

ANTONELLI'S CHEESE SHOP

BY JARDINE LIBAIRE



“In an MBA program, you’re basically supposed to build a business model,” says John Antonelli. “Why not try to execute it at the same time?”

And that’s just what he did. Without actually going back to school, Antonelli applied the traditional graduate degree template—lock onto a passion, research, cultivate mentors, intern, write a business plan—to the world of cheese. He studied bibles like Steven Jenkins’s *Cheese Primer*; he boot camped at the legendary Murray’s Cheese Shop in New York City; he interned at Kerbey Lane Cafe. Then he toured France, Italy and Switzerland with his wife, Kendall, who had also caught cheese fever. What emerged from all that work is Hyde Park’s new Antonelli’s Cheese Shop—the modern, elegant offspring of a renegade, but economically wise, DIY “degree” in cheese.

The Antonellis opened the store in February 2010, two years after John left his CPA job. Previously, their foray into cheese included little more than running a grilled-cheese club from home for fun. But the fun became serious when they considered what they wanted in the long run. As they learned more about cheese, their passion caught fire, but it was the tour abroad that cemented their path. In Europe, they roamed with no agenda aside from

cheese—swerving off the road at any sign that showed an animal being milked. Their language was limited: “All I could say was, ‘I study cheese,’” says Kendall. An appreciation rapidly bloomed—not only for the cheeses, but for the people who make them and the stories behind them.

From France’s mystical, yawning *caves d’affinage* to the modest couple making wheels of Comté in a tiny village; the Antonellis brought all of their experiences back to Austin. And when a mentor alerted them to a Hyde Park space up for rent, Kendall brazenly cold-called Joel Mozersky, interior designer of Uchi, the Belmont and other Austin standouts. A fan of Mozersky’s work, she had hoped for a good referral at best, but her passion and vision enticed him to sign on.

Originally a laundromat, then an architectural firm, the site had only 15 feet of precious storefront. Mozersky played off the unpretentious yet earnest feel, producing a comfortable effortlessness to the atmosphere. The shop’s interior features crisp crimson bricks accented with handwritten cheese diagrams; the cases are fitted to the area like an answer to a riddle.

Antonelli’s sells about 75 cheeses, 25 wines and 16 craft beers, as well as charcuterie and cheese accompaniments like honey, nuts

and olives. The focus is local and artisanal, with some creative interpretations of “local.” They distinguish American cheeses from European—highlighting award winners, like Slow Food USA’s favorite, Hooligan, from the mother-son team at Cato Corner Farm in Connecticut. They laud Texas cheeses like Banded Beauty, a natural-rind cow’s milk cheese from Pola Artisan Cheese in Houston, and a Parmesan from Waco’s Brazos Valley Cheese Company. They celebrate cheeses made within a small radius of the shop, like Pure Luck’s Chipotle Chèvre (Dripping Springs) and CKC Farms’ Seasoned Feta in rosemary, olive oil and sun-dried tomatoes (Blanco). They also offer local products made in batches too small to fill orders at Whole Foods Market or Central Market, like Austin Jam Company’s Blackberry Pepper Jam and Salt & Time’s Salumi.

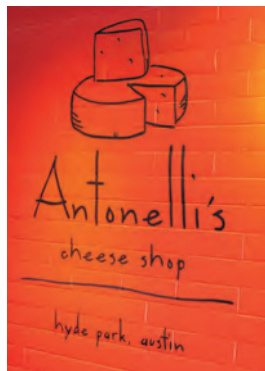
But it’s not just what they sell, it’s how. “It’s our passion for cheese that’s really being sold here,” says Kendall. As a customer, you’re invited to “taste away the case.” Kendall and John start you at one end, and you sample through fresh, soft-ripened, bloomy, washed-rind, semi-soft, firm, hard and blue cheeses. They point out a cheese’s textural strata from rind to butter to chalk in the center, and explain it. The product cards alone offer an education: the Renata, for example—a semi-soft cheese from Sally Jackson in Washington—is made from the milk of *one* cow, named Renata.

This Old World generosity has won Antonelli’s die-hard fans almost overnight. Shaesby Scott, a local jewelry designer, says they encourage all customers to taste as many cheeses as their hearts desire. This has led him and his family to discover new, unexpected favorites. Technologist Garrett Hall says that while Antonelli’s is a specialty store, it’s not exclusive. “You walk in, and they take time to understand what your personal tastes are and why you happen to be in that particular day trying cheese,” he says.

Because it takes time to serve each customer, John says that customers start talking to one another and offer recommendations. Not only does this slowed-down experience form intimacy between shopkeeper and shopper, it creates a neighborhood hub.

The Antonellis were originally uninterested in using technology for communication, but food bloggers asked them to Tweet new arrivals and there has been an enthusiastic response. Cheese lovers consult the Antonelli’s Facebook page and weekly e-mails to find out what’s on Antonelli’s signature plate at Apothecary Cafe & Wine Bar in Rosedale, which delicacies are premiering at the store and a schedule for future cheese classes. The shop can even keep an

account of everything a customer has bought and tried—just like the butchers and bakers of yore who knew what to cut and box before the bells above the door finished ringing.



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Tues.–Sat.: 11 a.m.–7 p.m.
Sun.: noon–5 p.m.
Twitter: AntonellisCHZ

Jardine Libaire writes novels, including *Here Kitty Kitty* (Little, Brown and Company), and writes for magazines, including *Elle*, *New York Magazine*, *Men’s Health* and *BlackBook*.

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