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The Rosengarten Report

THE FOODS AND WINES THAT MAKE ME SWOON

Greek Cheese 101

What It Is.....How It Differs.....How to Find It.....How to Enjoy It!

Welcome everyone to Comparative Cheese 101!

What's that? Yes, that's correct. You're in the right room. This is a sneaky required course before you can elect to go on to Greek Cheese 101. Why must you take the starter course? Because the dean says so. The dean also says "though I've been enjoying Greek cheese for many decades, it was only recently that I discovered the very best way to understand it: by comparing its over-arching nature to those of the other traditional European cheese-making nations. Only then do you get the idiosyncratic beauty and uniqueness of Greek cheese."

Well, since I'm the dean.....allow me to jump right into the syllabus!

The most revered cheese country in Europe.....nay, on the planet.....is France, sans doute. France has an astonishing cheese tradition. No other country has the regional diversity, the sheer number of cheeses that are completely different from each other, the consistency within each style, the depth within each style.....not to mention the fact that no other country can touch France's assortment of small, jewel-like, ultra-French artisanal cheeses, runny little works of art, ephemeral and ethereal.

The national cheese profiles of Spain and Italy differ some-

what from the French profile. Yes, both Spain and Italy have great diversity as well—but there are more "backbone" cheeses in both places, several widely made kinds of cheese in both places, that help to define the overall cheese-making traditions in the two countries.

Spain, for example—though its artisans all over the country are making small quantities of idiosyncratic cheeses—is often thought of as "the firm sheep's-milk cheese country." Keep in mind, however, that this often-made type of cheese is not defined by a single cheese name across the country; it still has its strong regional affiliations and names. In La Mancha, the most famous sheep's-

Continued on page 2



Santorini Extra
PAGE 6

Products I'm Lovin' Right Now



PAGE 16

BBQ Sauce & Wine



PAGE 19

GREEK CHEESE 101

milk firm cheese is Manchego; in the Basque region, the most renowned is arguably the smoky Idiazabal. And so on. There is no “national” sheep-cheese name.

In Italy—once again, a land of many cheeses—firm sheep’s-milk cheeses and firm cow’s-milk cheeses help to define the national cheese picture. From the sheepy Pecorino Romano, to the cow’s-milk Parmigiano-Reggiano, and Grana Padano, a large number of Italian cheeses do double duty as eating cheese when young, grating cheese when old. And, once again, all of these cheeses belong to their own “place” in Italy—Pecorino Romano from the Rome region (though broadly defined), Parmigiano-Reggiano and Grana Padano from Emilia-Romagna (and a few surrounding regions).

Greece, at last, breaks the mold (shall we say) in any number of ways:

1) Most of the famous Greek cheeses have trans-national names. In France, Camembert is made only in Normandy; Feta is made everywhere in Greece! In Italy, Montasio is made only in Friuli; Kefalotyri is made everywhere in Greece! It’s a vastly different way of thinking.

2) Within the big trans-national names (Feta, Kefalotyri, etc.), there are lots of very significant vari-

ations—so much so that two examples of, say, Mizithra, may seem like examples of two different cheeses! Intriguingly, however, you can’t rely on *regional* variations to indicate the differences: individual cheesemakers make Mizithra the way they do because they want to, not because there’s a regional style. This makes Mizithra like a musical key, that a jazz musician might riff on.

3) Unlike France, Italy and Spain—there are almost no small, fragile, jewel-like runny-goopy cheeses. The Greeks rely on yogurt for goop (and what wonderful goop it is!). The explanation for un-goopy cheese may lie with observation #4, the most important observation of all:

4) The Greek sensibility concerning the serving of cheese is vastly different from the French sensibility. In France, cheeses are often served as a separate course, after the main course; it is a perfect time to ooh and aah over those little, free-standing, runny artisanal gems. In Greece, the cheese sensibility usually involves blending the cheese *with other foods!* Feta goes on salad (though it might stand free....with olive oil and herbs!); Kefalotyri is for fried cheese, or *saganaki*; Manouri is for a honey drizzle; etc.



And that is the basis of Greek Cheese 101: understanding the various types of cheese, the variations you may find in them.....and.....perhaps most importantly.....finding out the best ways to blend the cheese with other delectables, *a la grecque*. Your increased knowledge, I guarantee, will lead to ever more mirthful Mediterranean dining at your table.

I had some terrific help in putting Greek Cheese 101 together. On my recent trip to Crete—a Grecian cheese epicenter! —I attended a conference on Greek food that drew many intriguing experts on Greek cheese.

I spoke extensively with Greek-born **Daphne Zepos**, with whom I used to work closely when she was *affineur* of **Artisanal Cheese** in New York City; her observations on Greek cheese and its uses are sprinkled below.

GREEK CHEESE 101

One of the headliners at the conference was the ultra-knowledgeable **Diane Kochilas**, New York-born Athens resident, who has given us so many wonderful books in English on Greek food; tidbits from her books, and from our recent conversations, are also mixed in below.

Jim Botsacos—born into a Greek family in the U.S., and executive chef at New York City’s influential restaurant Molyvos since its opening in 1997—was instrumental in the development of this piece.

A few months back, I flipped out over his Graviera Tart (recipe below) and decided: “I’ve got to pick this guy’s brain on Greek cheese and its uses!” He went one better: he arranged a cheese tasting for the two of us at the wholesale/retail shop in Astoria, Queens that Jim says has the best supply of Greek cheese in America, Titan Foods.

Once at the store, I was in the remarkably capable hands of owner **Costas Mastoras**, who spent about three hours showing us the best of the best that’s in this country. Mastoras opened Titan in 1984, in the heart of New York’s biggest Greek neighborhood—and his place has grown to “institution” status. He carries over 2000 products imported from Greece, most of them imported by his own company, Optima Foods. There are things

available here that simply aren’t available elsewhere in the U.S.—like hyper-fresh Greek yogurt, for example, which arrives at Titan by air from Greece almost every single day!

“The heart of the store,” according to Mastoras, is the deli section—which carries a staggering variety of Greek cheeses (you can choose from 8 to 12 fetas alone!), and accounts for 30% of Titan’s sales. And the best news is this: Mastoras will be delighted to ship any of his Greek cheeses to any *Rosengarten Report* reader. Furthermore—despite the fact that his cheeses are already a good 25% less expensive than comparable cheeses in Manhattan stores, if you could find them—he will slash off another 5% on any order received from a *Rosengarten Report* reader.

Here is the contact info for the store:

Titan Foods
2556 31st St.
Astoria, Queens
718.626.7771

Because Greek cheese is so inextricably tied to dining, and dining options—and is so much more than just the material for a cheese plate—I think you will be delighted to learn more about the Greek cheeses, as I have, and how to fit them into your culinary repertoire.

After my tasting at Titan, I selected twelve Greek

cheeses—seven of them very well-known, five of them more obscure—that I think you need to get into your life right now. Make these your Mighty Dozen!—the bedrock of your Greek cheese knowledge. For each one, I will give you a basic description of the cheese—especially of the one I tasted at Titan—and I will also fill you in on the variations in that cheese you might expect to find throughout Greece. Most important, I will give you notes from a variety of sources on how to blend that cheese with other ingredients, how to serve it, how to use it in cooking, and how to enjoy it—other, of course, than just breaking off a piece and munching it! Remember that all of these twelve Greek cheeses are just a phone call away, waiting for you in Astoria, Queens.

THE BEST-KNOWN GREEK CHEESES AVAILABLE AT TITAN FOODS

Greek Cheese #1: Feta

Feta is the one Greek cheese we all think we know—but the feta field is fiendishly complicated, resulting in a wide range of feta choices at a place like Titan. To put it most simply for the taster/buyer:

GREEK CHEESE 101

feta can be white, yellow-ish, hard, medium-hard, medium-soft, soft, creamy, salty, medium-salty, sour, medium-sour, hardly sour at all, bland, medium-intense in flavor, intensely sheepy-goaty. But how do you know which is which?

