



# Cheese Champions

*An Interview with Lee Smith,  
Publisher & Editorial Director, Cheese Connoisseur*

**Q: How long have you been publishing *Cheese Connoisseur* and what was the inspiration behind the creation of the publication?**

The upcoming winter issue will be the fourth issue and the end of the first full year of publication. *Cheese Connoisseur* is published quarterly and the next winter issue will be on newsstands the second week of December. Our business-to-business and consumer subscribers will see it arrive in their mailboxes the first week in December. ([www.CheeseConnoisseur.com](http://www.CheeseConnoisseur.com))

*Cheese Connoisseur* is really the evolution of an idea. Many years ago – too long ago to admit – I started working as a supermarket clerk. As I worked my way up the chain of command, I found myself a deli and specialty cheese buyer/supervisor, and I fell in love with specialty cheese. At that time, specialty cheese was a niche business and mostly confined to the large cities on the east coast that had a strong European influence. In 1995, when I approached Phoenix Media Network with the idea of developing a trade magazine for the retail deli industry, Deli Business, specialty cheese was going to be a regular department. I have to admit that in the beginning it was more a labor of love – when I had extra pages I would publish more articles about obscure cheeses and cheesemakers. American cheesemakers were just starting to make themselves known on a national level and it was a personal goal to see American cheese sales grow and get the cheesemakers the recognition



*Lee Smith*

they deserved.

Last year, the dream of devoting a magazine to cheese coupled with a public not only interested in cheese and fine food, but also with a desire to support American businesses, local farming efforts and sustainable practices allowed us to publish a trade/consumer lifestyle magazine around cheese.

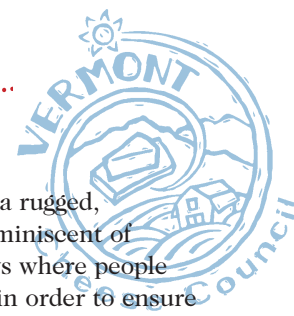
**Q: You feature cheeses from all over the world — how do you make your selections?**

We look for exceptional cheeses from extraordinary cheesemakers who have a story to tell. We also have some other qualifications. For instance, we want to choose products that are available nationally, but we wouldn't hesitate to feature a cheese that requires a bit of a treasure hunt to find. After all, we want to find the extraordinary and our readers what

to be in the know – so a little hunting adds to the mystique. We also like to feature cheeses that may be well known among connoisseurs, but the nuances of seasonality, for example, may not be understood. We want to entice, enlighten and awe our readers.

**Q: What constitutes a noteworthy or memorable cheese in your opinion?**

First, it must be a good piece of cheese. Sounds simple but in reality cheeses that are unusual or pretty and seem to be noteworthy are often times, upon tasting, found to be lacking in quality. So, the first thing I look at is the rind, and then I move on to the aroma and general appearance of the cheese. Rupert from Consider Bardwell Farm in Vermont is a cheese that has an amazing presentation with a beautiful



rind that makes the artist in me want to touch – to fondle – it. The aroma is breathtaking with overtones of butter, toast and roasted nuts. This is a cheese that also follows through with a paste (the inside of the cheese) that is delicious, not bitter and in complete balance, and its texture is both pleasing and technically correct. In other words, a beautiful cheese that is technically very good. I'm not the only one with that opinion. Rupert won third place in the American Cheese Society (ACS) Competition this year for Best in Show. Since there were over 1300 cheeses entered, the win is a profound testament to its quality.

But, just being a technically good cheese is often not enough to make it either noteworthy or memorable. Consumers are generally not that interested in the opinions of scientists or purists. Consumers want more. They want something that tastes wonderful and satisfies all the senses. We all want to be part of something special. Therefore, the story is very important. Cabot's Clothbound Cheddar is an example of a world-class cheese that won Best of Show at the ACS Competition and Judging in 2006. The partnership between a premier cheesemaker that revived its clothbound cheese with the help of Jasper Hill and its aging caves brought to the world a Cheddar reminiscent of the classic Cheddars of Somerset, England - with an American twist. Not as high in acid and not as dry and crumbly as the English Cheddars, the duo created Cheddar with a distinct Vermont profile – truly noteworthy and memorable. Jasper Hill with its expertise in aging and its amazing “real” cheese caves was able to bring out the character and nuances of flavor Cabot might not have been able to accomplish on its own.

