



Mona Lisa
Wake Robin Farm
Jordan, New York

Artisan cheese

From Gouda to cheddar, Finger Lakes farms
produce gourmet product



**By Sherrie Negrea
GOODLIFE**

The fertile farmland sloping down to the Finger Lakes can produce the perfect grapes for Riesling and Pinot Noir wine, some 15 varieties of apples, blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, sweet corn, sweet and sour cherries and now, artisan cheese.

A growing number of dairy farms from Waterloo to Candor are embracing the art of cheese making, hoping to create a niche product that will complement the

region's wines. Last fall, 10 cheese makers joined forces to create the Finger Lakes Cheese Trail, drawing hundreds of visitors for two tastings in May and July.

"People have the idea that they shouldn't eat food that comes from California if you can get it locally," says Susanne Messmer, owner of Lively Run Goat Dairy, which began producing chèvre, or goat cheese, in 1982 and was one of the first cheese operations in the Finger Lakes. "That's the kind of thing that helps the local food industry."

The Finger Lakes wine industry has a long history and many award-winning wines. An increasing number of dairy farms in the region are now producing high-end, artisan cheese.

A cheese for every taste

What makes the cheese producers in the Finger Lakes distinctive is that each is making a different type of cheese. Visitors to the cheese trail can sample mild Dutch Gouda, sharp American cheddar, blue cheese made from goat's milk, sheep cheese, kefir cheese and Irish-style



PROVIDED

Aging room at the Finger Lakes Farmstead Cheese Co.

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NANCY RICHARDS
Owner of Finger Lakes Farmstead Cheese Co. in Mecklenburg



NANCY RICHARDS

washed rind cheese.

"We all just kind of picked something," says Carmella Hoffman, owner of Sunset View Creamery in Odessa, which specializes in cheddar and Monterey Jack. "It just happened this way by chance. Everybody has got something different to offer."

With so many varieties of cheese from the Finger Lakes, it's easy to create a cheese tray that will appeal to any palette. Larry Wilcox, owner of Artisan Foods, a distribution company in Rochester, who has been promoting the Finger Lakes Cheese Trail, suggests placing a mix of cheese on a tray, including a soft or

semisoft and a sharp, aged cheese.

For dessert, Messmer suggests serving fresh chèvre, with a spoonful of plum preserves, heated in the microwave for 20 or 30 seconds, and accompanied by a Finger Lakes Ice Wine, which is made from frozen grapes.

"Just as with the wines, you start with

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the least intense flavors and work toward the heartier cheeses,” says Wilcox, who distributes five of the Finger Lakes crafted cheeses in the Rochester area.

While the cheeses on the Finger Lakes trail are sold directly at the cheese houses, they can also be purchased at many of the wineries in the area and in various specialty stores, including the Ithaca Bakery, the Ithaca Coffee Company and Ludgate Produce Farms.

The artisan, or handcrafted, cheese is made in small batches from milk produced by herds of cows, goat and sheep kept on their farms. Even if two farms are producing the same type of cheese, Hoffman notes that they will taste different because of the variety of feed in the animals’ diet, one factor that makes artisan cheese unique.

“All cheeses take on their own characteristics from where they are grown, as do the wines,” says Wilcox. “If you grow a Riesling here, it’s different from a Riesling grown in Washington state.”

Natural fit with local wines

Many dairy farms in the Finger Lakes have turned to cheese making as prices for raw milk have plummeted, leading farmers to develop new products to help stabilize their incomes. Yet many see the cheeses as a natural complement to the wines the Finger Lakes are known for – Riesling, Pinot Noir, sparkling and Ice Wine.

“I think cheese tends to be a fairly potent flavor and goes nicely with something like wine,” says Nancy Richards, owner of Finger Lakes

“All cheeses take on their own characteristics from where they are grown, as do the wines. If you grow a Riesling here, it’s different from a Riesling grown in Washington state.”

LARRY WILCOX

Owner of Artisan Foods, a distribution company in Rochester

Farmstead Cheese Co. in Mecklenburg, which specializes in Gouda cheese. “They definitely have a synergy where each is better together than on their own.”

Apprenticing with a Dutch cheese maker, Richards learned to make Gouda cheese using milk produced by the 50 Holsteins on the family farm where she grew up. The process starts by heating up the milk, mixing it with a bacterial culture, and then adding rennet, which causes the milk to coagulate, clump and separate into curds and whey. The cheese is aged for 60 days, allowing any pathogenic bacteria to die, a U.S. Department of Agriculture requirement for all cheese made from unpasteurized milk.

Though Gouda is available in most supermarkets, none of them is probably soaked in Ithaca Beer during the washing process, as is Richards’ Bier Meck (named after the hamlet of Mecklenburg). Her Schuyler Gouda is available in 14 varieties, including Herbes de Provence, Jalapeno and Stinging Nettle.

Fourteen miles south, at the Sunset View Creamery in Odessa, Hoffman specializes in American-style cheddar

because she felt that variety would have greater appeal to customers in rural Schuyler County. Yet because her cheddar cheese is placed in vacuum-sealed bags, it is much creamier than the supermarket variety; it is also cream colored and not artificially dyed orange. Flavorings for her Monterey Jack cheeses (a variety of cheddar in which the curds are washed) use all natural ingredients, whether it’s bacon or horseradish, and do not contain any preservatives.

Beyond cheese and wine, Hoffman recommends using her Deep Seneca or Razor Sharp cheddar for macaroni and cheese (a favorite of the Odessa firefighters); her popular recipe is listed on her website. When grilling hamburgers, she suggests sprinkling some garlic powder on the burger and topping it with a slice of KTM’s Garlic Delight or Sneaky Pete, her hottest Monterey Jack.

“You’re not going to find them in the grocery store,” Lisa Kerslake, manager of the Ithaca Coffee Company, says of the locally produced cheeses. “They taste better. They’re artisan cheese – a little more care goes into them.”

Perfect pairings

Cheese is a perfect complement to wine. Following are pairings suggested by producers of artisan cheese in the Finger Lakes.

Pair Schuyler, a Gouda made by Finger Lakes Farmstead Cheese Co., with Pinot Noir or Chardonnay

Try Red Meck, a Gouda made by Finger Lakes Farmstead Cheese Co., with Riesling

Cayuga Blue, a goat cheese made by Lively Run Goat Dairy, pairs well with Merlot or Cabernet Franc

Feta, a goat cheese made by Lively Run Goat Dairy, matches up with rosé wine

Down on the Beach Cheddar (an extra sharp variety made by Sunset View Creamery, complements Chardonnay or Merlot

KTM’s Garlic Delight, a Monterey Jack cheese made by Sunset View Creamery, can be served with Seyval Blanc or Cabernet

