
An HOMAGE to FROMAGE
SAY
CHEESE
Edited by
Julia Spalding
With Corrie E. Cook & Renee Wilmeth
• Photography by Tony Valainis •
Wherein we milk it for all it's worth

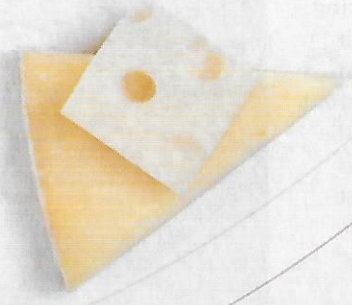
It might have started with an enlightening nibble of velvety fresh goat cheese at a farmers market somewhere, or perhaps that evening we first saw the words "cheese course" on a dinner menu. In the stores we saw a flurry of funky imports, and heard about award-winning handcrafted cheeses popping out of molds on dairy farms around Indiana (and being presented, at restaurants in Los Angeles and New York, as quaint little artisan gems). Somewhere along the way, the term "stinky cheese" underwent a radical image change (mmmm, stinky cheese), and we developed a taste for things like moldy veins and downy white rinds. The result? Indiana has a place on the leading wedge of the handcrafted cheese market.

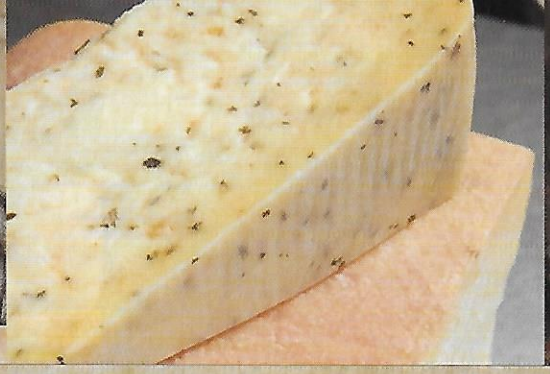
Much of the credit goes to four of our top cheese-makers: The Swiss Connection in Clay City, which is forging new territory with seasonality and old-school techniques; Fair Oaks Farms near Valparaiso, producing cheeses for large-scale distribution but still garnering a pack of awards from prestigious contests; Greenville's Capriole, the internationally famous maker of farmstead goat's-milk cheeses that marks its 20th anniversary this year; and Zionsville's Traders Point Creamery, which won unexpected acclaim last summer when its aged Fleur de la Terre captured top honors at the 2007 American Cheese Society meeting—the big wheel of cheese competitions. We have cheese made from cow's milk and goat's milk, pasteurized fresh cheeses, raw-milk aged rounds, mass-produced Swiss, and handcrafted Italian-style Parmesan. And they are as unique as the regions of the state itself, north to south.

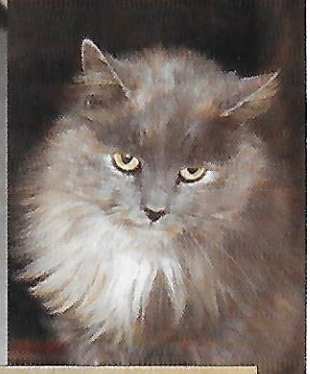
While the journey of cheese from grass to wheel can seem complex, at its heart, it is very basic. The essence of cheese comes from milk, and our Indiana cheese-makers liken the milk they use to *terroir*, the essence of the land in grapes that gives wine its distinctive characteristics. When you taste the creamy texture of a cheese, you get a sense of the grasses, the soil, and the season. Achieving that vision—delivering to us the tastes of our land—is the real prize.

