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From cheesemongers to miniaturists, blacksmiths to mixologists, we celebrate those who shape the world with their hands



# WILD CURDS



## If you thought American cheese was square, orange and only fit for melting on burgers, you're in for a pungent surprise. We meet some New Englanders who are bringing new meaning to craft cheese

Words / Patrick McGuigan → Photography / Brian Jenkins

**T**here's a cheese revolution happening in the US. Driven by a new generation of makers, buyers and consumers who reject industrial manufacturing in favour of traditional methods, it's bringing a new wave of exciting flavours to farmers' markets and shelves from coast to coast.

The artisan food renaissance that began with beer, coffee and bread has now spread to dairy, and cheese is becoming a cool career choice for young people who care about what goes into their food. Many have the tattoos to prove it: cow-related inkings have become de rigueur. And as membership of the American Cheese Society (ACS) has soared – almost doubling in the past 10 years – so has the number of innovative products. More than 2,000 artisan cheeses were entered into the ACS awards last year.

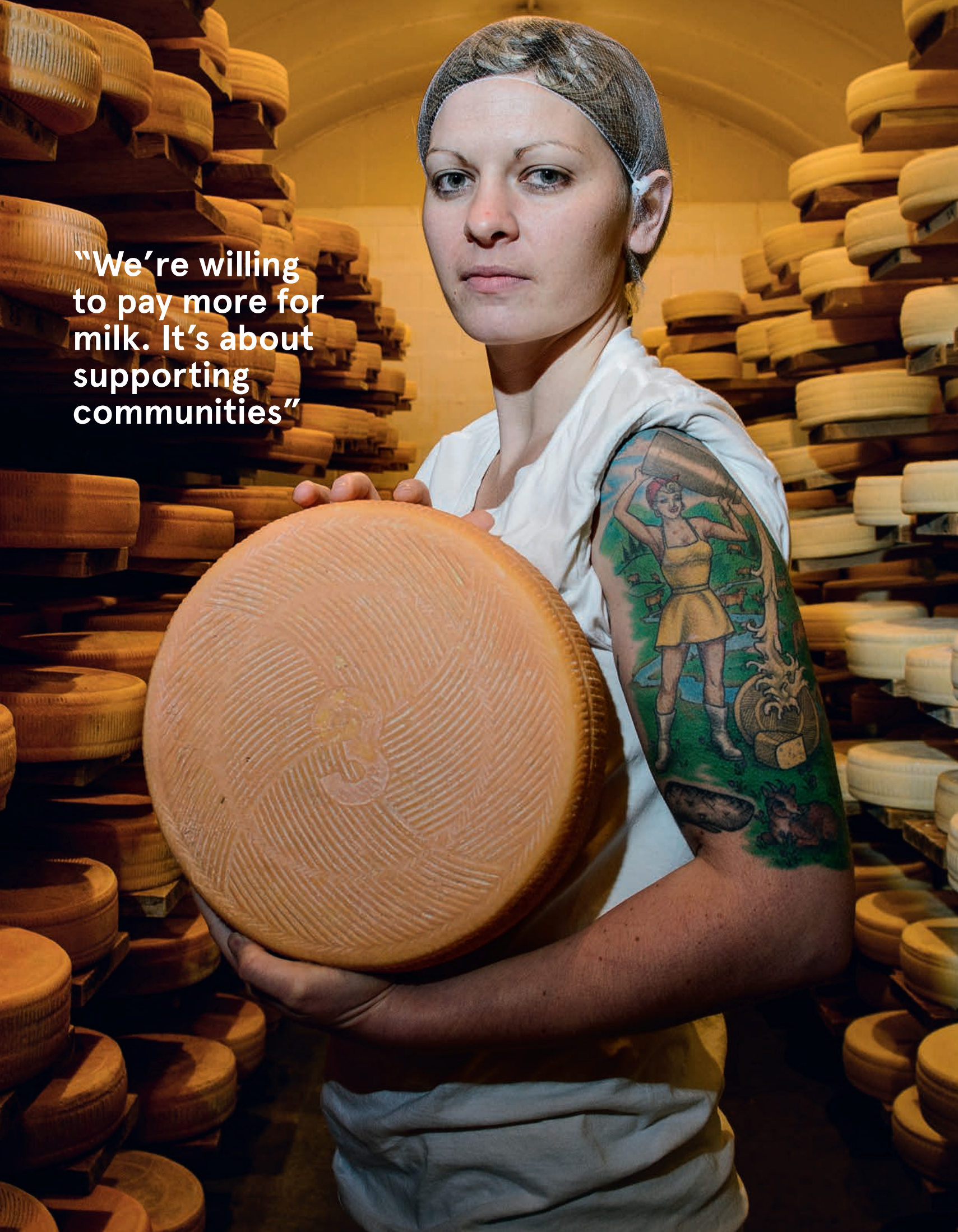
Leading the vanguard of the renaissance is the New England state of Vermont, which has a long history of progressive thinking and dairy farming. It's home to more cheesemakers per capita than any other state in the US. Most of them can be visited as part of the Vermont Cheese Trail – a map published by the Vermont Cheese Council highlighting farms, shops and museums where the public can take tours, see cheese being made, and taste and buy it for themselves.

