has always been firmly in the grip of San Francisco's high society, because it was easier to reach,« Ig Vella explained to me. »But here in Sonoma things have always been a little less glamorous.« He exudes the down-to-earth pragmatism of a person forced to be realistic and economically efficient by hard work and by carrying responsibility for a midsize company. Of course, they would shrink-wrap the pieces of cheese for shipping: »What good is spoilt cheese to my customers who are spread all over the USA?«

It's that same Ig Vella that David Gremmels went to see with the goal of winning him as a cheese supplier for his wine bar. And in turn, he was told that if he wanted cheese, he would have to damn well make it himself, Rogue Creamery was for sale. Because after Ig Vella modernised the creamery and had been commuting between Sonoma and Central Point, which is a six-hour drive, for three years, his wife put her foot down: If he wanted to lead Rogue to success properly, he would have to move to Oregon. Her husband chose to stay in Sonoma and started looking for buyers for Rogue. Under no circumstances did he want to sell to an investor looking only for established brands or to a venture capitalist who could possibly re-sell the creamery or even close it down. David Gremmels seemed like a good candidate to him. David Gremmels and his partner at the time, Cary Bryant, took three weeks to come to terms with this surprising offer but ultimately a handshake sealed the deal on July 1, 2002. Over the course of one year, Ig Vella travelled to Oregon every month for one week and initiated David Gremmels into the art of making cheese. »When Ig was here, we would make cheese every day,« remembers David Gremmels. »We ate every meal together, drank espresso, talked about the past and the future. I learned so much in that time, and until his death in 2011, Ig was like a father to me.« The small, bright yellow wooden bungalow next to the creamery where Ig Vella used to stay in those days can now be rented by visitors.

From then on, David Gremmels immersed himself in the subject of cheese completely. He took classes at the Institute of Artisanal Cheese in Vermont and at the University of

California in Davis and visited creameries in Wisconsin and Oregon. He quickly became one of the key figures of the artisanal cheese scene (in 2007, he left the wine bar to chef Lynn Flattley, who now runs the restaurant Coquina in it – which I highly recommend!). As early as 2002, he submitted an Oregonzola to the competition of the American Cheese Society, which he went on to shape significantly. This Oregonzola didn't win any prizes, while a few of Sally Jackson's cheeses were honoured (more on this extraordinary farmer and cheesemaker in the next chapter). »That only motivated me more. Sally's cheeses have inspired me a lot,« he says.

Apart from this fundamentally positive attitude, David Gremmels keeps emphasising that he doesn't consider himself the owner but rather the steward, the manager of Rogue Creamery, where the team of fifty takes centre stage – his sense of social responsibility is strong. On his initiative, other food producers have taken up residence along the main street of Central Point, and this *Artisan Corridor* has been hosting the Oregon Cheese Festival every year in mid-March since 2003. Taking part are creameries from all over the USA, whose products can also be bought in Rogue's store.

The old creamery is a rather inconspicuous, level concrete building, but the former Art Director has placed an old pick-up truck painted a vibrant Rogue-blue in front of it and furnished the façade with neon writing of the same colour, at the same time modern and traditional. He and his team share the innovative attitude of the Vellas. Together they inspect all the existing cheeses and develop new ones – »I believe that innovation is key for American cheeses. After all, I'm a designer,« says David Gremmels. Rogue continues to produce Cheddar more for historical than for economic reasons and by now they also make a Mozzarella and the TouVelle, a semi-hard cheese. But now as ever, the heart of the operation and taking centre stage on the shop's counter are the blue cheeses. It's one big family headed by Rogue River Blue.