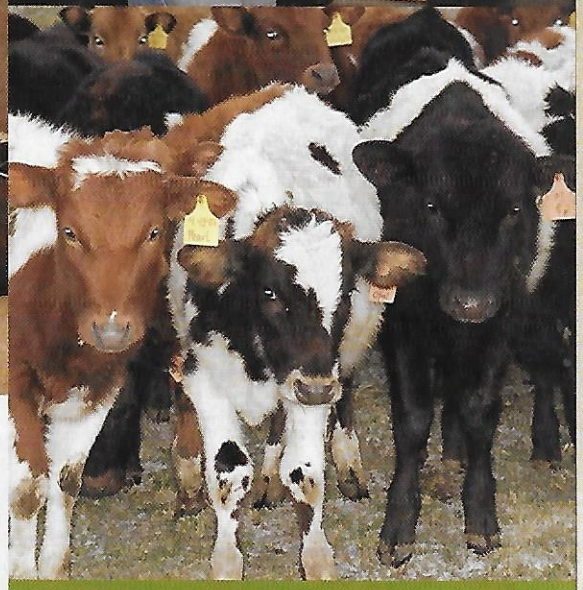
Where can you stock up on these local gems? All over town, at cheese shops and counters manned by experts who will also sliver off a piece of rare Parmigiano-Reggiano made from the milk of red cows in Italy, and school you on the provenance of a particular English cheddar. Our guide to local cheese shops will help you navigate, and we also gathered some handy gadgets to help you cut the ... um ... *serve* the cheese in style.

So let us raise a water cracker (heck, forget about the water crackers) in praise of our Hoosier hunks and exotic chunks. Cheese has come of age in Indiana.









The Swiss Connection, Clay City
swissconnectioncheese.com

WHAT THEY MAKE:
Raw cow's-milk cheese from 100 percent grass-fed cows.

HOW MUCH THEY MAKE:
15,000 to 16,000 pounds per year.

WHAT TO TRY:
Jegerlehner Swiss. *A sweet, flavorful, aged Swiss.*
Flora. *Pungent, aged Gouda-style cheese.*
Pazia. *A rich, tangy whole-milk Parmesan-style cheese.*
Dry-curd Cottage Cheese. *Customers from all over the United States mail-order this difficult-to-find specialty item.*

Clockwise from top left: Mary and Alan Yegerlehner, along with daughter Kate, make up the sixth and seventh generations working this land; Garlic-and-herb Jack cheese; Hello, kitty; Pearl, Opal, et al.—part of the dairy's grass-fed herd; Meadow Creek Kase, a bandaged cheddar.

[GOING ALL THE WHEY]

Reinventing the Wheel

Everything old is new again at **The Swiss Connection**, where a line of handcrafted cheeses finds beauty in seasonal milk and traditional techniques.

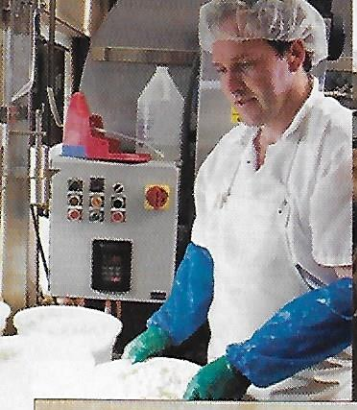
It is a blindingly clear but cold day at The Swiss Connection dairy outside Clay City in western Indiana. Two barn cats with thick winter coats are sunning themselves on a window ledge, taking full advantage of the rays at the northeast corner of the building that houses a small store, cheese-making rooms, and a milking parlor (dairy-speak for the platform where cows give up their bounty). A herd of a couple hundred dairy cattle has ambled three miles up the road to its winter pasture, so the cats, for now, have the place to themselves.

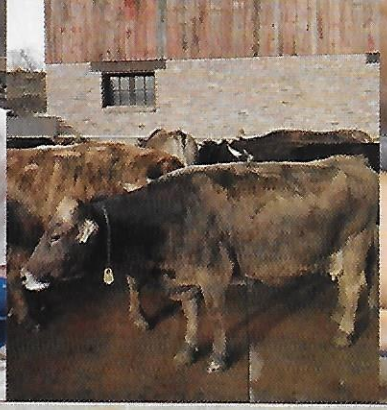
Unlike most dairy farms that produce year-round, The Swiss Connection produces milk and cheese only when its cattle can graze, from March through December. "It's what we call the green season," says Alan Yegerlehner, who owns the farm along with his wife, Mary. For their 100 percent grass-fed cattle, the best milk comes when the herd is eating natural pasture grasses spring through fall.

