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A Stink So Good

By Caitlin M Ryan Photos By Alison Narro Issue Sept 2010 Neighborhood Campus / Hyde Park

Practice makes perfect. And that’s exactly the mentality that owners of Antonelli’s Cheese Shop, Kendall and John Antonelli, encourage within their customers. With an entire store devoted to education in cheese and cheese-pairings, the couple has made a stereotypically highbrow concept accessible to Austin’s masses by facilitating instruction, trial and error, and pushing palates and pairings to the limit.

While honeymooning in Grenada three years ago, the spunky young couple made the bold decision to eschew corporate America and follow their bliss: an unwavering love for cheese. So longstanding was this love that John had previously formed and funded a “gourmet grilled cheese club” out of his home in high school. After their honeymoon, the Antonellis breathed new life into the same concept, and reopened a similar club out of their home.

Rather quickly, their devotion to cheese became serious. John undertook internship after internship—which included studying under Hervé Mons (one of the world’s leading affineurs) in France—and both Kendall and John attended a “cheese boot camp” at the famed Murray’s Cheeses on New York City’s Bleeker Street. To truly test the limits of exploration, the couple then traveled around the European continent. “We traveled parts of France, Italy, and Switzerland on a glorified cheese tour,” Kendall says. “It was truly amazing. It was there that we realized it was the cheese itself, the cheese-makers, and their stories that we loved and were passionate about.”

The couple has been working as business partners since the opening of their Hyde Park cheeseshop in early 2010. Everything within the red-walled store is done with purpose. The first thing the Antonelli’s staff explains to customers is how the cheese case is arranged—by increasing flavor profile, from right to left. Possible alcoholic pairings are arranged in similar fashion on a corresponding wall. John cordially steps up behind the counter, asking his customers a series of questions while handing out samples, all in an attempt to hone in on the perfect selection of fromage. If any doubt lingers, informational chalkboards detailing cheese style, flavors, and examples hang in clear sight behind the counter.*

Most remarkable about the Antonelli’s experience is the staff’s genuine respect for the craftsmanship behind cheese-making and the corresponding goal of passing that knowledge along. For example, some fresh cheeses (like Chevre) are ready to eat immediately after production, while washed-rinds (like Taleggio) may have to be washed with an acidic solution, rubbed, and flipped two to three times per week in order to create a hardened exterior. Such are the interesting nuances any willing participant is guaranteed to learn when visiting with the shop’s approachable owners.

Upon explaining how to create the perfect cheese plate, Kendall says that, while it really takes years to understand, the magic number seems to be between three and five different styles of cheese. Pick three different styles you like, she suggests, and do not to stress over perfection.

“Consider your purpose, plate the cheeses in order [according to style] clockwise, serve at room temp, and enjoy!” Kendall says of her no-fail approach for would-be cheese-hosts.

And such a spirited attitude is precisely what has earned Antonelli’s Cheese Shop its devoted customers and positioned the shop as Austin’s premier authentic cheese retailer. Other local mainstays, like the Alamo Drafthouse, have taken note of Antonelli’s grand reception within the community, and the two Austin businesses offer occasional joint tasting events, with more on the horizon.

“There’s nothing John and I do better than get excited about cheese,” Kendall shares. “So the best job for us was to share that passion and those stories with others.”



