



Antonelli's USA Cheese Tour Part Two: CALIFORNIA

Thank you, thank you, thank you! Thanks to our team for holding down the fort while we were out of town and thanks to the California cheese producers who welcomed us onto their farms and into their creameries. We started off last week with an all-to-brief evening in San Francisco, hitting up the Ferry Building (Cowgirl Creamery and Boccalone), Cheese Plus (an awesome cheese shop), and a few other highlights, followed by a scrumptious Italian dinner in Little Italy. Our time there was cut short (especially by the three hours we waited on our rental car!), and we rose early Tuesday morning for a quick drive down Lombard, the curviest street, a hazy drive across the Golden Gate bridge, a quaint breakfast in Petaluma, and the cheese-y visits began!

We first visited Bellwether Farms in Sonoma County, a farm and dairy started by former nurse Cindy Callahan in 1986 and joined by her son Liam as lead cheesemaker, as well as many other fine folks. Lenny led our personalized tour, starting with a gorgeous view of the lush hillside pastures where the East Friesian sheep graze, followed by their shady shelters, the milking area, the cheesemaking rooms, and the affinage cellars. Of the herd, about 200 are milked five days a week, morning and evening. The milking parlour holds 16 ewe and 8 are milked at a time; each sheep yields only about a quart of milk per day, which is immediately pumped into a milk tank in an adjacent room and used for cheesemaking usually within 24 hours. As we stepped into the cheesemaking room and the humid, lactic air swept over us, we witnessed Carmody in the making and Lenny explained to us that almost all of the by-products are used in some form. Their sheep milk products include San Andreas and Pepato cheeses, ricotta, and yogurt, as well as a few cow milk (sourced from Brown Swiss cows at Valley Ford) cheeses like Carmody and Cresenza, fromage blanc, and crème fraiche - all of which have amazing creamy and buttery textures since they are hand-ladled and cared for. This small, family-run operation has much in store for it, including a new facility with a tasting room and panoramic views in the near future!

We next ventured to Pacheco Family Ranch where Achadinha Cheese Company is based. Although those big words (ie "Company") make you conjure up notions of a large-scale operation, this business is run by Jim and Donna Pacheco, their four kids, and a few part-time hands who help here and there while working forty farmers markets. Three dogs greeted us frantically and Donna hurried out in an attempt to beat them to us, and she immediately led us into the cheesemaking room. We donned our hair nets, walked through sanitizer, and watched in awe as Donna immediately got back to work stirring 800 pounds of coagulated goat milk destined to become feta. She chooses to do everything by hand since machines are "hard on the curds" and it's clear she coddles them with a cheesemaker's touch. When she was ready, she led us into her aging room where wheels of Capricious sat. Speaking to the nature of artisanal cheese, Donna stated, "We're consistent at tasting inconsistent depending on what the goat's are eating." Indeed, since the goats are fed brewers' grains (from three nearby breweries), Donna noted how some batches of milk come out more bitter (ie hoppy!) and must be adjusted. From there we ventured to the milking barn, surrounded by the picturesque pastures, and on to the sheltered areas where the nearly 600 goats stood and sat enjoying the shade (well, expect for the one gal in heat who was troubled by three

aggressive billy goats fighting for her, ahem, attention!). In addition, we met their cattle, pigs, and even their owl, as we looked around. The most dominant characteristic we met in Donna, is that she's a passionate woman determined to keep her family farm through hard work, little money or time off, and love for her animals. Although her "new car is the new vat pasteurizer," it's clear her priorities are her family and the legacy she'll leave them. And on days that it gets to be a little stressful, she heads off to kickboxing class.

Our final cheesemaking visit took us to Redwood Hill's Creamery. Although the farm has been in the family since 1968, it was in 1978 that daughter Jennifer took the reins from her parents and expanded the goat milk product offerings, as well as concentrated on supreme breeding (indeed, local Cheesemakers Pure Luck in Dripping Springs has gotten bucks from Redwood Hill). David, Jennifer's brother, who led our tour, recalled his first goat that he showed in 4-H when he was four year's old and he jokes that "[We're] still a 4-H project out of control!" but that their emphasis remains on "doing things the right way by the animals." In fact, Redwood Hill became a "certified humane" producer about five years ago but, as David commented, those practices have always been in place, despite the recent official title. While still considered a smaller producer (especially compared to the larger industrial complexes today), Redwood Hill has continued to grow to meet demand and it shows as we tour their relatively new creamery, just down the road from the farm. Goat milk is brought in about four times a week and used to make yogurt and kefir (their most popular products), as well as Feta, fresh chevre with assorted seasonings, Camellia, Cameo, cheddars, California Crottin, and Bucheret. The facility is one hundred percent solar (and contains three acres of solar panels on the roof!). It's clear Redwood Hill is doing something right (or many things!), as the demand for their delicious products continues to grow, as well as their operation and reputation.

Okay, so we've rambled more than we're supposed to! And yes, we did a few non-cheese things, like hit up Hog Island Oyster Company, Fatted Calf Charcuterie, Bouchon, and a few other hot spots. And, as we always do when we visit a cheesemaker, we've come away re-invigorated and re-committed to what we're doing with the goal of getting their amazing cheeses into your mouths and telling you about the labor and love they put into them. We want to tell you more, so come in and ask us! (We'll be uploading photos to our facebook page soon.)

California Cheese

We received two cheeses from Redwood Hill, including the California Crottin and the Camellia, a Camembert-style goat cheese named for one of Redwood Hill's favorite does. When this cheese is young, the paste is firm and has a mild, buttery taste. As the cheese ages, the paste softens and takes on a mushroomy earthiness.

A staple in our case since opening day has been Bellwether Farm's Fromage Blanc, a traditional, European-style cheese that is tangy, buttery, and easy to spread. We love it as an alternative to cream cheese on a breakfast bagel with lox and caperberries or on fresh-baked bread with French wild strawberry jam.

Barinaga Ranch's Baserri is back in the case. The sheep (mixed breeds of East Friesian and Katahdin) graze on pasture all year long with a great view of the Pacific. Inspired by Basque style sheep milk cheeses from the Pyrenees, Baserri is named after the ancient tile-roofed cheesemaking huts that cover the mountainside in that region.

Capricious, from Achadinha Cheese Co, is made using the American tradition of Dry Jack, as demonstrated by its shape, a result of its first press in cheesecloth. During the six-month aging period, the natural rind is bathed in olive oil and it develops a deep, tangy, caramel flavor and a mild pungency at the finish.

Cheese Tasting Events!

Sunday, September 25 (4-6pm): Come join us for a Cheese & Wine Pairing event at Pilot Knob Vineyard. Explore why many refer to this combination as a "match made in heaven!" Cheesemonger John will take you through a selection of artisan cheeses that have been perfectly paired with Pilot Knob Vineyard wines. Learn how to pair textures and flavors of cheese to wine. Come learn, enjoy, and have some "cheesy" fun at Pilot Knob Vineyard! Space is limited, so call early at 512.489.2999 to purchase your \$35 tickets.

Thursday, September 29 (7-8:30pm): We're teaming up with the Conarkos at Con Olio to pair cheese with various balsamic vinegars. The \$40 ticket not only covers your evening of cheese and balsamics, but also a taste of a 50+ year old balsamic, other accoutrements, and complimentary wine samples. Call Con Olio to book your seat to this limited space tasting: 512.342.2344.

Cheesily Yours,
Kendall & John
Kelly, Brad, Shawn, and Courtney

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Mon: Closed
Tues - Sat: 11am to 7pm
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