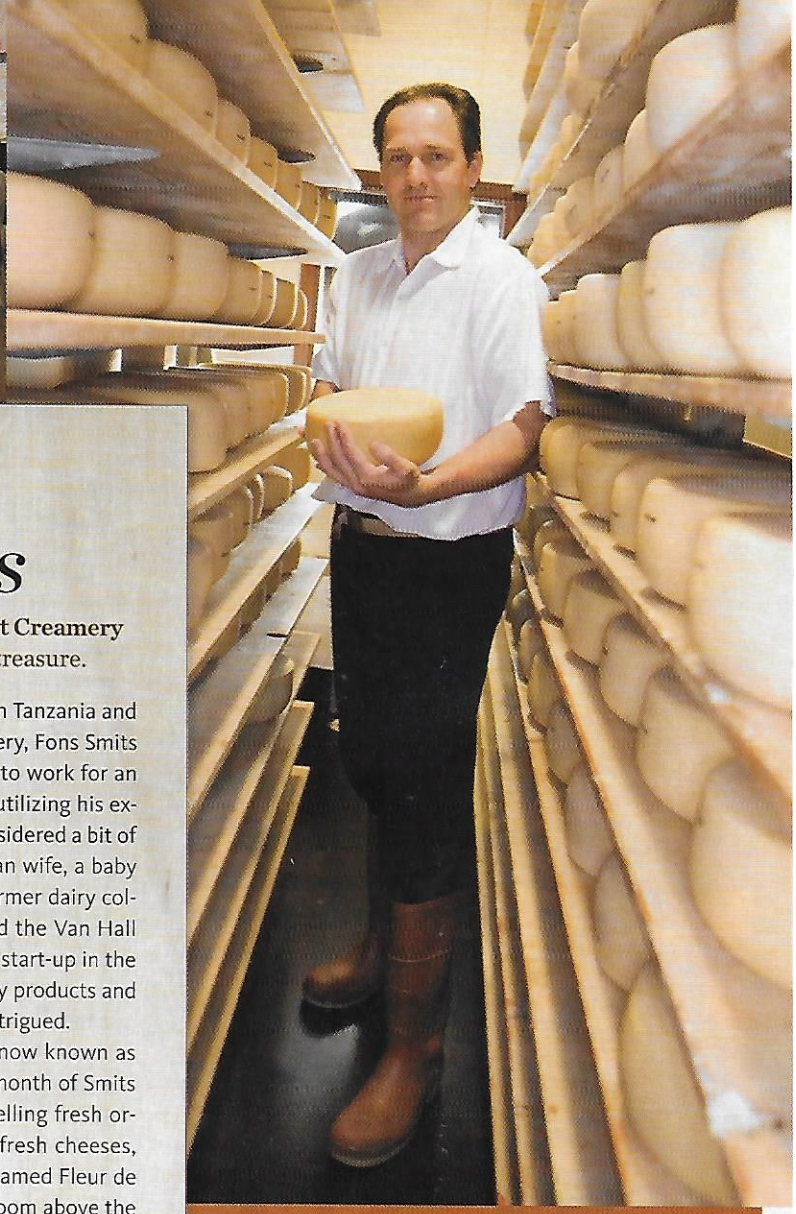
Although this working farm has been in the family since 1861, cheese-making is fairly new here, relatively speaking. Alan's father started the dairy herd in the 1950s, and in 2000, the Yegerlehners took the business in a new direction, switching the herd to 100 percent grass-fed and moving to a seasonal production cycle. Shortly thereafter, they sold their first cheese. But after attending the biannual Terra Madre conference in Turin, Italy (a global meeting of artisanal and slow-food producers), the couple took their cheese-making to a new level. Having seen firsthand how farmers and dairies in Switzerland produced sublime, handcrafted cheeses from small facilities—cheeses that defined "localness" and seasonality—Alan made substantial changes in his technique and relaunched a line of handcrafted gems focusing on the milk. His efforts resulted in the sharp, sometimes fragrant, herbal flavors distinctive to The Swiss Connection's cheeses.

The family reworked the entire line of six artisanal aged cheeses. The star among them is a new Parmesan-style variety that Alan calls Pazia—Hebrew for "golden," the color of this whole-milk, grass-fed cheese. Different from traditional, crumbly Parmesans made with skim milk, this semisoft cheese is full of fat, giving it a moister texture without compromising that distinctive Parma salty spiciness. Alan designed it based on the taste of the milk from his own land and herd here in Indiana, and he did the same with the Flora, his hard, Gouda-style cheese made last summer and aged about six months. In tasting this cheese, one can almost envision the late-summer grasses and tall, flowered weeds crowded in around the edges of the pasture that the cows munched before they produced this distinctive milk. "The flavor comes from what's naturally occurring in the environment around us," Alan says. "It's in the air around our farm. It's what the cows eat—even the microbes in the soil." The Swiss Connection's seasonality translates into an herbal earthiness, a distinctive quality usually found only in handcrafted, award-winning gourmet stars. *—Renee Wilmeth*

For information on where to purchase this or any cheese featured, visit indianapolismonthly.com







[GOING ALL THE WHEY]

Traders Secrets

With Holland native Fons Smits at its helm, **Traders Point Creamery** has turned a rustic patch of Zionsville into a local treasure.

