

IT GETS FETA

My four years with cheese

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I never anticipated my life's path would be shaped by cheese. I never thought answering a Craigslist ad for a job at a cheese shop would allow me to rediscover myself. But here we are. This is my cheesy tale to tell.

YEAR ONE: THE UNSURE BOCCONCINI

I moved to Vancouver six years ago with my husband after we finished university. I had made the terrifying decision to leave my hometown of London, ON, having never before lived away from my family—the glue I was convinced held me together. I can't blame the weather for my depression; I fell in love with the grey Vancouver days. I walked along English Bay every afternoon feeling restless and empty and cold. It was in that state of aching and profound loneliness that I began working as a full-time cheesemonger.

We wore uniforms: white lab coats that identified us as the people who could transform your dinner party cheese course into a wild success, who could tell you off the tops of our heads what to pair with a bottle of peaty whisky or special occasion wine.

At least, my co-workers could. I spent three months learning about cheese before I was allowed to begin serving customers. Most importantly, beyond learning, I became comfortable with asking questions. With not knowing the answer. With slowly coming unstuck from my life in Ontario.

YEAR TWO: THE MATURING PARMESAN

My second year of being a cheesemonger was my time of awakening. I would come home from work buoyant, bursting with ideas gleaned from that day's conversations with coworkers and customers. It was during this time that I began to actually think about food blogging seriously. I had been tentatively writing about food for the past year, dipping my toes into the water only to yank them back out in fear. I discovered that I had a good palate. Flavours that were elusive to some found their way to me easily. I let this slip one day while we all gathered around at work to try a new wheel of Queso Maxorata, a firm cheese from the Canary Islands made with raw goat's milk. An entirely ordinary-looking cheese, I had expected it to taste like other goat's milk cheeses: tangy and undeniably goaty. Instead,

I tasted cinnamon and dried marjoram. No one else had been able to taste these notes, and I instantly assumed that I was the one who had made a mistake. Quiet vindication came later that night when I was reading about Queso Maxorata: a cheese made from the milk of goats that feed on wild marjoram.

I began to share other observances with my peers, until I eventually reached the point when I felt assured enough to share them with select customers. I suddenly had a skill with potential—a skill that made me feel solidly confident with the recommendations I gave, the choices I made on behalf of a shopper.

YEAR THREE: THE CONFIDENT GRUYERE

All my experience transformed and began to move forward with accelerated speed. I had more responsibilities at the shop, more chances to work with restaurants when they were developing their cheese dishes, and fewer moments when I felt completely out of my element talking to customers.

My interest in cheese pairings became a weekend obsession. I discovered that milky coffee brings out rich chocolate notes in Beaufort d'Alpage. I tentatively experimented with the unlikely pairing of gin and cheese. As it turns out, Fleur du Maquis, a semi-soft raw sheep's milk cheese from Corsica that's aged in rosemary and juniper berries, is the perfect match for an ice-cold gin and tonic. Kaltbach Alpine Extra, a firm raw cow's milk cheese from Switzerland, tastes as though it were destined to be shaved thinly onto roast beef sandwiches with mayonnaise and arugula.

Cheese is something pleasurable, something that could even be described as fun, and I began to notice how fearful people were of screwing it all up. I've since come to the conclusion that if it tastes good to you, then the pairing is a success. There are endless rules—arbitrary rules—that are ascribed to cheese by imperious food writers who would like to make you think there is something wrong with the fact that you enjoy a spicy shiraz with burrata. If it's true, though, that this combination tastes wonderful to you, there's no sense in denying yourself something that brings you the simplest of joys. It became my goal to make people comfortable with their own taste, to give customers the room they needed to unabashedly enjoy the pairings they desire.

YEAR FOUR: THE FREE ROQUEFORT

I experienced a tipping point in the form of being ignored by the shop's exclusive oenophile customers—the kind who claim they have a bottle of 2004 La Grande Dame sitting in the trunk of their car, as if telling their friends they were dating a European supermodel. I'd listen to them talk to my male coworkers with visions of foie gras mousse, aged Mimolette the colour of orange poppies, a wedge of unctuous triple cream brie, and a dollop of Champagne rose petal jelly. I had great ideas, but they would never know.

Not being included in these customer relationships made me feel bitter, like I had a vast cavern of information tucked away that I wasn't allowed to use. As though I had embarked on a backwards journey in time to visit my former self, the self that hadn't realized her real potential yet. Bitterness is the most unyielding cement, the stickiest glue in which you can trap yourself. The only real antidote is bravery: forcing yourself to blindly leap off a cliff without any real assurance of landing somewhere remotely safe.

I spent several unhappy months thinking about being brave; I would replay my ideal quitting scenario over and over again in my mind until it became a situation of do or die, write or be written off. And then one bright November morning, after a sweat-soaked and anxiety-ridden bus ride to work, I closed my eyes and leapt off the cliff. My voice sounded like ground-up pebbles being dropped down a metal chute; the fear was a combination of standing up for myself and finally understanding I had real knowledge and real power.

I could stand on my own, on the other side of the counter, and I could be an authority on the subject of cheese. I could write for magazines, and I could contribute to books, and I could be sought after for my recommendations. Saying goodbye was difficult in the same way that leaving my family in Ontario was difficult—I loved so many aspects of my time as a cheesemonger and I felt as though I was abandoning my friendships with my coworkers. But in the end it came down to the simple fact that I needed to be free, to experience and embrace a life and career of my very own. Cheese was there for me then, and though in a different way, it's still here for me now.