“Vermont is at the epicentre of the American cheese renaissance and the push towards small-scale, farmstead cheesemaking,” declares Rory Stamp, who's on the council's board. “A lot of it is thanks to the fiercely independent nature of Vermonters. We've long been a dairy state, but in the 1970s we also had the back-to-the-land movement with hyper-liberal hippies moving to Vermont. It's an environment that promotes individuality.”

Cripplingly low liquid milk prices are also playing their part. Fifteen years ago there were 1,400 dairy farms in Vermont. Today, there are fewer than 750, thanks to milk prices that are stuck at below the cost of production. In contrast, artisan cheese fetches US\$30 per pound (about 0.45kg) in specialist cheese shops.

“Dairy farmers can get a better price by producing good milk for cheesemaking,” says Stamp, who was named America's best cheesemonger in 2018, after winning the Cheesemonger Invitational – a raucous test of cheese skill in San Francisco. “It's like *The Hunger Games* of cheesemongering,” he says. “But also an opportunity for the industry to learn from each other, and spread knowledge.” *We hit the trail to meet the people living life on the wedge... »*

**“We’re willing  
to pay more for  
milk. It’s about  
supporting  
communities”**





## THE ROCK 'N' ROLL CHEESEMAKER

Leslie Goff tells her life story through the medium of tattoos. There's a maple leaf and snowflake beneath each ear chronicling her childhood on a Vermont farm where maple syrup and snowmobiling were a way of life. But her true calling is revealed in a colourful shoulder tattoo. It depicts a milkmaid, surrounded by cows and goats, holding a churn triumphantly above her head with milk cascading into a wheel of cheese.

"Cheese is wild," says Goff, creamery director at Consider Bardwell Farm in West Pawlet. "I love the gratification of taking a raw product like milk and turning it into something that is eaten across America."

Goff first started working at Consider Bardwell Farm when she was 15, visiting after school to milk the goats. Now 29, she oversees production of the dairy's unpasteurised goat and cow's cheeses, named after local towns. Highlights include Manchester, a semi-soft washed rind cheese full of earthy flavours, which is made with milk from the farm's 200-strong herd of goats. "Because we don't pasteurise our milk we get more complex flavours that reflect the landscape and the seasons," she explains.

There's also Rupert, a fruity, Gruyère-style cheese made with rich Jersey cow's milk from a neighbouring farm. Goff pays around three times the market rate for the milk – a principle close to her heart. "There used to be a bunch of small family dairy farms here, but they're going out of business because milk prices are so low," she says. "To make good cheese we need milk from animals that graze green pasture and hay in the winter, and we're willing to pay more for it. It's about supporting communities."

Located in the rolling hills of the Champlain Valley in South West Vermont, the 120-hectare farm was set up in 1864 by a man called Consider Stebbens Bardwell. Cheesemaking started here in 2004 after it was bought by Angela Miller and Russell Glover, a literary agent and an architect with a passion for sustainable farming. Today the company employs 30 people and its products are sold at Michelin-starred restaurants and fancy cheese counters, bringing wealth back to a part of rural Vermont where money is tight.