After a successful career running places like a model dairy co-op in Tanzania and making cheese for San Francisco's highly regarded Cowgirl Creamery, Fons Smits was at the top of his game. He moved back to his native Holland to work for an international dairy consultancy that sent him from Asia to Africa, utilizing his expertise. But when the business closed its doors in 2003, Smits—considered a bit of a hotshot in the cheese world—found himself with a new American wife, a baby on the way, and no job to speak of. He happened to stop by his former dairy college, the prestigious Agrarische Hogeschool Friesland (now called the Van Hall Instituut), on the same day that a fax arrived about a job at a small start-up in the middle of the United States. Their plan was to produce organic dairy products and handcrafted cheeses from 100 percent grass-fed cattle. Smits was intrigued.

The dairy was Zionsville's Traders Point Creamery, of course, now known as the state's only USDA Certified Organic dairy processor. Within a month of Smits and his family relocating to Indiana to run the dairy, they were selling fresh organic milk, and Smits quickly put his experience to use creating fresh cheeses, European-style yogurts, and a new organic cow's-milk cheese he named Fleur de la Terre, aged four to six months on fragrant wooden shelves in a room above the creamery's bustling restaurant. Now featured in retail shops on both coasts and by a popular Sonoma wine-and-cheese club, Smits' "Blossom of the Land" is hitting the big time, from a cheese perspective. "An aged cheese is the perfect carrier for the taste of the land," he says. "Because it matures over a long time, those flavors come through." He refers to this Dutch-style Gouda with mildly pungent overtones and strong nutty qualities—as "The taste of Zionsville, Indiana."

In 2007, the aged Fleur de la Terre took top prize at the American Cheese Society awards in one of the largest categories—artisan cheeses. The unexpected success brought with it a high demand from chefs, retailers, and cheese-lovers. And it caught the small operation by surprise. "To develop an aged cheese takes time; it's a really long process," Smits says. "So for us to win the category right now is a little overwhelming."

Which is not to say that Smits is unaccustomed to the cheese-making spotlight. In 2000, he created several award-winning cheeses for Cowgirl Creamery, including the popular Mt. Tam, and the 2003 ACS Best in Show Red Hawk, a triple-cream washed-rind cheese. For this spring, Smits is working on a stronger, aged, pasteurized cheese he currently calls "chouda," a cross between "cheddar" and "Gouda." This organic cheese will age in large wheels, and Smits likes the cleanness that the pasteurization gives to the taste. But like any aged cheese, experimentation can take months to see results. Small adjustments are logged in meticulous detail. But Smits already knew that creating an award-winning cheese can take years; he's in no hurry. *—Renee Wilmeth*

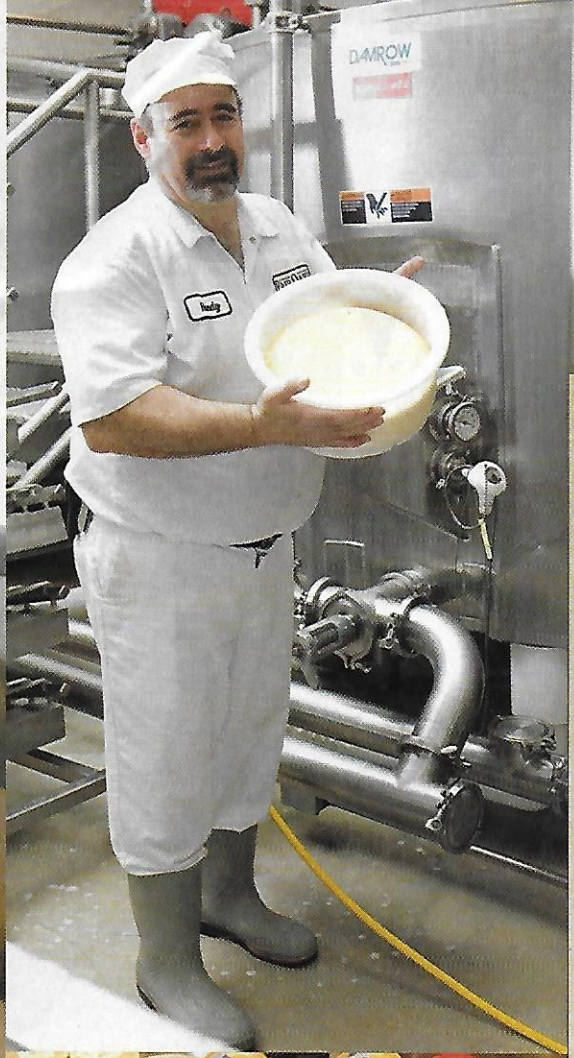
Traders Point Creamery, Zionsville
tpforganics.com