Nowadays, blue cheese is a trend in its own right among cheesemakers and no longer an accident. On one of my subsequent research trips, this time to the opposite end of the North American continent, I met Lyndell Findlay in Halifax, the capital of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia surrounded by the Atlantic, in May of 2017. She explained emphatically: »I desperately wanted to make blue cheese. But I didn't want to be a farmer or live in the countryside.« In her late sixties and frontrunner for the title Mrs Blue, she is very fit, and unlike many startup cheesemakers she is very organised. When she talks it's unmistakeable that she was born in Australia. But her passport has been Canadian since 1999: »I worked for the UN for a long time, with refugees and in very interesting places, but I spent many summers on the Canadian east coast. And I simply knew this would be my new home.«

A new life, a new career, not altogether easy. She liked the idea of making cheese but had to learn it first. So, she went to Ohio for hands-on knowledge, and then, just like David Gremmels and many others, to the Institute of Artisanal Cheese in Vermont for the theory. Creameries are few and far between in Nova Scotia, so she founded her own company. She found a cottage in Halifax, a small wooden bungalow with a cellar, and converted it into a business space. She rents the front part to a gluten-free bakery and since 2013, Blue Harbour Cheese has been residing in the back, almost invisible: a small, super-tidy and well-organised mini-cheesemaking facility. She developed her main product, Urban Blue, through a series of experiments and with the assistance of Pete Luckett, the owner of a local grocery chain (and winery). He and his team kept tasting the cheeses created in these experiments and provided feedback. Twice a week, Lyndell Findlay works 240 litres of pasteurised cow's milk from the local dairy into blocks of cheese that weigh a couple of kilos each. The cheeses are dry-salted three times and then pierced with a custom-made device. Finally, they are wrapped in paper and continue to age for eight weeks. The blue mould mostly grows in the pierced veins on the inside, on the outside it develops as a dry, thin, mushroomy bluish-grey rind and all of this together is simply harmonious, accessible and full of character at the same time.

By now she has also found a source for untreated sheep's milk. During the season she makes Electric Blue (cylindrical, about the size of a Fourme de Montbrison, extremely delicate) as well as the beer-washed Hiphop (a square soft cheese based on Maroilles, which tames the milk's richness in an unexpected and successfully acidity-driven way). Still, Urban Blue remains the uncontested star of this unusual, exceedingly successful startup that proves that creativity doesn't necessarily have to mean chaos. Lyndell Findlay is a woman with a mission: »All I want is to convert everyone to blue cheese. First, I give them the mild Urban, and then we work our way forward.« Her next goals are not only to include new varieties of cheese but also to obtain a Canada-wide sales licence as well as an export licence.

Another representative of the Blue Family is Mike Thomson, who has been making his Young Buck near Belfast in Northern Ireland since November 2013: »I just thought about what could potentially sell well and everybody said: make us a raw-milk blue cheese.« The man in his mid-thirties upskilled from cheese enthusiast to cheesemaker and today processes the raw cow's milk he gets from a neighbouring farm in a cheese diary, financed by a crowdfunding campaign, in the industrial area of Newtownards. He went to the School of Artisan Food in Nottinghamshire and when it comes to form, texture and grain, Young Buck reminds me of the Stichelton created by Joe Schneider and Randolph Hodgson, who co-founded the school. But the aromas are different. Young Buck seems a bit quieter and darker. In the beginning, Mike

Thomson stuck to the Stichelton recipe as closely as he could, now he uses as little cultures as possible to find out where his cheese »wants to go«. He has no problems with sales: the world seems open to the blues.

It has even spread to the Allgäu. »We have to allot Chiriboga Blue, it's that popular,« reports Norbert Sieghart from the export company Kaeskuche who brings this cheese (and many other great cheeses from the Allgäu and the Bregenz Forest) from the Obere Mühle in Bad Hindelang to British and American cheese counters – »right now, we're building a new dairy!« When I presented an evening on premium-quality German cheeses at Formaggio Kitchen, a delicatessen store with a fantastic cheese counter in Cambridge/Massachusetts, a few years ago, Chiriboga Blue absolutely had to be there. We didn't serve it like David Gremmels' cheese, as a sensation at the beginning of the evening but as a highlight at the end and, following the advice of the responsible cheesemonger, in little bowls and with a spoon like ice cream. And indeed, this cheese plays in such a buttery and sweet league of its own that everyone was enthralled.

The Chiriboga story is unusual even for blue circumstances: Arturo Chiriboga was born and raised in Ecuador, studied cheese making in Switzerland and afterwards worked towards setting up a cheese industry in his native country before he settled down in Bad Hindelang with his German wife. The cheese diary Obere Mühle sits at the far end of an idyllic green valley surrounded by high mountain peaks and this setting has surely contributed to the fact that the quiet, likeable cheesemaker scores big with this cheese among a series of other good cheeses made from milk supplied by the surrounding farms. In its form it resembles Roquefort and Bleu d'Auvergne, but when it comes to taste...