Mastoras really helped me wrap my mind around feta—which, though it owes its origins to the mountainous regions of central Greece, is made all over Greece today. There are many factors contributing to the ultimate taste of feta—**starting with the kind of milk used in its production.** Most feta is mostly sheep's milk cheese—but there is often 20 to 30% goat's milk in the blend. The results are pretty clear:

- More **goat's milk** means whiter cheese, with more acidity, and a greater tendency towards dryness, crumbliness.

- More **sheep's milk** means yellower cheese, with less acidity, a fattier, richer texture, and, usually more deep “barnyardy” flavor.

Either cheese can be salty, medium-salty, or un-salty—depending on the amount of salt added to the milk by the cheesemaker.

Another key question, of course, is: where in Greece does that milk come from?

Mastoras says that there is a kind of hierarchy in regional milk quality, based on richness, fattiness. The more of the latter the better:

- **Milk from Macedonia** is the lowest-quality; it generally takes 4.2 kilos of this milk to produce one kilo of Feta.

- **Milk from Thessaly** is better; it generally takes 3.4 kilos of this milk to produce one kilo of Feta.

- **Milk from the Peloponnese** is about the same; it generally takes 3.4 kilos of this milk to produce one kilo of Feta.

- **Milk from Epiros** is best; it generally takes 3.2 kilos of this milk to produce one kilo of Feta.

The next question is: what container was used to age the cheese? For there are three main options:

- **Barrel Feta** is the best of all, says Mastoras—though Diane Kochilas says it's a dying art, and only a few producers in Greece continue to practice their art. Hurray for Mastoras—because he is one of them! He has an arrangement with a dairy owner in Epiros—which some call “the Wisconsin of Greece,” and others call “the Switzerland of Greece”—that enables Mastoras to call all the shots on the production of artisanal, barrel Feta. He follows the classic practices.

The Feta, molded into huge triangular chunks that fit perfectly into the barrel, are aged in the barrel for anywhere from two weeks to about three months, without brine. Those barrels come to the U.S.—like

to Mastoras' store, Titan—where the shopkeeper removes the Feta, piece by piece, to put on display; once out of the barrel, the Feta may be put in brine in the display case, but it is not brine-aged in the barrel. That's one reason why barrel Feta is often less salty, more refined; it's also usually richer and creamier.

- **Basket Feta**, according to Mastoras, is the second-best option. It is held for a week in a basket mold, usually made of plastic today—which leaves its ridged imprint on the cheese—for a week or so without brine. Then it is dipped in brine, and kept there for about two months. Once again, in the retail store, it may be displayed in brine or out of brine. Basket Feta is usually a little saltier than barrel Feta, and possibly a little less rich.

- **Tin Feta**, says Mastoras, is third on the quality totem pole—but, nevertheless, there is some terrific tin Feta out there. The timing details mirror those for basket Feta: one week in the tin with no brine, then two months in the tin with brine. However, the enclosed tin environment leads to a firmer feel, a more crumbly cheese. You may see Feta-filled barrels or baskets in stores today (as at Titan)—but you will not see tins; shopkeepers used to cut their hands on the edges of the tin, so now tin is outlawed for

“The genius balance occurs, in my opinion, when you get perfect long-term barrel-aging—leading to rich cheese that also has depth of flavor”

store presentation. Tin feta is now transferred at the factory to vacu-pack plastic, which may also contribute to its firmer texture.

No matter which **aging system** is used, you can count on **shorter-aged Feta to be creamier**, and **longer-aged Feta to be drier** but more intense in flavor. The genius balance occurs, in my opinion, when you get perfect long-term barrel-aging—leading to rich cheese that also has depth of flavor. Of course, not everyone agrees; in the north of Greece drier Feta is preferred. According to Mastoras, it is the Cretans, above all, who love their cheese soft and creamy. I guess I'm a Cretan!

I had the wonderful opportunity to taste six different Fetas with Mastoras. We started with three Fetas made by other producers, and finished with three Fetas produced by Mastoras' dairy—named Arahova (for a nearby mountain), in a town called Preveza, in the region of...Epiros! Where else? (“Preveza is the only town in Epiros that's near the sea,” Mastoras says, “so we get extra salty tang from the sea breeze!”)

The first Feta we tasted was the **Agrafa Goat Feta (\$6.29 per lb.)**, a tin-aged Feta from the Epiros region (but not Preveza)—and it is 100% goat, which is rather unusual. It was predictably white, firm, even hard, with low fat content, quite dry, medium-salty, with a touch of chèvre flavor. This is good Feta for crumbling over salads or other dishes.

Next up was the **Valmas Mt. Athos Basket Feta (\$6.49 per lb.)**, made in the traditional way that had been established by the monks at the famous Mt. Athos monastery on the Haldiki peninsula in the extreme northeast of Greece. This was an astonishing cheese. Very white, indicating a high goat's-milk percentage—but medium-creamy at the same time, so you know there's some sheep in there. Quite salty and quite sour—these two factors adding up to a mouth-zinging brightness that is absolutely extraordinary. Good enough—but then comes a bewitching barnyard-y undertaste. Jim Botsacos said he'd “honor this cheese by serving it alone”—but

allowed that it would be an awesome Greek Salad topper in a thick slice, sprinkled with dried oregano and olive oil. Be careful when you order this cheese from Titan: the store also carries a vacu-pack version of it, which is a little less bright, a little waxier. Make sure they know you want the non-vacu-packed basket version. If you're an acid freak.....this is your cheese!!!

Thirdly, we tasted a tin Feta—the **Kolios Tin Feta (\$4.99 per lb.)**, from a factory in Thessaloniki, one of my favorite food areas in Greece. But this Macedonian cheese was my least favorite in the group—kind of a middle-of-the-road Feta for those not prepared for the splashy wonders of better Fetas. Lower acid, decent salt, moderately creamy. It has an odd, slightly soapy-pickled taste—but Botsacos said that this would be a fine Feta for baking into northern Greek meat and vegetable pies.

Then the Arahova sequence began.

First up was a very soft Feta, short-aged and right out of the barrel: the **Arahova Soft Bar-**

GREEK CHEESE 101

rel Feta (\$6.79 per lb.), an absolutely delicious version of a rich and creamy Feta. (Again, Mastoras said “Only Cretans like this!”) I loved its good acid, good salt, seductive texture and, best of all, its subtle underlying smokiness (it hadn’t been smoked, of course, but that taste appeared nevertheless). My Greek friends might kill me—but this stuff schmearred on a bagel with smoked salmon would be the Mt. Olympus of Greek-Jewish fusion!

Then we tasted Mastoras’ Mt. Olympus, his favorite Feta, the one he calls “The King.” it is the **Arahova Barrel-Aged Feta (\$6.49 per lb.)**, made from 75% sheep’s milk and 25% goat’s milk. It had a different look from the start—a little more yellow-ish, and with bigger holes or cracks inside the cheese. I absolutely loved its sheepy taste, trailing off into a long, complex sheepy finish. Good salt and good acid, too. What I didn’t love was its texture—a bit drier, less fatty than my ideal. But Mr. Botsacos was there to tell me that it’s a wonderful topping cheese for cooked dishes, baked onto a casserole of shrimp or other main-course items.

Lastly, Mastoras wheeled out an experimental cheese—the **Arahova Lite Feta (\$6.29 per lb.)**, though he made up that name on the spot. It’s not lighter at all in the usual ways—it is made from



On my trip to Greece last month—where I picked up so much cheesy information—I stopped in at the **fabled isle of Santorini** for two days. I’d been there once before, and been dazzled, bewitched—but not in high season. Would it have the same magic in June, while it’s under tourist siege?