WHAT THEY MAKE:
Raw cow's-milk cheese from 100 percent grass-fed cows and fresh pasteurized-milk cheeses.

HOW MUCH THEY MAKE:
16,000 pounds in 2007. 35,000 pounds projected for 2008.

WHAT TO TRY:
Fleur de la Terre. *A strong, flavorful, aged cheese.*
Fromage Blanc. *A fresh, unaged cheese, similar to ricotta.*
Cottage Cheese. *Made with Traders Point's own special dressing.*

Clockwise from top left: Working one batch at a time, cheese-maker Fons Smits packs curds from this morning's milk into mesh molds; Cattle call—the Traders Point dairy cows feed only on grass that grows in the surrounding fields; Smits checks on the progress of his wheels in the creamery's tiny aging room. Each wheel is dated, and the flavors can vary from batch to batch.



[GOING ALL THE WHEY]

The Big Cheese

A field trip to **Fair Oaks Farms**, Indiana's Disneyland of cheese.

Thanks to Fair Oaks Farms' Dairy Adventure and prime field-trip amenities, most Indiana schoolchildren are familiar with the gleaming dairy educational center just off I-65, about two hours north of Indianapolis. More than 100,000 people a year make their way through the interactive museum displays, marveling at life-size Holsteins, watching interactive movies, and learning how corn and grain are transformed into milk. There is even a birthing barn where casual observers can witness the miracle of calving through glass-walled viewing pens with stadium seating.

But alongside these shiny attractions, a bustling cafe and a cheese shop, is a working creamery helmed by master cheese-maker Randy Krahenbuhl. He makes somewhere in the neighborhood of 700,000 to 800,000 pounds of cheese a year, in about 24 varieties, from milk free of both antibiotics and artificial hormones.

While smaller dairies make cheese with only their own milk—called "farmstead cheese," Fair Oaks' cheese is made with a small fraction of the milk produced from the roughly 30,000 head of cattle in its co-op system. Still, Krahenbuhl is able to specify the pens (of particular cattle), feed mixture, and milking schedule (the evening milk for the best butterfat) sent over to the creamery to be made into his Butterkase and Havarti.

A third-generation cheese-maker from southern Wisconsin, Krahenbuhl comes from a Swiss background and finds northern Indiana, and its predominantly Dutch dairy tradition, foreign at times. "It's not like southern Wisconsin, that's for sure," he laughs. But that hasn't stopped him from making world-class Swiss- and Dutch-style cheeses, ice cream, and bottled milk.

Unlike the Dairy Adventure and the activity at the birthing barn, which are funded by dairy-industry promotional grants, the cheese-making operation is a for-profit venture. As a result, Krahenbuhl, a serious, quiet man with a neatly trimmed goatee (which requires its own little "beard net" to go along with the requisite hair-net in the preparation areas), is constantly developing new products. For 2008, he is putting up a Cheddar that will age for four to five years and developing a bleu cheese he might work into an organic product line. But while he can make in one batch what farmstead creameries make in a year, his cheese still has a handcrafted appeal.

In 2005, Krahenbuhl's Emmantaler was named overall winner at the U.S. Championship Cheese Contest, a large, highly technical contest put on by the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association. Over the past few years, his Gouda, aged Gouda, Havarti Pepper, and Sweet Swiss (a milder, small-eye Swiss that has become a customer favorite) have all garnered major awards.