Not that the cheese life is easy. "It means long days and hard physical work," says Goff. "You get into some pretty unnatural positions leaning over the vat and lifting 30lb [14kg] cheeses. But I love that I'm still involved in farming and keeping the valley alive."

[considerbardwellfarm.com](http://considerbardwellfarm.com)



Opening page  
Cheese rounds ageing  
on boards in the cave at  
Consider Bardwell Farm

From left  
Creamery director Leslie  
Goff holds a 10lb round;  
the farm's barn; a baby goat



From left  
Plymouth Cheese  
headquarters; the brand's  
distinctive retro waxed  
cheeses on the shelf;  
Jesse Werner



## THE CHEESE REVIVALIST

Vermont makes more than 150 cheeses, from goat's logs to spicy blues, but it is best known for its tangy Cheddar, first introduced by English settlers.

"We like our Cheddar sharp with a bit of bite," explains Plymouth cheesemaker Jesse Werner, who knows more than most about the state's cheese history. He took over one of the US's oldest Cheddar factories in 2009 and resurrected an old recipe found on a scrap of paper for a Vermont Cheddar with a fruity flavour and sharp tang that New England's pioneers would no doubt have appreciated.

His company, Plymouth Artisan Cheese, is located in the tiny town with which it shares its name, high up in the Green Mountains. It was established in 1890 by Colonel John Coolidge (father of US President Calvin Coolidge), and cheese has been made on and off in the original clapperboard building ever since.

It was given a new lease of life when Werner took over aged just 29, fresh from the University of Vermont, where he had been learning about artisan production methods. "I could see the scene was taking off with more and more Vermont cheeses in

counters," he says. "There are so few things you can control in this world, but what you eat is one. If you work in an office in New York or Boston, food is one way of linking with the natural world. And this is particularly true of cheese."

Visitors to Plymouth can watch Werner's process through viewing windows in the shop, which also has an upstairs museum with Coolidge-era equipment. As well as the original Plymouth Artisan Cheese, which is aged for 12 months, there are versions flavoured with herbs and spices, each with their own different colour waxed rinds, plus blues and washed rind versions that are aged in the cellar.

The company's retro branding is based on original artwork found in the factory's archives and reimagined by Werner's wife Sarit, a designer who worked for Ralph Lauren for many years. "We found this cool old brand and really wanted to revive it, but also make it work for now," Jesse says. "Cheese is like a time capsule. It connects you to a time, an environment, the animals and what they were eating on a particular day." [plymouthartisancheese.com](http://plymouthartisancheese.com)



“Cheese is like a time capsule – it connects you to a time, an environment”





**“There’s a lot of love for Beyoncé. The cheese always seems to come out well when we listen to that”**



From left  
Andi Wandt with a cheese rake; dairy cows with the Green Mountains in the background; Cheddar ready to be packaged



## ***THE EXPERIMENTER***

It didn't take cheesemaker Andi Wandt long to fall in love with Shelburne Farms – just like pretty much everyone who comes here. Set up in the 19th century as a model agricultural estate on the shores of Lake Champlain near Burlington, it's home to 570 hectares of beautiful pastures, woodlands and gardens centred around imposing Hogwarts-esque farm buildings, and a non-profit cheese education centre.

“I took an educational trip to Shelburne Farms and was completely enchanted by the place,” says Wandt, who's now head cheesemaker here. “I was expecting birds to land on my shoulder, like something out of Disney. I thought, ‘How do I get here?’”

Working at Whole Foods Market in Florida at the time, she successfully applied for a position as a seasonal cheesemaking assistant, and in 2017 made the 2,400km move to Vermont. A year later she was promoted to head cheesemaker as her talent for turning milk into cheese became clear.

“I'm fascinated by the art and science of cheese,” she says. “We make the same product every day, but it's never the same. There are so many intangibles. Raw

milk has a life of its own. The weather, the climate, the mood of the cheesemaker all make a difference.”