Unmistakably, indubitably....yes. The core miracle of this island is the bizarre geologic circumstance leading, most spectacularly, to two towns, Oia (pronounced EE-uh) and Fira (pronounced FEER-uh), clinging to the crest of a high mountain, with the eye-opening volcano rim that blew out and got flooded in 1600 BC lying just below. When I visited in March, 2006, sunset in Oia was quiet, somber, incredibly beautiful and deeply moving. When I visited last month, sunset in Oia was frenetic, a huge excuse for a street party, incredibly beautiful and deeply moving. Take yer choice.

In addition to the vital comparison—I did pick up some fabulous up-to-date info on things to do in Santorini, places to stay, places to eat.

For starters, the **one thing you cannot miss on Santorini is that sunset**, even if you’re just a day-tripper. The place to watch it, of course, is from the stacked, whitewashed dwellings of Oia, many of which have terraces converted into bars, restaurants, etc. Every night, in season, it’s kind of a scramble for sun-viewing space. But I talked to a restaurant owner with a good idea. His place is called Kastro, and he has about seven tables lined up with a perfect sunset view. When I walked by it last month about an hour before sunset, they were all empty—but with “reserved” placards on them. “What does it take to get a **sunset reservation** at one of these tables?” I asked. “Just give us a call in the morning,” he said. “Something’s always available.” Good enough.

Continued on page 7

GREEK CHEESE 101

the same 75% sheep's milk and 25% goat's milk as the regular Arahova—but it is made with modern materials: molded in stainless-steel forms, and aged and shipped in plastic barrels.

“Shipping wood barrels is costly,” Mastoras says—and the plastic barrel solution may be the wave of the future. You know what? This wave ain't bad at all. In fact, I really like this cheese! In texture, it is halfway between creamy and crumbly, with a mild dose of salt and acid (I could use more, but this is good enough). Best of all, it has an absolutely lovely, deep, sheep-y taste. Fantastic cheese for topping your Greek salad!

One more Feta note: in the past I have also been very open to Bulgarian Feta and French Feta, both of which emphasize rich texture and deep flavor. However, they do not exist any longer—at least under those names. In 2006, the EU decided that only cheese from Greece may be called “Feta”—so now, if you want the other stuff, you have to look for “Bulgarian White Cheese” or “French White Cheese.”

I think it's kind of silly, since “Feta” doesn't imply a geographical origin, like “Champagne” does. But the EU is no friend to cheese in general. Mastoras tells me that there used to be over 3000 Feta producers in Greece—many of



On your Santorini day, call **222860.71045**. It's on your way to the steps to **Ammoudi Beach**.

You want those steps to Ammoudi Beach. Just for itself, it is a spectacular walk-down, particularly at sunset. They are wide, wild, often cracked steps, with the thumbprint of history on each one—and I'm talking 214 thumbprints! Warning: this is not for the physically unfit! The steps sweep you along the northwest face of the “Big C” island that is the main part of Santorini, inexorably plunging down to the sea, past red cliffs, white caves, windmills that would make Don Quixote gawk.

At the base is Ammoudi Beach, though there's not much of a beach. It's a little port, where fishermen come in at night—at sunset!—to drop off their catch, repair their nets, have an Ouzo. There are also cruising boats leaving from this port, and you can strike a deal with a guy in a boat to take you out on the caldera for a few hours for sunset-viewing. Check with your concierge.

There are also about half a dozen restaurants strung along this little area, where you can take your cocktails, eat grilled just-caught fish, and watch the sunset. The most famous one is called.....guess what?.....**Sunset!** I've been wanting to go to it for years, having heard great things about it. So I went. Eh.

The people were nice, the view was spectac, the wine list was good—but the food was ordinary at best, and our waiter took advantage of every language difficulty he could find to bring us, after many *mezedes*, or appetizers, a huge sea bream for two that could have fed four and cost us a hundred bucks. And it wasn't even especially good. This place, I fear, now has “tourist” written all over it.

I later met with an insider friend on the island, a Greek man in the food business with a summer house on Santorini, and he told me the scoop: of course it's worth going to Ammoudi Beach, but **the restaurant you want is Dimitri's**, right next to Sunset. Next time, for sure.

Finding other good restaurants on Santorini is a bit of a challenge—particularly if you want to eat traditional Greek food. Oh, sure, there are enough jet-setters coming in these days to support all sorts of high-end, creative Greek shmusion places with scary menus that I haven't cracked (though I am tempted to try **Ambrosia**, because the ex-pat co-owner Tony, who also owns the **Old Sea Captain's House**, one of Oia's best places to stay, seems like he knows food).

But on this trip I went to the places that were recommended to me as “real Greek,” and I wasn't “real happy”—especially not with **Skala**, in Oia, everyone's top traditional pick, where the chef turned out mussels so salty your tongue hurt, and pasta so overcooked (on two tries) you could eat it with a straw.

Continued on page 8

GREEK CHEESE 101

them small artisans, making great cheese in their own homes. Now, he says, stringent EU regulations have whittled the number in Greece down to about 500 larger producers—some of whom are making great Feta, but you have to shop around.

Greek Cheese #2: Manouri

I like Manouri a lot....and plan to use it a lot more in my gastronomic repertoire!

Think cream cheese. It is a soft sheep's-milk whey cheese, but it gets a lot fattier than most whey cheeses—because Manouri makers add sheep's milk or cream to the whey.

So what you get is a big, fatty, alabaster-colored block that seems something like very flavorful cream cheese. It is a specialty of northern Greece, and can vary quite a bit—because some producers choose to hang it and dry it.

The excellent **Hotos Manouri** (\$5.49 per lb.) at Titan Foods, made in Thessaly (kind of north-central-east), is definitely a soft one.

You can cut it into chunks and gobble it—in which case it has a texture reminiscent of cold foie gras terrine. I'd describe it as a slightly hardened cream cheese, kind of sweet, with lots of buttery flavor and a sheepy kick.

Man, is it flexible in the kitchen.



Happily, I did find my way to a truly wonderful restaurant on the beach—but not on any of the high-flung beaches that have to do with the inner mountain around the caldera. This **beach, called Perivolos**, near the town of **St. George**, is at the southeast corner of the island, facing east to the open sea. It's very beach-resort-like, and not an intuitive spot for gastronomic greatness.

But I had **absolutely delicious food at a place called The Nets** (in Greek, in something like Ta Dythzia, but I couldn't quite get it), which has a huge open-air terrace right on the water. The two, long, fat tentacles of grilled octopus were among the highlights of my trip to Greece—golden-brown exterior, shiny and glossy, with a luminous, pearly inside, heaven to chew. This is not the even more exciting chewy octopus you get on Lesbos, but it's a paragon of its own style. A seafood casserole featured more octopus, big rings of squid, shrimp—in a tan, creamy Ouzo sauce that tasted like something out of Spanish Basque country. A pot of *plegori* or cracked wheat, was turned black by cuttlefish ink, and cuddled big chunks of the cephalopod, adding up to Greek comfort food (think hot cereal, or even mushroom and barley soup). And the platter of spaghetti with shrimp, cooked properly, was one of the best pastas I had on this trip. The phone # you want is **22860.82818**.

Of course, I'm not always for big-deal sit-down food, as you know; I am Mr. Street Food, as well! And the multitudinous gyro (pronounced YEAR-oh) stands of Fira sure got my gyro juices flowing. Well, I made a great discovery, sort of: a new Santorini friend of mine (more about him in a moment) told me that only one place on the island makes **gyro in the real, old-fashioned way**. It is called **Stavros**, and it's in Santorini's largest town, **Emporio**, set on the plain by the eastern coast (not far from The Nets!). We drove by it en route to The Nets, to have a pound or so of pork as an appetizer—but, alas, it was closed until night, and I couldn't get back later. So the must of musts for my next Santorini trip is.....and I hope you beat me to it.....Stavros in Emporio at night.