But even with the awards and the high-tech facility, Krahenbuhl stays true to his Wisconsin roots. To him, cheese—made from an infinite combination of living cultures and bacteria—is an ongoing experiment. "Just by being here, having your hands in it all the time, you learn things," he says. "If I'm not continually learning things, I'll quit." *—Renee Wilmeth*

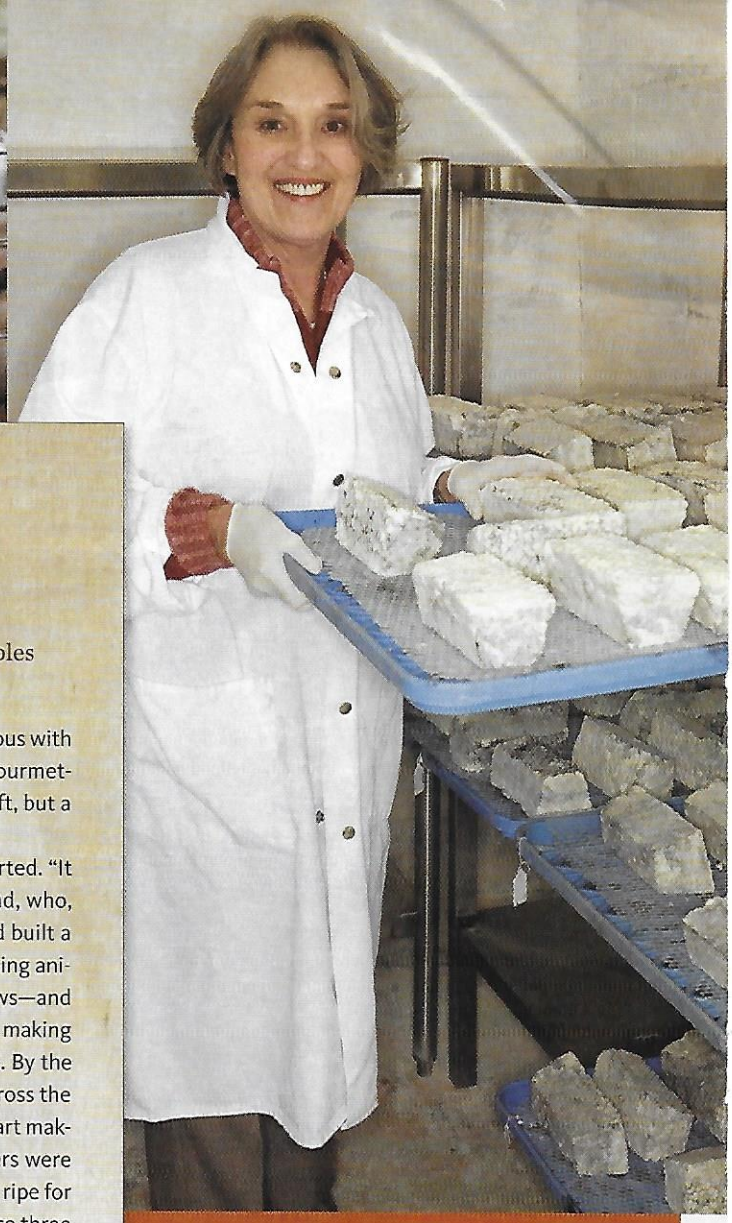
Fair Oaks Farms, Fair Oaks, fofarms.com

WHAT THEY MAKE:
Cow's-milk cheese and pasteurized-milk cheeses from grain-fed cows.

HOW MUCH THEY MAKE:
700,000 to 800,000 pounds per year.

WHAT TO TRY:
Sweet Swiss. *A milder, slightly sweet Swiss cheese.*
Aged Gouda. *Perfect for snacking.*
Butterkase. *A mellow, buttery cheese, perfect for grilling. (Look for bleu cheese in the summer and Raclette next year.)*

Clockwise from top left: Master cheese-maker Randy Krahenbuhl molding cheese; Aging gracefully; A few of Fair Oaks' award-winning cheeses; Milking the cows; Cheese soaking in salt brine.



[GOING ALL THE WHEY]

Smooth Operator

Capriole's tart, velvety mounds of goat cheese have become staples in cheese shops and restaurants around the country.