So, in summation a noteworthy and memorable cheese is a cheese that is technically correct but unique and has a story to tell the world.

**Q: What are your thoughts about the quality and breadth of cheeses currently being made in Vermont?**

Vermont is unique and remarkable – and not just for its cheeses! The cover story in the fall issue of *Cheese Connoisseur*, “Good Neighbors Make Good Cheeses,” is the story of the Vermont cheese making community. Jan Fialkow, the managing editor of *Cheese Connoisseur*, and I spent close to a week visiting cheesemakers, restaurants, bed and breakfasts, farms and dairies to research the story. We wanted to learn more about Vermont cheeses but we also wanted to experience the character of Vermont.

I have to thank Allison Hooper of Vermont Butter & Cheese Creamery (VBCC) for helping us make the story a success. She and her partner Bob Reese are typical of the teamwork and cooperation seen in Vermont. Not only did we have the opportunity to visit their plant, but Allison also made the arrangements for us to visit other cheesemakers. VBCC is another unique story. When Allison was a college student in France, she worked on an organic farm, learning to make cheese while earning her room and board. Today, many of VBCC's world class cheeses are based on French classics – with a Vermont touch. Their cheeses are now exported to France, completing the circle.

Vermont has its own amazing and unique

culture. There is a rugged, independence reminiscent of early pioneer days where people worked together in order to ensure survival. Yet underneath it all is a subculture of fine china, poetry, master craftsmen, classic food and a love of the environment. The results are excellent cheeses with unique, distinctly American characteristics that are respectful of their European heritage. Obviously, a lot has to do with Vermont's cheesemakers, but the environment has a lot to do with it, too. Clean air and water, the proper and humane treatment of animals and a respect for the land all play an important part in producing good milk and good milk is the keystone for good cheese.

The breadth of cheeses is, well, breathtaking. From the French-style goat cheeses of Vermont Butter & Cheese to the cheddars, mountain-style cheeses, blues and more, they are all uniquely Vermont and a United States treasure.

**VERMONT CHEESES**

THE STATE IS HOME TO THE SOME OF THE BEST ARTISAN CHEESEMAKERS IN THE COUNTRY. HERE'S A SMALL SAMPLING OF THE MANY VARIETIES THAT MAKE VERMONT PROUD.

- 1. BLUE LEDGE FARM, Salisbury:** Lake's Edge is a mold-ripened goat's milk cheese aged for three weeks. Wonderfully tart and creamy; it was awarded a second place ribbon in 2006 by the American Cheese Society and named one of 100 Great Cheeses by *Wine Spectator* magazine in 2008. [www.blueledgefarm.com](http://www.blueledgefarm.com)
- 2. BLYTHEDALE FARM, Corinth:** Jersey Blue is made in the Salton style from whole, unpasteurized milk and Roquefort terfat content assures melt-in-your-mouth quality. The American Cheese Society has judged it best in the blue-veined class. [www.vtcheese.com/members/blythedale/blythedale.htm](http://www.vtcheese.com/members/blythedale/blythedale.htm)
- 3. TAYLOR FARM, Londonderry:** Vermont Farmstead Couais is made from fresh, Holstein and Jersey milk cows that graze in lush pastures of red clover and timothy. Sealed in red wax, it slices beautifully and pairs with fruits, nuts and breads. [www.taylorfarmvermont.com](http://www.taylorfarmvermont.com)
- 4. THISTLE HILL FARM, North Pomfret:** Tarentaise is a unique American farmstead cheese made from raw organic milk in the manner of French Alpine cheeses. The area's soil, geography, climate and flora give Tarentaise its characteristic smooth, subtle nut flavor and complex finish. [www.thistlehillfarm.com](http://www.thistlehillfarm.com)
- 5. WOODCOCK FARM CHEESE, Weston:** Weston Wheel is a natural-rind, sheep's milk farmstead cheese. It's aged four to five months to produce a distinctive bite with a nutty, strong, lingering flavor like toffee. It won first prize for farmstead sheep milk cheese at the 2003 American Cheese Society competition. [www.vtcheese.com/members/woodcock/woodcock.htm](http://www.vtcheese.com/members/woodcock/woodcock.htm)

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