The friend who knew about this place is also a friend that you want to know. His name is Petros, and he is the owner of a company producing Santorini's most renowned gastronomic commodity. Ask a globally-knowledgeable tomato freak anywhere the **best source of tomatoes in the world**, and the likely response will be.....Santorini! The way they grow in this bizarre, pumice-laden volcanic soil leads to impossible concentration and sweetness.

I was in Santorini about two weeks before the harvest began, so I didn't get the full experience.....but I did have the joy of walking through an almost-ready tomato field with Petros, plucking a few premature ones here and there, then going down to the small

Continued on page 9

GREEK CHEESE 101

Jim Botsacos of Molyvos likes to whip it with sheep's milk ricotta, and serve the mixture with figs in syrup. "In fact," he says, "any combo of figs and Manouri is bound to be good." He also likes to grill it quickly ("don't let it melt"), and serve it on top of a baby-green salad that includes beets and pickled pearl onions. The whole she-bang is meticulously described in Jim's wonderful book, *The New Greek Cuisine* (Broadway Books, NY, 2006), but here's the dressing he likes to use. It is made with Kalamata vinegar, a terrific Greek product that has a balsamic-like character:

KALAMATA VINAIGRETTE (FOR BEET AND GRILLED MANOURI SALAD)

2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
1/4 cup Kalamata vinegar
3 tablespoons thyme honey
1/2 teaspoon dried Greek oregano
1/2 teaspoon coarse salt, or to taste
pinch of freshly ground pepper
1 cup extra virgin olive oil

1. Combine the vinegars, honey, oregano, salt and pepper in a small mixing bowl. Whisking constantly, add the oil in a slow, steady stream, beating until the mixture is emulsified. Taste and, if necessary, season with additional salt and pepper.

Daphne Zepos is also a Manouri freak. "It is the ultimate morning cheese," she says. "Lovely, fatty, buttery—I like to spread it on toasted *tsoureki*, which is like a cross



"plant" by the sea where some of his tomatoes are turned into the most concentrated tomato paste ever, or into tomato chunks in syrup that you spoon over thick Greek yogurt.

I'm telling you all this....because there's a good chance you can do it too! I asked Petros if my readers might call him and get a look-around, and he said, with a smile, "they can harvest tomatoes.....but I don't pay much!" I'm sure if you wanted a hit of agri-tourism you could pluck a few (late June to late August is the season), and I'm also sure that if Petros isn't too busy he would simply show you around. His company's name is **Anidro**—some of his products are in the U.S.!—and you can reach him at **22860.81820**.

Lastly.....**where you gonna stay? Oia, of course.** I'm sure there are other beautiful spots, but I don't think you can beat this one. And this time I found a new place, with one of those insane terraces right on the caldera....that's not hideously expensive! It is called **Lampetia Villas** (don't get confused; it's a hotel), centrally located in Oia, with rooms created from old caves in the hill, furnished "grandma-style" with lots of charming old Santorini artifacts. It is open from April to October only. My stay, in early June, cost 225 Euros for an extremely large room off the terrace; the same room will cost a bit more, about 265 Euros, in July and August. Here's some contact info:

www.lampetia.gr
info@lampetia.gr (e-mail)
011.30.210.983.7010 (calling from the States)
011.30.694.435.8373 (owner's cell phone)

And if you're staying at Lampetia, there are all kinds of breakfast-with-a-view opportunities right around you, most of which are just fine. These places are all on the main thoroughfare of Oia that, in full view of the caldera, snakes past a million boutiques and restaurants.

However, the next parallel street over—one back from the caldera—features a few less touristy establishments that have really good local things to offer. I'm looking right now at the card of the bakery I discovered, and my Greek translation book does not enable me to decipher either its name or its address (because they've used "fancy" Greek characters on their card). But....it is a five-minute walk from Lampetia Villas—and, in the morning, it sells one of the **most delicious spinach pies I've ever tasted**—baked in a coiled ring of super-flaky pastry, about the size of a cinnamon bun. Oh man! Here's what you must do: ask your concierge to call **22860.72019**, and find out for you exactly where this place is.

Then you'll be covered from sunrise to sunset.

“Manouri is the ultimate morning cheese,” Zepos says. “Lovely, fatty, buttery...”

between challah and brioche. A little cinnamon, a little honey....incredible!” She also loves it for lunch, with tomatoes and salt—either by itself, or as part of a Greek salad. “Lots of Greeks prefer it to Feta in Greek salad,” she reveals, “because you can taste the other salad ingredients better next to Manouri. And....after a few minutes, it makes a really creamy broth at the bottom of the Greek salad bowl into which you can dunk your bread!”

Greek Cheese #3: Mizithra

Mizithra, like Manouri, is a cheese made from whey—often Feta whey. Mizithra and Manouri are the two most famous of Greece’s whey cheeses.

To Daphne Zepos, Mizithra is the snake pit of cheese Greek descriptions—because it is made in so many wheys (haha!) in so many different places. *Xynomizithra*, very popular in the Cyclades, is almost like sour yogurt. In other places, like Crete, Mizithra can be thicker—but also fresh-tasting. Then come the aging variations, which are too numerous to list—except for the ulti-

mate aged Mizithra, which is rock-hard, very salty, and very good as a grating cheese.

That’s exactly what Mastoras sells at Titan: a **Grating Mizithra (\$4.99 per lb.)** from Epiros—where the tradition is to add a little seawater to the whey as it boils. I can believe that—for this is one of the most fiercely salty grating cheeses I have ever tasted, almost stingingly salty. But it has a great, sheep-y flavor as well—which is why Jim Botacos was recommending this Mizithra as a great grate for meat stews (unsalted meat stews!), or for pasta (Jim recommended grating it on pasta that has lots of slithery, oozy, salt-fighting sweet eggplant). Try it instead of Pecorino Romano sometime soon!

Greek Cheese #4: Kefalotyri

Here’s another description nightmare, because there are so many versions of Kefalotyri—even hard, grating Kefalotyri, something like the Mizithra above. And Titan obliges with one of those—a cheese called **Romano-Type Kefalotyri (\$ per lb.)**, very sheep-y and penetrating. Another all-time grate.

Most of the time, however, Kefalotyri is softer than that—though not too soft (except in Cephalonia, which makes the creamiest Kefalotyri). The name Kefalotyri was originally used to identify the largest cheeses in a village, because “kefalo” means “head.” Today, it has come to mean a family of large, aged, flavorful, fairly hard sheep’s milk cheeses—sometimes with cow’s milk added—that can be cut into wide, thin slices and gobbled all on their lonesome.

Kefalotyri, however, is also popular in cooking; browning it brings out lots of flavor. It figures in many casseroles that call for sliced melting cheese on top, and it is a very popular cheese choice for the wildly popular *saganaki*—that Greek-restaurant staple of pan-sizzled cheese flamed in Ouzo (more on this later).

