



LONG ISLAND'S
WELL-AGED
CHEESE
SHOPS

By Liza Burby

AMERICANS LOVE CHEESE. IN FACT, ACCORDING TO A RECENT BLOOMBERG REPORT, WE'RE EACH EATING AN AVERAGE OF ABOUT 35 POUNDS A YEAR. THE PAST TWO YEARS MARK THE HIGHEST AVERAGE CONSUMPTION SINCE 1975. ADDITIONALLY, ARTISANAL CHEESE—MADE BY HAND—WAS ONE OF THE NATIONAL RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION'S TOP PREDICTED FOOD TRENDS FOR 2017.

Fortunately, if world-class cheese makes you melt, there are local shops that have aged well, adapting to whatever trend their patrons have a taste for. While there are a few new shops on Long Island, these have a rich history that continues to ripen under the care of their cheese experts.

THE VILLAGE CHEESE SHOP

Among the popular stops on Love Lane in Mattituck is The Village Cheese Shop, which opened at number 105 in 2001. Michael Affatato bought it from the original owner, Rosemary Batcheller, in the autumn of 2015. Prior to that, Affatato spent nearly 25 years in the wine business in France, where, he says, cheese is part of the staple diet.

“Here it’s more of a novelty. But our customers, 80 percent of whom are transient—we’re a magnet for Europeans, day-trippers and New York City residents—are well-traveled, erudite and have discerning palates,” Affatato says. “They come to this shop to invest in something good.”

The Village Cheese Shop carries about 200 domestic and direct imports, with something new to offer customers every Friday. Among these are popular Dutch Goudas, triple creams, truffle-based creams and manchegos from Spain. The shop also serves baguettes, charcuterie such as speck and chorizo, olives, chocolates, biscotti and 38 different wines from France and Long Island. There’s also a sunny café on site where you can order wine and six different fondues.

CAVANIOLA'S GOURMET CHEESE SHOP

Cavaniola's Gourmet Cheese Shop at 89B Division Street in Sag Harbor opened in 2004. Owner Michael Cavaniola



Cheese on a rack at Mecox Bay Dairy. Photo credit: Mecox Bay Dairy.

learned the trade from the time he was 5, working in his parents' Fort Lee, New Jersey, shop in the 1970s. He had no plans to follow his parents, but after 14 years as an architect, he says, “I moved to Sag Harbor to spend a year clearing my head. I noticed there were no food businesses out here, so I thought I’d be able to meet a need.”

Since then, Cavaniola’s has become a trendy destination for vacationers and residents alike, with many customers coming in weekly for the past 13 years. “We started to get busier on Sundays, because people even buy their cheeses before going back to Manhattan,” Cavaniola says.

What draws customers is that he caters to their tastes. “Most of my clientele are well traveled, so they go to Europe and come back and want the same flavors they had there,” he says. “When they come in, we have a conversation about what they’re looking for and what they like.”

They can select from about 175 imported and domestic cheeses, 90 percent of which are artisanal and come from France, Italy, Switzerland and the British Isles, as well as the U.S. “Right now, people’s taste buds are definitely accepting stronger cheeses; they’re not as into the soft, creamy ones,” Cavaniola says. “Washed rind cheeses are popular, as are Époisses from Burgundy and Gorgonzola cremificato.” »



Artisanal Dutch gouda exclusive to The Village Cheese Shop.
Photo credit: The Village Cheese Shop, Mattituck.

Since last May, there's a second cheese shop in Amagansett at 8 Amagansett Square.

THE CHEESE STORE OF CEDARHURST

Neighborhoods have different food personalities, notes Mitch Rakita, who 40 years ago opened The Cheese Store of Cedarhurst at 532 Central Avenue with his father, Louis. Though the establishment still serves many original customers, as newer families have moved in, their tastes have differed. Further influencing the cheese selection in his cases, says Rakita, are the food trends he's adapted to since 1977.

"At first we just had cheese and crackers to meet the wine and cheese party trend. We've been through the salt-free fad, then low-carb, and, during the Scarsdale diet craze, on Thursdays you could eat all the cheese you wanted, so it made that day crazy here," he recalls. "But regular cheeses are back in vogue, like high-fat cheddars. My clients today like the savory cheeses like dills, garlic, caraway and hot pepper."

His customers also like charcuteries such as soppressata, and the store carries specialty items like olives, figs, pâtés and olive oils.

Cavaniola's is tucked behind Main Street, with Cavaniola's Kitchen—serving foods like lobster rolls and crabcakes—on one side and his Wine Cellar (housed in a Revolutionary War building) on the other.

Rakita's patrons come in not only for the selection of 350 cheeses he offers each year but also for snacks to take to the nearby beaches and for the iced coffee menu, which includes 25 chocolate flavors, as well as nutty and fruity choices. *LL*

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Basket assortment; Mecox Bay Dairy.
Photo credit: Mecox Bay Dairy.

THE *NEWEST-OLDEST* CHEESE SHOP ON LONG ISLAND

Mecox Bay Dairy at 855 Mecox Road in Bridgehampton just opened its first official cheese shop, but the farm has been in operation since 1875, alternating between potatoes and dairy for much of its history. According to Peter Ludlow, a fifth generation farmer, his grandfather and great-grandfather ran a dairy selling milk and cheese from 1910 to 1950 before switching back to potatoes. Around 2002, his father, Arthur, decided to go back into the cheese-making business. In July of this year, they opened a self-serve store with cheeses such as Alpine-style, English-style cheddar and a washed rind Tomme, as well as grass-fed beef and pasteurized pork. A staple is their raw milk, which has been in demand among local customers for 15 years. Through a window customers can watch the cheese making, cow milking and cheese-aging processes.

"We've been selling our cheese to farmer's markets and local restaurants since 2005. It takes a lot of land to grow a commodity crop like potatoes, and you have no connection to your customers," says Peter Ludlow. "By making and selling cheese, we can contribute to the micro-economy—and my father appreciates getting to talk directly to our longtime customers." —*LB*