

FEBRUARY 10, 2003

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FEBRUARY 1, 2003

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TIME

June 30, 2003 Vol. 161, No. 26

YOUR TIME

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Meet the Big Cheese

At a first-of-its-kind facility in the U.S., great cheese isn't born—it's molded

YOU MUST SMELL THIS one!" exclaims *maitre fromager* and *affineur* Daphne Zepos, inhaling deeply from a pungent wheel of Tomme au Marc cheese. "It smells like a walk in the forest in October."

After getting her exotic-scent fix, her face lights up as she evaluates the flowerlike molds developing nicely on the washed rind, noting that it reminds her of "Brancusi, like sculpture, not cheese," before moving on to observe that the crocks of St. Felicien, a creamy, nutty cheese, are ready for optimal eating. This is the chief goal of the newly opened Artisanal Cheese Center in New York City: to allow good cheeses to mature and therefore become better and tastier.

The brainchild of cheese-centric chef-restaurateur Terrance Brennan, the Artisanal Cheese Center is the first major establishment of its kind in the U.S.: 10,000 sq. ft. devoted to the art of *affinage* or aging of fine cheeses.

During *affinage*, cheese is placed in a cave to mature—a process that typically takes months but can last as long as two years or more. At the cheese center there are five caves equipped with customized European refrigeration systems, creating a distinct, precise climate for each type of cheese to reach its full potential. There's one each for blue, goat, washed rind, bloomy rind (like Brie) and semihard *tomme* cheeses.

The caves are all seasoned with naturally occurring "good" molds to replicate a natural aging environment. Zepos and a team of fellow *affineurs* monitor the cheeses daily, turning them and tasting the developing flavors

several times a week.

Brennan believes that artisanal cheesemaking (crafting cheese in small quantities) is on the verge of a breakthrough in the U.S., "like the wine industry was 20 years ago." Then a good bottle of wine was saved for special occasions. "Now, on weekday nights, people will open a nice bottle of wine," he says. "My goal is to get them to have a piece of good cheese as well."

The center aims to make fine cheeses accessible to everyone through its website, artisanalcheese.com. There's also a cheese-of-the-month club that delivers a monthly selection of three crafted cheeses. —By Lisa McLaughlin