Diane Kochilas, in her indispensable book *The Glorious Foods of Greece* (William Morrow, NY, 2001), presents a recipe for an unusual bread from the Peloponnese—where, she says, some especially sharp Kefalotyri is produced in the mountain villages of Parnona. This bread, nibbled with appetizers, is made with hard and sharp Kefalotyri:

CHEESE BREAD FROM LACONIA

6 to 7 cups all-purpose flour, as needed
1 1/3 cups extra-virgin olive oil
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 cup warm water
2/3 pound Kefalotyri, coarsely grated

1. Place 6 cups of the flour in a large bowl or basin and drizzle with the olive oil. Using your fingertips, work the oil into the dough until it becomes coarse and mealy.
2. Dissolve the baking soda in the water. Make a well in the center of the flour and add the soda mixture. Add the cheese and knead all together until a soft, smooth dough forms. Add a little more flour as you knead if dough is too sticky.
3. Preheat the oven to 450 degrees. Oil a large baking pan or sheet. Shape the dough into a large ball and spread it into the pan with your fingertips to form a circle about 15 inches in diameter. Make indentations in the surface as you go. Bake the cheese bread until golden, 30 to 40 minutes. remove from the oven and the pan and cool on a rack. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Daphne Zepos notes that in the north of Greece, particular around Metsovo (in Epiros), Kefalotyri can be a bit milder in character. Her preference, however, is for the sharper Kefalotyri, “rustic Kefalotyri,” aged at least six months, cut in small pieces and served with Ouzo. “It is, in fact,” she clarifies, “a condiment to Ouzo.”

You can get a very fine Ouzo condiment at Titan Foods in Queens. I especially enjoyed the **Arta Kefalotyri (\$8.29 per lb.)**, very salty and sharp,

but very edible, with a lovely, aged taste and a long sheep-y finish. A good choice too if you’re planning on doing some Greek cooking.

Greek Cheese #5: Kasseri

You need to know about Kasseri—made mainly from sheep’s milk, and pulled like mozzarella—because it’s a biggie, one of the giants of Greek cheese production and use. So how come I don’t love it?

I’d probably love it more if they left it like mozzarella, but they don’t—for after the warm-water bath, and the pull, Kasseri is placed in large, wheel-shaped molds and aged for at least three months. What emerges is a yellow, semi-hard cheese that is quite oily in texture.

One of the best ones I ever tasted is Titan’s **Trikala Kasseri (\$6.99 per lb.)**, from the town of Trikala, in Thessaly—the region most associated with Kasseri production. I tasted it at the store in wide, thin slices, which were somewhat reminiscent of Swiss cheese—but moister, less waxy, saltier, and, of course sheepier (Emmenthal is made from cow’s milk, this Kasseri is made from 30% cow’s milk, 70% sheep’s milk).

Jim Botsacos said that it melts very appealingly—something you might expect from a cheese with a mozzarella-like

history. It is often suggested as a saganaki cheese—but Jim likes to melt it in an earthenware pot, a *cazuela*, in the oven, which makes it all bubbly and stringy. On-the-spot improv: how about Kasseri melted in a casserole with bits of Kalamata olive and served with toasted pita chips for dipping? This would be a Greek *queso fundido*!

Greek Cheese #6: Graviera

This relative newcomer to the Greek cheese scene (first made in the Peloponnese in the early 20th century) is one of my favorite Greek cheeses in general—though, once again, comprehension is dogged by a profusion of Graviera styles made all over the place.

To simplify: the name is actually the Greek version of “Gruyere”—and, despite the fact that Graviera is usually not identical to Gruyere, it is reasonably useful to think of Graviera as the “Gruyere-like” one. It is usually a yellow-ish, semi-hard cheese with a great buttery flavor.

Gruyere, of course, is made in Switzerland from cow’s milk; in Greece, Graviera can be made from cow’s milk, sheep’s milk, goat’s milk, or a combination of milks. Because Graviera is important to me, [here’s a quick guide to a few regional styles](#):

GREEK CHEESE 101

- **Naxos Graviera.** Made from cow's milk on this Cyclades island. Diane Kochilas describes it as “dense, pleasantly pale, nutty.....with a full, round, buttery flavor.”

- **Corfu Graviera.** Made from cow's milk, with a sweeter taste than Naxos Graviera.

- **Epiros Graviera.** The one made by the Tossitsa Foundation in Metsovo is actually very close to Swiss Gruyere—though it is made from 100% sheep's milk.

- **Thessaly Graviera.** The ones made in the high Agrafa Mountains, from 100% sheep's milk, are harder and whiter than some others.

- **Cretan Graviera.** The superstar of Gravieras? Diane Kochilas calls Graviera from Crete “possibly Greece's most delicious table cheese.....Its taste is rich and round and full with the buttery flavor of sheep's milk. It can also be quite nutty, reminiscent of hazelnuts or almonds.”

At Titan, I tasted a wonderful one from Hania, in western Crete: the **Mohlakis Graviera (\$8.99 per lb.)**, which is blessedly un-vacu-packed. “Lots of Graviera,” Costas Mastoras told me, “comes in vacu-packs, which stop it from breathing. We leave ours open, on wooden shelves, where it develops a white rind on the outside.” On the inside, I saw lots of little holes, unmistakably like a small-scale version of Swiss cheese—

and the flavor was equally unmistakably Swiss-like, but with a deliciously welcome sheepy twang. Softer than most Swiss, and a little less waxy.

I like Graviera as a straight-up eating cheese—and, lacking a long tradition, it doesn't turn up much in traditional Greek recipes. However, modern, creative Greek chefs love to use its buttery richness in all kinds of dishes. One of the most delicious desserts I tasted in 2007 was a Graviera Tart—baked by none other than Molyvos' Jim Botsacos, when he and I did a Greek cooking demo together at Macy's New York in April.

Here's the recipe, which would work out extremely well with the Mohlakis Graviera from Crete:

TARTA GRAVIERAS ME KSERA SIKA

(Graviera Tarts with Figs
and Mavrodaphne)

makes 7 individual tarts

To make the pastry:

4 1/2 ounces butter
6 1/2 ounces all-purpose flour, sifted
2 tablespoons water

1. Preheat oven to 300 degrees.
2. Place the ingredients into a food processor and pulse until a ball begins to form. When the dough forms a ball, remove and roll out on a lightly floured surface with a rolling pin. Roll the dough out to 1/8" in thickness.
3. Cut out seven 4" circles. Place the circles into seven fluted individual tart shells, each one 3" in diameter. Place the dough in the shells and mold into all

the creases. Place a small square of plastic wrap inside the shell, and fill with raw rice. Fold the plastic over the rice creating a small packet.

4. Place the shells on a sheet pan, and bake at 300 degrees for 10 minutes. Remove from the oven, remove the bag with rice, return shells to oven, and bake 5 minutes more. The pie shells will be blond in color when removed from oven. Reserve on a rack.

To make the custard:

1 1/2 cups heavy cream
3 eggs
3 ounces sugar
pinch cinnamon
8 ounces finely grated Graviera
14 small whole white dried figs, cut in half

1. In a stainless steel bowl, whisk together the heavy cream, eggs, sugar and a pinch of cinnamon. Set aside.
2. Line the insides of the 7 pie shells with the halved figs, using 4 half-figs per shell. Divide the grated Graviera among the shells, sprinkling an equal amount over the top of each. Divide the custard mixture among the tarts, filling each one about 3/4 of the way.
3. Return the tarts to a 300-degree oven, preferably convection, for about 40 minutes. The tarts will become golden, the pastry will pull away from the shells, and the Graviera cheese will become golden-brown. Allow to cool slightly.

To make the stewed fig accompaniment:

1 750ML bottle of sweet Mavrodaphne (a wine from the north-western Peloponnese)
14 small whole white dried figs, cut in half

1. In a medium-size saucepan over medium heat, combine the Mavrodaphne wine with the dried figs. Stew the ingredients until the wine reduces by 3/4. Remove from fire and allow to cool slightly.

Assembly

1. Unmold the tarts, placing each one custard-side up on a dessert plate. Take 4 halves of the wine-soaked figs and place them next to the tart. Drizzle figs and tart with remaining liquid.

Greek Cheese #7: Kefalograviera

Have you had enough “Kefalo” names? Enough “Graviera” names? Just one more to keep track of.....and it’s an important one. Because very possibly the most exciting cheese I tasted at Titan was a Kefalograviera from Epiros.