Arturo Chiriboga enrichens the milk with cream and processes the curd with his hands – »I have to feel it,« he says. After salting them, he pierces the new wheels so that the blue mould can develop and up until this point, nothing seems out of the ordinary. The unusual thing about Chiriboga's recipe is that he doesn't add the blue mould cultures to the milk in the vat like all the other cheesemakers. Instead, he dips the needle into the deep-blue liquid before he pierces the wheels. After a week in the ageing room, when the first dark spots begin to appear, the wheels are packaged. The warmer and damper they are stored, the more blue mould grows in and on the snowy-white cheese and adds an unobtrusive depth of flavour to the buttery sweetness. Whether it comes as a sensation at the start or by the spoonful near the end, the Blues is a part of life.

Hippies and Dropouts:
The Californian Cheese Girls

Laura Chenel, Sally Kendall, Sally Jackson, Jennifer Bice, Soyoung Scanlan,
Mary Keehn, Sue Conley & Peggy Smith
California/USA

It all started with the hippie movement and the social turbulences of the 1960s and '70s. The uprising of an entire generation against the status quo, the youth's resistance against »Vietnam, Saran-Wrap, diet pills, the Bomb« (as the American writer Joan Didion put it in *Slouching towards Bethlehem*) not only lead to a new Californian cuisine, but also to a new cheese culture. In 1964, Joan Baez founded the Institute for the Study of Non-Violence in Carmel. In Berkeley, Alfred Peet started to roast coffee beans fresh on the premises according to French tradition in 1966 and one year later, the Cheese-Board-Collective just around the corner offered not only European but also local cheeses. Alternatives to Kraft's Saran-wrapped cheese slices did exist; ever since 1931, Vella Cheese Company in Sonoma had been producing Monterey Jack, originally made for mid-19th-century gold miners, while Martin Cheese Company in Petaluma had been supplying the dock workers of San Francisco with »Breakfast«, a simple, fresh soft cheese, since 1865 and later expanded their range with traditional white mould cheeses. But there was one thing that was completely out of the question: goat's cheese. Goats stank and only served people living in extreme poverty.

The fact that this perception changed fundamentally and that these cheeses are now among the most expensive and most popular in San Francisco's delicatessen stores is due to the tenacious pragmatism of a whole group of women. Its most famous members are Laura Chenel and Alice Waters. When Alice Waters, at the age of twenty-seven and without any prior gastronomic experience whatsoever, opened the restaurant Chez Panisse in Berkeley in 1977, the macrobiotic diet was widely propagated by the hippies as a protest against the industrialisation of food production (Saran-Wrap!). In a nod to French cuisine, Alice Waters, extremely idealistic then as now, served Californian baby vegetables and sun-warmed fruit instead of brown rice and legumes. This was radical in that it united protest and pleasure. Chez Panisse is often called the founding stone of California cuisine, but almost at the same time, a no less enthusiastic Patricia Unterman offered three freshly prepared dishes of a similar style in her small Beggar's Banquet in Berkeley and there were also a number of others doing the same. The need for radical change was in the air, everyone was looking for ways to get »back to the

land« and Unterman, who would go on to found the Hayes Street Grill as well as the Ferry Plaza Farmers' Market in San Francisco, remembers well how absurd everything was when it came to food at the time, because everything was industrially processed straight away: »Finding fresh fish was impossible,« she says.

Laura Chenel's »career« as a cheesemaker began with a few fruit trees, a vegetable patch, some chickens – and a couple of goats for the sake of self-sufficiency. In keeping with the spirit of the times, she was a vegetarian and goat's milk, back then at most prescribed by doctors as an alternative to cow's milk for people with allergies, represented an important source of protein for her. »A cow would have been way too big,« she told me when I visited the then 53-year-old on my very first cheese research trip in 2002. But soon she was fascinated by the animals, her herd grew larger – »and we noticed that we were drinking more wine than milk after all!« What to do? That's when she tried fresh French goat's cheese for the first time – and was rapt. »No one in California was making cheese like that! I went back to college and studied French.« Today, *chèvre*, French for goat, is synonymous with soft goat's cheese in America.

