

Upcoming Artisan Cheesemakers of the North Bay

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There's a whiff of springtime in the air. Or is it cheese?

As February turns to March and pasture babies begin weaning off mom and onto Northbay grasses, local cheese makers swing into full gear, making their curds and whey. This year, however, expect a bumper crop of goat, sheep, cow and even buffalo milk cheeses as a new (or at least semi-new) group of artisan producers bring their ripe and ready wares to market.

For many, their big debut comes over the next several months when local cheese maker Sheana Davis hosts a who's who of the cheese world the [Sonoma Valley Cheese Conference](#) (Feb. 25-27) and the [California Artisan Cheese Festival](#) (March 23-25) celebrates local cheeses with always-sold-out tours of local creameries, cheese-maker dinners and classes.

Here's a sneak peek at the most buzz-worthy of this year's producers...

A local cheese primer:

We'd be remiss in not mentioning some of the other great cheese producers who've put Marin and Sonoma County on the artisan cheese map.

- Achadinha Cheese Compnay: Longtime goat cheese producer, Petaluma
- Andante Cheese: Soyoung Scanlan is a biochemist and musician who's painstakingly made cheeses grace top restaurant tables, Petaluma.
- Bellwether Farms: From cheese to yogurt, the Callahan's are the first-family of California's artisan cheese making movement.
- Bodega Artisan Cheese: Producing since great local boat cheeses since 1984.
- Clover Stornetta: The local brand we all know and love.
- Cowgirl Creamery: Peggy Smith and Sue Conley are cheese royalty, and their handcrafted cheeses are legendary.
- Laura Chenel's Chevre: The company that brought goat cheese to the American table
- Marin French Cheese: Old continuously operating cheese factory in America
- Matos Cheese Factory: Inspired Portuguese-style cheeses
- Point Reyes Farmstead: If you've had a salad in the Bay area, chances are it had their Original Blue on it.
- Redwood Hill Farm and Creamery: Cheese, yogurt, kefir and a host of other other great goat products
- Spring Hill Cheese Co. : Best butter ever, great local cheeses
- Vella Cheese Company: Sonoma's own, Ig Vella inspired much of the West Coast's great cheese making.
- And in Humboldt County: Cypress Grove Chevre: Humboldt Fog, Midnight Moon. And life's complete.

Weirauch Farm and Creamery: While cultivating their small herd of wooly East Friesian sheep to make European-style sheep's milk cheese, Joel and Carleen Weirauch have honed their skills making swoon-worthy cow's milk cheeses including Peau de Peche, a raw washed-rind cheese, Doubloon (a soft, spreadable crottin), Aged Tomme and Carabiner, an aged raw tome. Joel's aged sheep's milk cheese should hit the market this summer. Available at the Sebastopol Farm Market, weirauchfarm.com.

North Bay Curds and Whey: Alissa Shethar has been making locally-sourced raw cow's and sheep's milk cheeses under her own label for just about a year. Using a cooperative creamery with Ramini Mozzarella and Bleating Heart, Shethar has a strong East Bay following (where she sells at local farm markets). Watch for fresh farm cheeses (Frisch, Picnic) as well as aged Baamonde, washed-rind Mariazell and Pavia, a mixed milk Romano-style cheese. northbaycheese.net.

Barinaga Ranch: Marcia Barinaga's Basque shepherding ancestors inspired her to leave her former life as a scientist and make farmstead sheep's milk cheese instead. Recently featured in the cheese-lover's magazine, Culture, her raw-milk Baserri is an aged Spanish-style cheese that deserved it's lush centerfold spread in the winter issue. Txiki is a smaller-sized version of Baserri, which ages more quickly and has a slightly different center-to-rind quality. barningaranch.com

Bleating Heart: The current darling of the local cheese scene, owners and Sean Doughty and Dave Dalton make both cow and sheep's milk cheeses. Because sheep's lactation cycles are seasonal, their Fat Bottom Girl and Sheperdista sheep's milk cheeses are available only about six months a year — beginning in the spring. To keep year-round cheese production, they also produce Sonoma Toma, a jersey cow milk cheese. Hungry to try it? The first batch of 2012 Fat Bottom Girl went into production on Feb. 5 and should be in stores soon, and they're planning a blue version of Fat Bottom for this year. bleatingheart.com.

Two Rock Valley Goat Cheese: Though dairy family Don and Bonnie DeBernardi manage a large herd of Jersey cows, their cheese making got its start after the couple inherited several goats and didn't know what to do with the milk. Inspired by his Swiss-Italian family roots, Don makes both aged and fresh goat's milk cheeses, 762-6182.

Valley Ford Cheese Company: Estero Gold, an Italian farmstead cow's milk cheese, is an award-winner inspired by Asiago. It's a light, nutty aged cheese made by fourth and fifth generation dairy farmers. valleyfordcheeseco.com.

Bohemian Creamery: Lisa Gottreich and Miriam Block use cow, goat and sheeps' milk in their lineup of some of the most sought-after cheeses in Sonoma County. Only available seasonally, Bo Poisse is a sheep's milk Epoisse style cheese that's as stinky as it is delicious. Cowabunga is a soft, spreadable cow's milk cheese with goat milk caramel and the tangy Caproncino, a semi-hard goat pressed into small wheels. bohemiancreamery.com.

Upcoming Cheeses

Ramini Mozzarella: One of the most anticipated cheese debuts is Craig Ramini's water buffalo mozzarella, set to hit shelves this year. Yes, water buffalo. The former software exec has spent the last several years growing a small herd of water buffalo in Tomales as well as a creamery. Highly prized in Europe, water buffalo mozzarella has a rich, creamy tang that sets it above it's cow's milk sibling. Expect to see it on the shelves this year. raminimozzarella.com.

Toluma Farms: This Tomales goat ranch has long been a milk supplier for Redwood Hill Farm in Sebastopol. Owners David Jablons and Tamara Hicks are currently building their own creamery and cheesemaking facility, Tomales Farmstead Creamery, with planned goat cheese production starting this year. tolumafarms.com.

Where to buy: Small, artisan cheeses can be hard to come by, though less so in the spring and summer months when production is at its highest. If you're jonesing to taste these, your best bets are at the Sonoma Winter Artisan Cheese Fair (Feb. 27, 1-4p.m., MacArthur Place, \$40, theepicureanconnection.com) or Sunday Marketplace at the Artisan Cheese Festival (March 25, noon-4p.m., Sheraton Sonoma County-Petaluma, \$45, artisancheesefestival.com). You can also find some local artisan cheeses at Oliver's, The Epicurean Connection (122 West Napa St., Sonoma), The Cheese Shop in Healdsburg (423 Center St., Healdsburg) and local farm markets.

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