First of all, Daphne Zepos supplied me with an easy continuum that helps mere mortals like us keep track of the great Graviera-Kefalograviera-Kefalotyri triad. Daphne says that you should think of Graviera as the mildest, subtlest of the three. You should think of rustic Kefalotyri as the other end point, the sharpest of the three. And you should think of Kefalograviera, a newcomer hatched only 30 years ago, as the in-between.

Kefalograviera—Gruyere-like, but a little sharper than Graviera—is now made all over Greece, from the usual variety of milks. Diane Kochilas leans towards the Kefalograviera of Crete, made from 100% sheep’s milk.

The magnificent one I tasted at Titan—the **Vlaha Kefalograviera (\$8.59 per lb.)** was also 100% sheep’s milk, but it was made in Metsovo, in the dairy heartland of Epiros. This baby, aged over 90 days, and showing large interior holes, had a powerful Gruyere-like aroma. On the palate, it was

buttery, medium-hard, medium-salty—and with the most intense aged nuttiness of any cheese I tasted that day. I adore it.

As with Graviera, there’s not much of a cooking tradition. And with this cheese, I would stand it straight up on any French cheese platter.

LESSER-KNOWN GREEK CHEESES AVAILABLE AT TITAN FOODS

Greek Cheese #8: Anthotiro

Lots more name confusion here. Generally, however, Anthotiro is a soft, fresh, whey cheese, often made from the whey of Graviera. I didn’t get to taste any on this visit.....but Mastoras tells me that a very creamy version is an Easter staple at his store. It has a 14-day shelf life, so....as Easter rolls around.....act fast! Good for spreading on sweet Easter rolls.

Greek Cheese #9: Formaela

This is a completely new one on me—but one of the most valuable discoveries I made in the whole process! For Formaela, despite its obscurity in America, turns out to be the best *saganaki* cheese I’ve ever

tried! (See “Panning Out: The Story of Saganaki”)

Formaela is made in one place only in Greece: near Delphi, in the region called Roumeli. It is a 100%-sheep’s-milk cheese, shaped in cylindrical baskets. The cylinder I tasted at Titan, newly discovered by Mastoras, and very, very rare in the U.S.—the **Arahova Formaela (\$10.49 per lb.)**—was yellow-ish, with a semi-hard chew, mild, not salty, with good butteriness and a haunting sheep-y flavor.

Mastoras recommended it to me as a saganaki cheese....and Diane Kochilas writes that Formaela “tastes better cooked.” So what could I do but give it a whirl in the saganaki pan? When I did, I discovered that it is worth every cent of its relatively high price!

Greek Cheese #10: Sfela

Well, this cheese from Kalamata, in the southern Peloponnese, was a little too much to take as a saganaki cheese—but man, is it a fantastic eating cheese! It is made from a mixture of sheep’s milk and goat’s milk, and brined in a barrel. The **Sfela (\$6.49 per lb.)** that I tasted at Titan was one of the most intense-tasting Greek cheeses I’ve ever had. Very dry and crumbly, like an aged Feta, but with incredible reserves of smoky, tarry,

Panning Out: The Story of Saganaki

One of the most often-ordered dishes in Greek-American restaurants is the “grilled cheese” dish saganaki—but it’s also one of the most confusing.

Many people believe that saganaki is a kind of cheese used in the dish.....but it’s not. **Saganaki is actually the name of the heavy pan in which the cheese is cooked.** Which cheese then? More confusion. Greek chefs make saganaki with lots of different cheeses—as long as they’re firm enough to stay intact after meltdown. Kefalotyri, Kasseri, and the Cypriot cheese Haloumi are often recommended.....but I find that there’s a better choice out there.

But first things first: **how do you make this thing?**

The typical method is to cut a slice of cheese approximately 1/2” to 3/4” in thickness. The cheese slice goes into a few tablespoons of hot olive oil in a heavy frying pan over medium-high heat; some chefs put it in just as is, I like to coat it with Wondra to give it a delicately crisp exterior.

When the cheese has become golden-brown on the outside, and melty within—about a minute per side—it is removed to a paper towel to blot off excess grease.

Then, after you spill the excess grease out of the pan, the cheese goes back in over medium-high heat—followed immediately by a few tablespoons of Ouzo.

Tip the pan so that it ignites and, after the Ouzo burns out and disappears (about 20 seconds), the saganaki is ready to be plated.

Some chefs serve it as is—with a lemon slice—and some chefs prepare a sauce to go over it. I’m dreaming of a very heavily reduced chicken stock, cooked with a little anchovy paste, velvetized at the end with a huge knob of butter, touched with Ouzo, and flecked with parsley.

I also like saganaki straight up. As long as the cheese is right.

So I had me a saganaki-off at my house, testing all the obvious choices—as well as a few that Mastoras threw my way. He even included a plastic bag of Batzios, a Macedonian cheese, that had the word “saganaki” written on it. It was correct, and held together well, but had the least flavor of any contender.

The cheese that had the most flavor was Sfela (see below)—which was practically too intense and salty as saganaki.

Nope, the one that had it all....**the Golden Mean of saganaki cheeses.....was undoubtedly Formaela.**

It had the sexiest melt, becoming almost runny, but still holding together perfectly. It had the softest texture in the mouth. It developed the crunchiest exterior, with a gorgeous gold-en-brown color, and also developed the best cheesy cheese-gratin kind of flavor. It had just enough salt to satisfy, you could eat tons of it, and it was the best one with Ouzo.

What the hell more could you want in a saganaki cheese?

I'm dreaming of some kind of Greek version of an Italian hero, layered with thin slices of this wonderful, flavorful stuff.

almost iodine-like flavor. Quite salty, too. Sfela might not be to everyone's taste—but if you're looking to make a Greek salad with a surprise in it, this Feta look-alike will surely wake up everyone at the table.

Greek Cheese #11: Lathotiri

Lathotiri from Lesvos..... where the village of Molyvos is found.....is featured a great deal by Jim Botsacos.....at restaurant Molyvos. And I must confess its textbook description sounds wonderful—a hard, yellow sheep's-milk cheese that is aged in barrels of olive oil (“lathotiri” means “oil cheese.”) So I'm keeping my mind open on this one—for I was underwhelmed by the example I tasted at Titan. Their **Lesvos Lathotiri (\$8.99 per lb.)** is a small, very firm dome, salty but not strong, with a nice buttery finish—but not too much distinction beyond that. Botsacos tells me that Lathotiri goes beautifully with Greek olives at Ouzo time before a meal, and I'm sure he's right.

Greek Cheese #12: Metsovone

Little-known Metsovone, on the other hand, is a wow! It is made in Epiros, where local cheesemakers tried to emulate the output of Italian Provolone makers—naming their new Provolone-style cheese after the town of Metsovo! But they take their sheep-and-cow creation one step further: they smoke it (beautifully!) over vine cuttings. The result is Titan's **Metsovone (\$9.49 per lb.)**, a yellow-cream cylinder, fairly firm and dry, with a sharp taste like an old-fashioned strong German cheese. Good salt, prominent smoke, lovely lingering finish. I couldn't find any traditional Metsovone uses, and Botsacos loves to simply serve it on a cheese platter—but, making the Italian leap, I'm dreaming of some kind of Greek version of an Italian hero, layered with thin slices of this wonderful, flavorful stuff.

Well, that's the line-up for now—a whole lot of Greek tradition accessible to anyone in

the U.S. with a postal address. In fact, it might be a wise idea to forge an acquaintance with these cheeses now—because, according to Daphne Zepos, there's no guarantee that the traditions will hang on forever.

Casting an eye towards the virtual revolutions taking place in the fields of Greek fine dining, and Greek wine, Zepos told me that it can't be long before Greek cheesemakers turn their attention to small-format French-style cheeses.