These beginnings are shrouded in myth by now and it's not easy to compile a chronology of the events in retrospect. Sadie Kendall, today seventy-two years of age, produces crème fraiche made from cow's milk in Atascadero near San Luis Obispo, but for her too everything had started much earlier, in the late 1970s, with a goat she kept as a hobby. Milk and cheese fascinated her as well, she switched from law to dairy science, learned a lot about making goat's cheese and was given a book on the production of French goat's cheese by a fellow student (which would fall into the hands of Laura Chenel only a short while later). Kendall proudly turned her goat's milk into Camembert in 1981 – and was met with straight-out rejection. »Other than a few chefs, nobody wanted it. Goat – how yucky. I was simply ahead of my time.« With tenacity (a quality that many cheese-making women share), she nevertheless created a market for herself within San Francisco's foodservice industry. But in the mid-1980s she decided, quite pragmatically, to focus on her most successful product: crème fraiche made from cow's milk.

In 1978, Laura Chenel travelled to the southwest of France and spent one long summer on the goat farm run by Jean-Claude Le Jaouen, the author of said book on the production of goat's cheese. She milked the goats, helped with the cheese making, drove to the farmers' market in a small van to sell the cheeses. One year later, she was ready to make this kind of *chèvre* at her home in Sonoma County. Friends and acquaintances were her first customers and sometimes they also delivered their own milk, because many of them had set their hearts on

breeding prize-winning goats, where large, swollen udders play an important role. But even though she was making more and more cheese, she couldn't make a living out of it. Goats still had a bad image. Finally, a wine merchant she was friends with encouraged her to show her cheese to Alice Waters. The latter was delighted and placed an order immediately – that was the breakthrough.

From then on, Chez Panisse served the small, round cheeses marinated in olive oil and thyme, then breaded, baked in the oven and served on mesclun, a mix of different salad greens (at the time just as revolutionary as *chèvre*). Patricia Unterman's Hayes Street Grill has been listing a salad with *chèvre* on the menu ever since it opened thirty-eight years ago. In 1981, Laura Chenel moved into a small, blue cottage that had previously been owned by a snail farmer in Santa Rosa and set up an official creamery there. She gave away her own goats, bought all the milk she needed and concentrated entirely on making and selling cheese. She worked every day from six a.m. until deep into the night, established and expanded her market and developed new cheeses such as the round Chabis and the bar-shaped Log. The small, aged Crottin, the ash-treated Taupinière that resembles a Valençay, a miniature Brie as well as the Cabécou, marinated in flavoured oil, stem from those days. Together with Ig Vella, she also created Tome, an aged semi-hard cheese.

[...]

Laura Chenel could be a celebrated star in the cheese scene today, but she lives secluded in the mountains of Sonoma County and dedicates her time to her animals and all the things she had to neglect during those twenty-five years as a cheesemaker.

Her cheeses continue to thrive, while others, unfortunately, are a thing of the past, like the Stornetta Creamery which burnt down in the autumn of 2017. For more than thirty years, Sally Jackson had been turning the milk from her small number of cows, sheep and goats with the simplest methods into extraordinary soft cheeses that aged for several months wrapped in chestnut and grape leaves. She worked on an extremely remote farmstead close to the Canadian border near Havillah in Okanagan County in Washington State. Even though I never visited or met her in person, she played an important role in my universe of cheese. When I went to the Cheese, the international cheese fair of the Slow Food movement that takes place every two years in Bra/Piedmont, for the first time in 2001, sheer curiosity but also incredulity had driven me to partake in a workshop entitled *American Goat's and Sheep's Milk Cheeses* – wasn't American cheese synonymous with those individually wrapped, bright orange cheese slices?