She spends a lot of time working out the most favourable conditions – and is often surprised. “We play music when we're making cheese and there's a lot of love for Beyoncé. The cheese always seems to come out well when we listen to that.”

The cheesemakers usually have an audience as they bop around the vat with viewing windows for the thousands of schoolkids and tourists that visit the farm each year. “We're used to having people with their faces pressed against the glass, mesmerised by where and how cheese is made,” she says.

The huge turreted Farm Barn is also home to a bakery, furniture maker, children's farmyard and a centre for school educational programmes. The Sun to Cheese tour covers the entire cheesemaking business, from the pastures that are grazed by the farm's herd of Brown Swiss cows to the science of cheese maturation. “You need to come here to understand,” says Wandt. “It's a real hub.”

[shelburnefarms.org](http://shelburnefarms.org)



From above  
 Mary Tuthill poses for a photo in the cheese display case at the Mad River Taste Place; a cheese toastie made from Sip of Sunshine Alehouse Cheddar



## THE MASTER OF CHEESE

Mary Tuthill has a bubbly personality and infectious smile, but her studies in cheese reduced her to tears. The head cheesemonger at the Mad River Taste Place, which showcases Vermont food and drink, is one of fewer than 1,000 Certified Cheese Professionals (CCP) in the US – a qualification that takes nine months of study, culminating in a fiendishly difficult test.

“It was absolutely the hardest exam I’ve ever taken in my life,” she says. “I cried a bit when I finished.”

Launched by the American Cheese Society in 2012, the qualification is only open to people with at least 4,000 hours of experience in the industry and covers every aspect, from cow breeds, milk and cheese history to stock management and food safety. CCP has underpinned the boom in artisan cheese, bringing new people to the industry, says Tuthill.

“It’s an important part of the American cheese story because it legitimises what we do. It’s taken the perception of working in cheese from being just a job to a career for life.”

## While you're in Vermont



### Stay Lake St Catherine

Close to the Cheese Trail, this is part of a gorgeous state park, there are plenty of Airbnb cabins and you can kayak off the cheese calories.

[lakestcatherine.org](http://lakestcatherine.org)



### Eat

#### Hen of the Wood

At the boutique Hotel Vermont, this lauded restaurant showcases Vermont's local produce in dishes full of gutsy flavours. The cheeseboard is unmissable, obvs.

[henofthewood.com](http://henofthewood.com)



### Do

#### Vermont Cheesemakers Festival

Cheese lovers travel from all over the US to attend this celebration each August. Meet 40 makers, plus other foodie artisans, selling more than 200 products.

[vtcheesefest.com](http://vtcheesefest.com)



**“Vermont is shining through. We have farms that are making cheese in the right way...”**

Her months of study are put to good use at Mad River, which combines a shop, café and events space with units for start-up food producers. It's also the headquarters of the Vermont Cheese Council, so it's no surprise that the long glass counter is populated exclusively with Vermont cheeses. Brilliant blues and truckles of Cheddars sit next to Bries and washed cheeses, plus dainty goat and ewe's milk products.

They are loved by locals, but also tourists, who nibble on tasters at the counter. Cheeses like Mad River Blue, an unpasteurised, organic variety produced from just 50 cows from the Von Trapp Farmstead, which was founded by a descendant of the original *Sound of Music* family. Its buttery texture and complex notes of cocoa and anise are a world away from the industrially produced alternative.

“People are looking for artisan cheeses, especially raw milk cheeses made on farms with their own animals,” says Tuthill, who sports a cheese slicer tattoo on her arm. “That’s why Vermont is shining through it all. We have farms that are making cheese in the right way.”

Having someone behind the counter qualified to explain the difference is the final link in the chain, although Tuthill says she is preaching to the converted. “Our customers want to learn more about cheese,” she says with the smile back on her face. “They understand there’s more to it than American cheese singles.”

[madrivertaste.com](http://madrivertaste.com), [vtcheese.com/vermont-cheese-trail-map](http://vtcheese.com/vermont-cheese-trail-map)  
*Norwegian flies to Boston and Providence, gateways to New England and both around two hours' drive from Vermont. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at [Norwegian.com](http://Norwegian.com)*