“The whole Greek tradition,” she said, with that ever-present Zepos playfulness, “is based on poverty and hardship. All we have right now are huge hunks of cheese that remind us of our grandfathers. Greeks used to be ruled by hunger: if you make a cheese, they reasoned, make sure it's going to last forever, make sure it's big.”

Greek chevre? Greek-style Camembert? Greek washed-rind cheeses? O brave new world. For the moment, I gotta confess: I'm really, really happy with Feta and huge hunks of Kefalograviera. Pass the Ouzo, please.

The Finest Frozen Crab Cake Ever!

The Crab Ladies Gluten-Free Jumbo Lump Crab Cake (\$71.70 for 6 crab cakes, plus FedEx shipping charges)

I do love crab cakes. And, though I find them easy enough to make from scratch, I am often seduced by the thought of having a bunch of frozen ones on hand, so that my response to a crab cake attack can be almost instant. Problem is.....there are not a lot of frozen crab cakes out there that pass the high-quality test.

So it was with a mixture of emotions that I recently sampled a new product, from a new company, with a new marketing angle.

The new company is The Crab Ladies, based in Maryland (a promising address for crab cakes), owned by Jill Rabin and Roma Campanaro, who have been running a successful catering company. A few years back, they decided to evolve—from catering jobs to top-quality food products sent through the mail.

It is just within the last few months that they started selling their headliner crab cakes.....and one of the reasons the product caught my eye was its point of difference:

“During the three years thinking about, planning for and developing our new company, we discovered....that there were crab cake market needs that were not being filled, including crab cakes for people with Celiacs disease (a disease that requires a gluten-free diet) and crab cakes for those who wanted something more than a basic crab cake.”

Now, I'm all for gluten-free for the gluten-free people.....but it doesn't sound like a guarantee of a great crab cake. does it? And “more than basic?” Well, my purist sensibilities were put on full alert for that one.

So I started my tasting with the **Original Jumbo Lump Crab Cake (\$70.20 for 6)**—and found it a little glue-y, *too* held together (too much gluten?), with an onion-y taste that was seriously over the top.

On to “something more,” the **Bacon and Gruyere Jumbo Lump Crab Cake (\$68.84 for 6)**—which is not nearly as heavy as it sounds. Unfortunately, the purist in me had seen this one coming down the pike: I found the extra flavors squashed the essential flavor of sweet crabmeat.

So there I was, wanting to love—but down to only one possible object of adoration. And it was gluten-free.

And that's when the magic occurred. Oh yes. The **Gluten-Free Jumbo Lump Crab Cake (\$71.70 for 6 crab cakes)** is an out-and-out winner....perhaps the finest shipped, frozen crab cake I have ever tasted!

For starters, the architecture of this thing is beautiful. It feels extremely light, the huge lumps of crab just holding together somehow (no gluten=no heavy binding?). The exterior, in your pan, cooks up to a golden, crispy crackle. Then there's the flavor: perfect sweet crab flavor, and perfect Baltimore



PRODUCTS I'M LOVING RIGHT NOW

crab house seasoning.....which the other cakes in this line don't have!

I know that this ain't a cheap proposition—jumbo lump crab never is—but in all good conscience, I'd say that even if you're used to snorting gluten before you go to bed, these gluten-free babies are well worth the buckage.

I can help a bit: if you identify yourself as a reader of *The Rosengarten Report* and buy two packs of 6 crab cakes each,

The Crab Ladies will give you a 10% discount on your order.

BEST STRATEGY FOR ACQUISITION

Their web site is not taking orders yet.....so just give them a shout on 301.682.8080.

Sidamo Star

Ecco Caffe Whole Roasted Beans, Natural Sidamo, Ethiopia, Shiicho Cooperative Fair Trade (\$15 per lb.)

When it comes to purchased coffee, I like consistency.... which is why I'm a fan of Illy coffee, the Trieste-based outfit, that manages to turn out can after can of the same beautifully balanced coffee. You know exactly what you're getting when you buy Illy.

When you buy from smaller operations—such as small, artisanal roasters—it becomes a crap shoot. Some of them never get it right. Some of them do, sometimes—but then get it wrong next time. It can be maddeningly frustrating.

Roasting is a very precise, very demanding art....and one of the things that artisanal roasters often get wrong is the degree of roast. A few months back, in *TASTINGS*, I wrote:

“When you roast coffee beans, it is true that they should pick up a little of the flavor of the fire, gaining a slightly toasty or smoky dimension. SLIGHTLY!!!! If you roast them too long, your coffee will end

up tasting like a house fire the day after the fireman have doused it—acid, bitter, ridiculously smoky. Furthermore, the extremely subtle regional tastes of coffee beans—like the wine-iness of Ethiopian Harrar, the berry quality of Kenyan, the mineral tang of Brazilian—get completely neutralized, wiped out by over-roasting! You're tasting only the roast! And the subtle interplay of acid, bitterness and sweetness is another burn victim.”

To experienced coffee connoisseurs, this American obsession with over-roasted coffee is very peculiar. Around the world, it is generally believed that medium-roasted coffee best enables the coffee beans themselves to be the star of the cup, not the roaster!

This is one of the reasons I like Illy so much....and one of the reasons I have a new coffee roaster in my life, a California star-in-the-making, whose Ethiopian Sidamo has, so far, demonstrated not only roasting moderation.....but fabulous consistency as well!

PRODUCTS I'M LOVING RIGHT NOW

Ecco Caffè was started in 2000, in Sonoma County, by Andrew Barnett, who had been an active judge on the coffee-and-barista competition circuit. Barnett, who specializes in Brazilian coffee (he currently has 10 Brazilian selections), tastes many, many coffees all the time, winnowing out just a few that he chooses to roast and ship. Roasting takes place in a small, old-fashioned roaster (the Diedrich IR12, if you must know), usually Monday through Thursday. Barnett can take your order and, depending on the details, get your roasted beans to you within 24 to 96 hours—in both cases well short of the 9-day limit after which fresh roasted coffee starts to degrade. Additionally, Barnett's people would like to talk to you before you order, hoping that they can help select the perfect coffee for your taste.

Well, I found the perfect coffee for my taste. I have long been a fan of the ancient dry-curing technique for coffee beans—invented in Ethiopia, and still practiced there. But the tricky thing is that lots of Ethiopian coffee in the U.S. is wet-cured, not dry-cured.....such as the beans from Ethiopia's most famous coffee area, Yrgacheffe. To get dry-cured beans, you must look for "Sidamo," or a few other Ethiopian place names.

And why is dry-cured important? Curing is all about removing the mucilaginous gunk that sticks to the bean itself inside the coffee fruit. In wet-curing, the gunk is coaxed away from the bean by a water bath; no significant flavor exchange occurs between the gunk and the bean. In dry-curing, the coffee fruits are simply laid out in the sun.....and, during the few days it takes for the gunk to fall away from the bean, the gunk has added a flavor to the bean. Some call it fruity, some call it winy, some call it "aged."

Oh boy.....does this Ecco Caffè Sidamo ever demonstrate the dry-cured thang. The

beans themselves, for starters, are dark-chocolate-brown, well-roasted—but, miracle of miracles, with the merest hint of exterior gloss; these are definitely not oily, super-dark, over-roasted beans.

The French-press coffee I made from these beans, a number of times, was dark and rich....but not at all bitter! Best of all was the flavor complexity. Ecco's notes refer to "cherry, strawberry, blueberry"—and, if the coffee is brewed in the French press, I definitely do pick up a touch of the latter. But what I get above all is earthy, barnyardy, something like the bandages of bandage-wrapped Cheddar. This is an extraordinary complexing element, in an extraordinarily well-balanced coffee, bringing it up to the level of fine aged wine.