But afterwards I went and apologised to Rob Kaufelt, the event's speaker and owner of the renowned cheesemonger's Murray's in New York, for being so prejudiced. The cheeses he had brought along for the workshop were a testament to individual handicraft beyond mass husbandry and factories. Those cheeses were indeed based on European traditions, but in their essence quite independent. What impressed me most was a cheese by Sally Jackson that seemed to resemble no other cheese I had ever tasted with its complex and yet unobtrusive flavour. When I asked Rob Kaufelt for its name, he simply said: »Sally's cheeses don't have names and they don't need any – they're simply Sally Jackson's cheeses and they belong among the best culture America has offer!« His voice resonated with deference, almost awe.

After my return from Italy I immersed myself in research and in 2002 I finally went on my first trip to California and met the producers myself. Ever since then, cheese has been the focus of my work. These days, I would be prepared for the long trek to Sally Jackson's place. But of all people, she, who inspired so many new cheesemakers in the USA and beyond, felt compelled to quit cheese-making altogether after a product recall in 2011 ordered by the authorities, which was discussed quite controversially in the scene. One of her batches had been connected to E.coli-infections and she was accused of insufficient diligence and hygiene. »Our operation exists in this form because we are so isolated, so far away from the authorities,« her husband Roger wrote to me in an e-mail in 2003. »The FDA is making our life hard enough already. It took thirty years for the right bacteria and fungi to develop in our ›cheesehouse‹. I'm sure that European cheesemakers are so successful because they have been producing their cheeses in the same location for hundreds of years.«

Culture takes a long time to develop, a persistent fight against many adversities – not to mention my difficulties in finding the cheese ladies on their farms without GPS and with nothing but unhelpful signage here. I turned up late everywhere and still, everyone welcomed me with great kindness. Although they were somewhat astonished by this visit from Berlin, they met me with great openness. Goat farmers are used to curiosity.

I arrived at Jennifer Bice's Redwood Hill Farm near Sebastopol after a very windy drive along a narrow country road from one hill to the next, past flowering meadows and small forests. Finally, I found the red, wooden buildings, a barn with its door left ajar – and the goats: La Mancha with tiny, Nubians with long floppy ears, snow-white Saanens, cinnamon- and chocolate-brown Toggenburg goats with white socks. A worker walking across the yard in gumboots and a long white apron left a whiff of cheese trailing behind him. This could have been a goat farm in Tuscany or Extremadura, but this farm was surrounded by eucalyptus trees and gigantic redwoods. Vivacious, red-haired Jennifer Bice appeared as determined as her small

operation professional. She wasn't a pioneer like Laura Chenel, hers was already the second generation on the farm. Her parents had moved »back to the land« from Los Angeles in 1963. Farming goats, a hobby all of the ten Bice siblings shared, quickly lead to the usual surplus of milk and consequently they built a small milking parlour and sold the raw goat's milk to health food stores in the vicinity. Redwood Hill introduced the first goat's milk kefir in 1970 and in 1978, Jennifer Bice and her husband took over the farm. They have been selling raw goat's milk feta since 1980, the first goat's milk yoghurt in the U.S. followed in 1982, the first goat's milk camembert Camellia, named after Jennifer's first goat, in 1994 – unlike in Sally Jackson's case there now existed a market for it. And also unlike in Sally Jackson's case, the technology for cooling and pasteurizing the milk was state-of-the-art here. Jennifer Bice always moved with the times while still producing artisanal cheese, a successful balancing act between originality and expansion, technology and character. In 2004, she invested in a large new facility in Sebastopol and in 2015, she sold Redwood Hill Farm & Creamery to Emmi, the Swiss milk processing company. This last step seemed as radical as Laura Chenel's, but it was just as pragmatic and came as less of a surprise. Mary Keehn, also one of the original goat's cheesemakers, had already sold her business Cypress Grove to the Swiss company in 2010.

Cypress Grove, located in McKinleyville on the coast in the far north of California, was made famous by a unique cheese called Humboldt Fog. The dazzlingly white goat's cheese named after Humboldt Bay has the shape of a small cake and is coated by an extremely thin layer of plant ash that also traverses the centre of the cheese in thin horizontal layer and that is covered by a delicate white mould on the outside. Its consistency seems as delicate and weightless as freshly fallen snow, it's all noblesse and grace. I first encountered it in a small shop in San Francisco, bought a slice, went outside, couldn't resist and wanted to sample just a little piece, ate all of it, went back inside and immediately bought a second, larger piece. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, Mary Keehn has successfully kept me from visiting her in McKinleyville – California is significantly larger than you'd think at first and the drive from San Francisco to Humboldt County takes almost six hours. I finally met the by now 70-year-old woman in San Francisco recently and she told me her story.

