

Austin Says Cheese

Article and Photographs by Veronica Meewes



As simultaneously luxurious and convenient as it is to have such high quality grocery stores within the reach of our fingertips, I sometimes wish for simpler times...when bread was purchased from the bakery, meat from the butcher, and cheese from the local cheese shop. Thanks to movements like Slow Food and Farm to Table, and the increasing momentum built around locally grown and produced foods, it seems many cities are going back to their more provincial roots. Farmers markets are all the rage, it is actually pretty common for your

menu to list exactly where your greens were picked, and now—thanks to John and Kendall Antonelli—Austin has its first artisan cheese shop!

Until this February, John and Kendall held two separate careers and a mutual love for cheese. Now, as cheesemongers in their recently opened Hyde Park shop, they get to share that passion with the rest of the city. “I have certain people in my life who are specialists in certain areas who I go to for advice, questions, offerings,” explains John. “...and that’s what we want to be to the people of Austin: if you have a cheese question or just want to be opened up to the world of cheese, that’s where we come in.”

It was on their honeymoon in Grenada that John decided a life change was in order. “It was one of those serene, perfect moments,” he explains, “when you’re sitting on the beach, staring at waves crashing and you think ‘Where do I picture myself in ten years?’ and it was not being a CPA.” Kendall supported this big leap into the unknown whole-heartedly, though she laughs “A career in cheese? I didn’t even know what that meant!” Upon their return, John attended bootcamp at Murray’s, New York’s cheese mecca, before taking on an internship outside of Roanne, France with Herve Mons, one of the world’s leading affinuers.

Kendall joined John in Europe, where they did a cheese-guided tour of France, Italy, and Switzerland. “It was then that we were really able to do some soul searching,” she remembers. And while a grilled cheese restaurant was one possibility they’d considered, they fell in love with not only the products but the people making them. They decided an artisan cheese shop was their calling. “What we hope to bring to Austin,” says John, “is a curiosity about where your cheese and products come from, so you can appreciate all the hard work that goes into it...we hope that education about cheese and the farmers leads to a passion for it.”

Step into the cozy, sunlit interior of Antontelli’s and you are immediately greeted by the eponymous pair. And this fromagerie bears no air of pretention. No matter how busy the shop, John and Kendall will take the time to find you the cheese of your dreams, and an accompaniment if you’d like to enhance your curd experience. (The shop features hand-picked cured meats, charcuterie, craft beers, boutique chocolates, nuts, olives, vinegars, and honeys.) They’ll also give you the story behind each hand-selected product and insist you sample before purchasing. At press time, one seasonal favorite was Cabot Creamery’s aged cheddar, a complex cousin of the quesadilla-grade Cabot you find at HEB. After large-scale production, the initial wheels are sent off to major grocery stores while this smaller batch is sent off to Vermont’s Jasper Hill Farm and wrapped in cloth to age in their cellars.

Some other favorites include Jasper Hill’s unique and very briefly available Winnemere, made from young Ayrshire cow’s milk, then wrapped in tree bark and washed in local cider. Northern California’s Cypress Grove Chevre puts out a breathtaking cheese called Humboldt Fog, a delicate goat’s milk wheel with a ribbon of vegetable ash strung through its entirety. Kendall also notes the popularity of Ewe’s Blue, a creamy, Roquefort-style sheep’s milk cheese produced by Hudson Valley’s Old Chatham Shepherding Company.

Local offerings make up more than half the case at Antontelli's: organic goat cheese from Blanco's CKC Farms, Pure Luck Farm's "Hopelessly Blue" out of Dripping Springs, and parmesan from Waco's Brazos Valley Cheese are just a few of the Texan selections you will find. The Antonellis are proud to provide local farmers another venue to sell their products and hope that their shop can act as a supplement to Austin's growing farmer's markets. Future plans include a possible local farm tour as well. "The producers are the ones on the front line; their art form is an amazing one," raves John. "They make from scratch, they create the recipes and the flavors. They're not cutting corners to make a profit. They're doing it the long and hard way. What Kendall and I are trying to do is showcase what they do well. Our art form is the education of what they do and how they do it."

Kelly Sheehan is the newest addition to the Antonelli's team, coming on as the catering and wholesale manager after four years as the lead manager at Central Market. Kelly also fell in love with cheese in France while studying abroad and living a block from legendary Barthelemy in Paris. She returned to the states and credits Central Market with enhancing her cheese knowledge, as she tended to roughly 1300 rotating cheeses from all different parts of the world. She was honored when the Antonelli's invited her to join on their cheese journey, stressing that "it is every cheesemongers dream to have a case of cheese instead of cutting on an industrial level." And with three experts on the case, you can rest assured that each cheese is being properly handled and stored. "[Cheese is] a living breathing product that needs to be matured," says John. "You need to give it the love and respect it deserves to make it the product it can be."