However you order, let them know that you're a *Rosengarten Report* reader (if you order on-line, just mention it in the comment box)—and you will receive a 10% discount on your order. Do feel free to sample other beans from Ecco—I liked everything I tasted. To me, however, Sidamo was the star.



BEST STRATEGY FOR ACQUISITION

There's an Ecco guy named Steve ready to receive your call at 707.537.5158. Or you can e-mail him at: steve@eccocaffe.com

Or, if you don't want to chat with Steve, you can order by calling 707.525.9309, or logging on to:

www.eccocaffe.com

New BBQ Sauces on Me.....and Some Wines to Go with Them!

Let's get all the negatives out of the way first:
1) I am not a huge aficionado of BBQ sauce. BBQ.....yes! But BBQ sauce....not so much. There are armies of BBQ professionals, particularly in Texas, who agree with me.

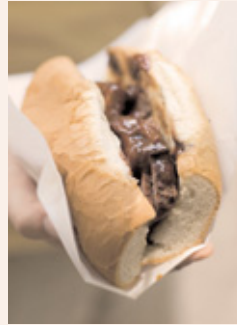
Why? Because we know that the greatest good in BBQ is the meaty miracle that comes out of your pit, properly smoked and seasoned—not the gloppy stuff you slather on it.

2) Wine and BBQ? I get that question all the time.....and usually avoid it! BBQ is not a very natural partner to wine.....which is why I usually break out the beer at BBQ time!

Right. Having said all that, having vented.....I must tell you two extraordinary things that happened to me recently:

1) A couple of BBQ sauces came my way that I truly loved! Now, none of them, in my opinion, is gonna *save* a poorly made BBQ.....and none of them is gonna get more attention from me at table than the warm, slithery meat, just coming away from the bone, or separating at the grain, at the touch of my teeth. However, if you happen to have some perfect slices of Texas BBQ brisket at hand.....and if you've

...you
gonna be
happy



got some fabulously insipid white bread.....and if you put them together into a sandwich and brush on some of the anointments below.....you gonna be happy!

Here are the three that caught my eye, a trio far above the average run of BBQ slather:

City Barbeque Sauce, Original

Columbus, Ohio

614.583.0999

www.citybarbeque.com

Hoisin-like brown with a touch of purple. The distinction here is: it has the molasses-like taste that comes with one of my favorite BBQ-sauce styles.....but.....despite the sweetness.....it also has really good acid and good heat.

Fiorella's Jack Stack Barbecue KC Original Sauce

Jack Stack BBQ

Kansas City, MO

877.419.7427

www.jackstackbbq.com

ORDERING TANZER'S NEWSLETTER

Stephen Tanzer writes the excellent bi-monthly wine newsletter, *Stephen Tanzer's International Wine Cellar*. Subscription details are available by calling 1-800-WINE-505, or by logging on to www.internationalwinecellar.com.

WINE OF THE MONTH

Slightly pulpy reddish-brown with great layers of complex flavor. Dominant tomato, with very sly use of cumin. A good effort from Jack Stack. But not as good as.....

Fiorella's Jack Stack Barbecue KC Hot Sauce

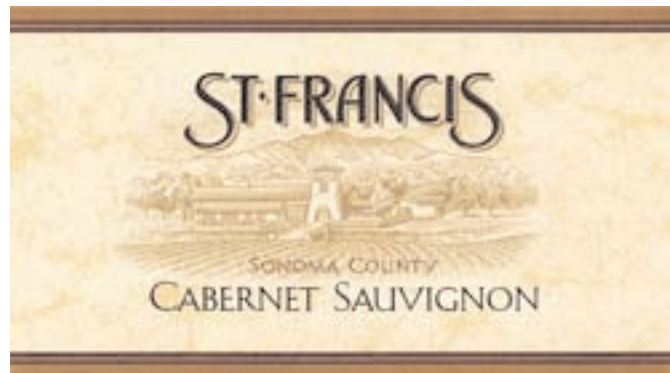
Jack Stack BBQ
Kansas City, MO
877.419.7427

www.jackstackbbq.com

Here it is. THE outstanding BBQ sauce of the year—fully worthy of carrying the name “Kansas City” on it (if I had to grudgingly pick one city for BBQ sauce, it would certainly be Kansas City). Brownish-red with lots of flecks. Amazing complexity and seasoning. The tomato base gets pumped up to an almost Bloody-Mary-like taste and intensity, with wicked, exciting heat. Order this now!

2) So.....back to the wine. If you're gonna drink wine with sauced BBQ, the meat seems to call out for red. Problem is....the sauce is usually sweet, or a little sweet....which requires wine that's sweet, or a little sweet, to stand up to it.....otherwise the wine tastes lean and mean. And there just ain't a whole lot of sweet, or a little sweet, red wine in the world. And.....further problem.....what there is of it ain't usually very good.

Three California labels, all carrying red wine that's slightly sweet, all carrying wine that goes very well indeed with BBQ.



WINE OF THE MONTH

I taste wine all the time....and, recently, was keeping up, as usual, at the same time that I was tasting BBQ sauces. And that's when I noticed three California labels, all carrying red wine that's slightly sweet, all carrying wine that goes very well indeed with BBQ. And the cool thing is: the labels are at three different levels of quality and price....meaning it's up to you whether you want to "drink down" or "drink up" with your BBQ!

Here they are, in ascending order of price:

2005 Red Truck California Merlot (\$10)

Really good everyday red—and BBQ red!—from a winery in Sonoma, California. Very pretty, bright purple-garnet, not too dense. Lively nose more reminiscent of Zinfandel (pepper and briar) than of Merlot. Very sweet attack, backed up immediately by bright acidity. Cushy mouthful of California fruit, which triggers in me the "expect pain and tannin" response—but the pain never comes. It's as if some wine scientist had stripped the tannin out of this hefty little wine. I like!

I liked the 2005 Red Truck Cabernet Sauvignon a little less, and, unfortunately, the 2005 Red Truck California Red Wine—which I might have liked best of all—was corked.

2003 Wild Oak Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County, St. Francis Winery & Vineyards (\$30)

I've always been an admirer of the Sonoma wines produced by St. Francis; the wines always seemed a little more subtle and sophisticated to me than many of the neighbor wines at a similar price point. Recently, St. Francis launched a new label—Wild Oak—which is a line of wines from special vineyard sources, offered at a higher price than the regular St. Francis label.

I loved the Wild Oak Cabernet best of all. It's a vibrant, dark purple—rich, but not scary. Really lovely dark fruit aromas—pretty, not Port-y, with no alcohol fumes rising off the wine. Compelling varietal character—herbs, pine forest, lead pencil—mingling with rich fruit.

On the palate, it's a big mouthful of wine with a sweet attack—leading to a balanced feel, bright acidity, under-con-

trol alcohol, and just enough tannin to prop up all that fruit.

The other new Wild Oak reds I tried—Syrah, and Old Vines Zinfandel—were good, but not as distinctive as this one. These are all beautifully balanced wines; despite the new name, this is not Oak Gone Wild.

Laetitia Single Vineyard Pinot Noir, La Colline, Arroyo Grande Valley (\$60)

Lots of checks and balances going on here. This is a hugely extracted Pinot Noir (not my favorite kind of thing).... but....it's from one of the coldest places in California, the Arroyo Grande Valley of Monterey.

So what you end up with, bizarrely enough....is a big, serious red wine....that also goes with BBQ! Fairly dark garnet in glass. Restrained nose showing the mineral-y, geranium-like side of Pinot more than anything else.

Fruit rises on the palate, along with subtle hints of herbs. What I like here is the paradox: it's weighty, New-World-rich—good for BBQ!—but at the same time it's nimble, tart, and soft in tannin. With air, and with your focus, a good deal of big-league subtlety emerges.

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Report

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