Newly married she moved into the woods of Humboldt County with her husband in 1971, without electricity or hot water they built their log cabin on their own land and felled the timber for it themselves. Children soon arrived as well as the notorious pair of goats to milk and breed. But then she suddenly found herself a single mother of four daughters. She moved from the woods to McKinleyville and eked out a living for herself. It was true hardship, she says: »We were extremely poor, I did everything myself and without our large vegetable garden

we wouldn't have made it at all.« She had taken the goats along with her and tried making cheese from their milk. At first, the result was a »cheese-like mass«, she tells me merrily, but bit by bit it turned out better. With confidence, she called her fresh cheese *fromage blanc* and had a go at making hard cheese and blue mould cheese. Her equipment was primitive and improvised, and she too confirms: »Back then, there was basically no demand for goat's cheese. When I presented my cheese somewhere I could already tell how wary people were by their body language, how they turned away.« But this attitude changed slowly and in 1982 it became clear that she could and should start making cheese professionally. She settled in what used to be a small egg packaging plant and remodelled it step by step, pragmatically and tenaciously, as best she could: »Banks didn't give loans to women, let alone to a single mother of four. I still can't believe how I managed it – consistently having award-winning champions among my goats and producing prize-winning cheeses. I was very lucky.«

She and a friend visited the 1985 Fancy Food Show, the yearly hub of San Francisco's food industry and serendipitously found a wholesale dealer for her cheese. From then on, she regularly gave boxes of cheese to the Greyhound bus in McKinleyville to transport. »We wrapped everything twice, but the cheese would still leak and it took a long time until we got the packaging right. That was pioneering work, too.« Not long after that, she started to buy milk from other farmers because her own herd of fifty no longer produced enough. Humboldt Fog, she says, came to her in a dream in 1992: A French importer she was friends with had taken her along to France where she experienced the big world of cheese for the first time. On the flight back, she fell asleep and dreamt of Humboldt Fog. »But it didn't come with instructions, unfortunately, and it took until the end of 1993 for me to finally see this dream cheese in front of me. The *New York Times* mentioned it in 1997 and that helped a lot, of course.« She remembers the call from a buyer for the Wholefoods chain of upscale supermarkets who complained that her prizes were simply too low for high-quality cheeses and laughs: »Well, that was a problem we could solve easily and quickly!« And what about Emmi, then? »We needed a new creamery, I had kept expanding the old one, but that was no longer possible at some point, and I didn't want to invest ten million dollars at my age. I had to think about taking care of myself and my employees.«

[...]

Sue Conley and Peggy Smith, two of the hippies and dropouts, don't make goat's cheese, they are cowgirls. Originally from the east coast (and by now in their mid-60s), they met at college in Tennessee and moved west together. Peggy Smith worked in the kitchen at

Chez Panisse for many years, while Sue Conley worked at Ocean View Diner, also in Berkeley. But in the mid-1990s, they had had enough of cooking and fell in love with Marin County. This coastal strip just north of San Francisco stretches from the wild spits of land that reach far into the sea near Point Reyes and Tomales Bay up to the oak and redwood forests on the hills surrounding Mount Tamalpais. Other than wildlife reserves, the county encompasses four family-run farms further inland. In the spirit of Alice Waters' Chez Panisse and all the others who moved to the countryside at the time, the two decided to support local farmers and growers. They set up shop in an old barn in Point Reyes and campaigned actively for the marketing of agricultural products from Marin County and the preservation of the farms. In the process they soon realised that there was excellent milk to be bought but hardly any good cheese; there was one single creamery, Marin French, in the county at the time.

1997 saw the birth of Cowgirl Creamery. In a corner of the barn, separated by glass panels, Sue Conley turned the organic milk she got from the Straus family, a German-Dutch immigrant family whose cows grazed only a few kilometres further north, into *fromage blanc*, crème fraiche and most notably into creamy cottage cheese. It was this cottage cheese that opened up a new world for me on my first visit in 2002. It had nothing at all to do with the rubbery grains in watery liquid that were usually sold under that name.