When it comes to cheese in Indiana, Judy Schad and Capriole are synonymous with excellence. The Greenville-based operation is a leader in the country's gourmet-food market, and Schad herself is not only considered a pioneer in the craft, but a nationally recognized figure in the world of American farmstead cheeses.

But two decades ago, the goat-cheese operation was just getting started. "It was during that whole 'get back to the land' thing in the '70s," says Schad, who, with her husband and three children, bought the Greenville property and built a house on the 1850s farmstead. For the Schad family, farm life included raising animals, but everyone especially liked the goats. Next came 4-H animal shows—and milk. Schad, a whiz in the kitchen, took a cheese-making course and started making what she describes as "some really bad cheese." But that quickly changed. By the early 1980s, she was learning cheese-making from top artisanal makers across the country, and she was getting pretty good at it. In 1988, Schad decided to start making goat cheese, utilizing production space at a nearby winery. Food-lovers were just beginning to discover gourmet cheeses, and the American market was ripe for a handcrafted goat cheese that didn't taste like it had been frozen in France three years ago. Within two months, Capriole had a distributor and several national accounts, including Neiman Marcus and the Four Seasons. By 1994, Capriole had been discovered by everyone from West Coast foodies to cheese expert and author Steve Jenkins, who managed the cheese department at Dean & DeLuca in New York and featured Capriole heavily in his bestselling book, *The Cheese Primer*.

Signature products include the fresh, unaged pasteurized-milk goat cheeses typically sold in logs or rounds, often with herbs or black pepper added. The rounds are hand-ladled into each mold. Some are wrapped in bourbon-soaked chestnut leaves to create the signature O'Banon, named for the late governor of Indiana, Frank O'Bannon. Ripened cheeses—pasteurized, fresh cheeses rolled or layered in ash (to lessen the acidic, lemony quality and increase the sweetness) or covered in sweet, musty mold as with the Wabash Cannonball and Sofia—are almost too beautiful to eat. *Almost.*

But if the fresh cheeses all sell equally, the aged cheeses are the stars. "We just let the milk do the work," says Schad, who figures she makes close to 50,000 gallons of cheese each year from the milk of more than 600 goats kept in woodland paddocks. "Cheese is 99.9 percent milk, and the milk is everything—the genetics of the animal, the care, the environment. It's what these animals are chewing on down in the woods." *—Renee Wilmeth*

Capriole, Greenville, capriolegoatcheese.com

WHAT THEY MAKE:
Pasteurized, fresh, and ripened goat's-milk cheese and aged raw-milk goat cheese.

HOW MUCH THEY MAKE:
Estimated 54,000 gallons per year.

WHAT TO TRY:
O'Banon. *Tangy, fresh cheese wrapped in bourbon-soaked chestnut leaves.*
Piper's Pyramid. *Sweet, gooey, orange, surface-ripened cheese perfect on crusty bread.*
Fromage a Trois. *Fresh goat cheese in flavors such as chocolate bourbon and sundried tomato–and-pesto torte, made in conjunction with Cyprus Grove Chevre in Arcata, California.*
Mont St. Francis. *Intense, pungent, semi-hard aged goat cheese, excellent for a dessert course.*

Clockwise from top left: Capriole's Crocodile Tear, a cone of dense, aged goat cheese with a paprika-flecked rind. The Capriole goats, started as a 4-H project, are now 500 strong; Judy Schad, now in her 20th year of making handcrafted chevre.

Cheese Spread

Gadgets and gear for plating your featured presentation. By Meghan McCormick

Hoosiers' *other* favorite dome. Cheese dome, $22.49. Vine & Table, 313 E. Carmel Dr., Carmel, 817-9473

Lay it on thick. Laguiole spreader, $39.95 (set of four). Sur La Table, Clay Terrace, Carmel, 575-0953

Take your pick. $2.99 each. The Cheese Shop, Fashion Mall, 846-6885

A sleek marble slab ups the elegance factor. Cheese board and stand, $99.95. Sur La Table, Clay Terrace, Carmel, 575-0953

It slices. It dices. Large cheese knife, $15.95. Sur La Table, Clay Terrace, Carmel, 575-0953

Pale-hued cheeses look even more appetizing on a warm red platter. $10.49. Vine & Table, 313 E. Carmel Dr., Carmel, 817-9473