But what really made the Cowgirls famous was the soft cheese that Sue Conley developed with a Dutch intern a few years later: half a pound in size, the triple cream forms a white mould rind as it matures. It's named after Mount Tamalpais, whose name the locals shorten to Mt. Tam. With its 750 metres, this mountain sitting in front of the Golden Gate Bridge is just as steeped in legend as Mount Shasta in the far north of California and of particular importance to the Zen-Buddhist community closely connected to the hippies' culinary history. The Cowgirls' Mt. Tam is therefore a thoroughly local cheese in many regards but is excellent even without all those associations.

A short while later, a coincidence lead to the next, equally as successful cheese, as is the case with so many cheese classics. A batch of Mt. Tam just wouldn't form the desired white mould and Sue Conley »forgot« this cheese in one of the plastic boxes she used for ageing. When she remembered it, instead of the white rind with the odour of fresh mushrooms a yellow one with a far more intense smell had developed: *Brevibacterium linens* had settled down and were obviously comfortable here. She tried the cheese, was convinced and ever since she has been making Red Hawk, which combines the creamy opulence of the lush green pastures with the wilder side of Marin, alongside Mt. Tam. Red Hawk is still created in the original creamery in Point Reyes with the local wild cultures, even after the main creamery was moved to a larger,

more modern facility in Petaluma. What's more, there are now seasonal Mt. Tam varieties: with stinging nettle in spring, wildflowers in summer, shiitake mushrooms in autumn and muscatel and chili in winter. At the request of Judy Rodgers, owner of Zuni Café in San Francisco and yet another pioneer of the new Californian cuisine, the Cowgirls started to produce a hard cheese called Wagon Wheel and, to my excitement, the small, incredibly creamy Inverness (a kind of *chèvre* made from cow's milk).

For a long time, Maureen Cunnie has been the Cowgirls' master of cheese. The native New Yorker worked as a chef in San Francisco and learned the art of cheese making from Sue Conley. In 2002, she was still worried: »Cheese is quite on trend at the moment,« she said, »hopefully it won't become a passing fad!« Her worry was unfounded and the Cowgirls contributed majorly to this. They opened a small shop in San Francisco called Artisan Cheese (where I first encountered Humboldt Fog) in 1998 and three years later they were offered a space in the newly-designed Ferry Building. They took it – »if our landlord had known how shaky our finances were, this would never have happened,« they told me and laughed – the rest is history. Despite initial financial difficulties the Cowgirls never thought of other producers as competition and they encouraged newcomers. From the start they were aware that everyone in the long chain of the food industry had to be doing well, from the farmer to the consumer. Again and again they emphasised the importance of the Marin Agricultural Trust, a foundation for the preservation of agriculture and farms. It's the first of its kind in the USA and exemplary for a successful cooperation between agriculture and environmental protection.

Sue Conley and Peggy Smith, the Cowgirls, are part of the new generation of women writing cheese history. Even though not all of them are as tall as the two (in jeans, boots and chequered shirts, they would just as well fit into the scenery of a John-Wayne-movie) and maybe rather petite like Laura Chenel, all of these cheesemakers are strong, determined women. The wave of indignation Sue Conley and Peggy Smith were met with when they sold Cowgirl Creamery along with all their stores and their distribution company Tomales Bay Foods to Emmi shows how much of an institution they have become. Their career spans the grand arch of the dreams, ideals and protests of the hippie movement from fifty years ago to today – if they consider this step the right one, that should be enough. On my trip to the old barn in Point Reyes last summer I bought one of the picnic cheese boxes and a small bottle of cold white wine in the Creamery's store, drove south along Highway 1 through the wild and romantic Marin Hills smelling of summer and stopped at Stinson Beach to immerse myself in this beachy landscape with all my senses. There I sat and looked out at the Pacific – *back to the land*. On my last visit

to San Francisco I thought it was more than befitting that the Cheesemonger Invitational took place at the same time as the Women's March. Cheese is women's business.