

STYLE

The Culture Is Changing, With Feminist Cheese

By ALEXANDRA JACOBS NOV. 22, 2017

Last year Erin Bligh, the proprietor of Dancing Goats Dairy in Newbury, Mass., planned to introduce a new cheese — hard, with spicy peppers — called Madam President, in what she assumed would be a fromage homage to a historic election.

Then came the unexpected result: hard cheese indeed, in the Evelyn Waugh sense of the phrase.

“I’m like, ‘Oh damn, this is awful,’” said Ms. Bligh, 29, who has four full-time employees overseeing a herd of 45 goats. She renamed the cheese General Leia Organa, after the Rebel Alliance leader in “Star Wars,” and sent chunks to fortify friends attending the women’s march in Boston. “This is my small piece of the resistance,” a local customer told her, brandishing a wedge.

Soon thereafter Ms. Bligh decided to name cheeses after Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Cheddary, enrobed in black) and Josephine Baker (Sardo-style, with a natural rind and slightly sweet). “We’ve got a Misty Copeland, we’ve got a Marie Curie,” she said. “We’re just releasing our Jane Goodall, and we had an Amelia Earhart — two wheels of it and it sold out in a second, because everyone’s like, ‘Yeah, that’s my girl.’”

Along with all the noisier revolutions of late, there is a quiet if pungent one happening in dairy cases across America. Cheese, traditionally named for a place of origin — Brie, Stilton, with the occasional Jack or Brillat-Savarin muscling in — now often broadcasts its inherently feminine constitution.

“As it should be,” said Seana Doughty, 46, of Bleating Heart Cheese in Tomales, Calif., who has created both Fat Bottom Girl, named for both a Queen song and its lovably variable shape, and Shepherdista, alluding to Ms. Doughty’s proud fondness for fashion. “Last time I checked, you couldn’t milk boys!”

Rrrright?

At a moment when assault and harassment revelations are creeping across male-dominated industries like so much unwanted mold, independent American cheese making stands as an obvious if undersung exemplar of the ultimate matriarchal workplace.

“We’re all women here,” said Rhonda Gothberg, 63, of Gothberg Farms in Bow, Wash., a former nurse who offers a cheese called Woman of La Mancha — the sharpest in her catalog, naturally. “We do have one man who cleans our pens for us, but all my milkers, all my farmers’ market people — it’s not a *requirement* that they be women, it’s just worked out that way,” Ms. Gothberg said. “We’ve tried a couple of guys, and they were not patient and kind and clean.”

Cheese was historically woman’s “indoor” work while men were outside plowing the fields, as the New York City cheesemonger Anne Saxelby details in a useful “5 Minute History” last spring, in which she proclaimed that “The Future (And Past!) of Cheese Is Female.”

Then came the Kraft brothers and their convenient processed singles of midcentury; the slick bricks of Velveeta, Philadelphia and Cracker Barrel.

Second-wave pioneers taking back the land in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s included Judy Schad of Capriole Inc. in Greenville, Ind.; Laini Fondiller of Lazy Lady Farm in Westfield, Vt.; and Sue Conley and Peggy Smith of Cowgirl Creamery in Point Reyes Station, Calif.

Last year Ms. Schad, 75, introduced Flora, named for her grandmother, who made cheese under less than ideal conditions on her back porch. It joined Piper’s Pyramide, inspired by Ms. Schad’s own first, redheaded granddaughter (“bright and spicy — just like her namesake!”); Sofia, for a longtime friend (“a queen at any

age!”); and Julianna, after a Hungarian intern. “Beneath her wrinkly exterior lies a complexity not often found in such a young cheese,” reads Capriole’s description of the Wabash Cannonball, a popular, prizewinning cheese named for the folk song about a fictional train sung by Johnny Cash.

“I think these cheeses are women — and sometimes they’re ladies, sometimes they’re not,” Ms. Schad said. “But the flavor is subtle. They don’t hit you over the head with a rolling pin.”

A commonly cited fantasy **Plan B** among urban paper-pushing professionals, the artisanal-cheese business has surged in recent years, with more than 900 specialty cheese makers in the United States, according to the American Cheese Society, a nonprofit trade organization in Denver. The A.C.S. does not keep data on gender, said its executive director, Nora Weiser, but compared with the bro-centric field of craft beer, where female brewers have **struggled** to get respect and recognition despite significant contributions, cheese making is a relative haven. Membership has more than doubled since 2005 and now numbers 1,800. “There aren’t many breakoff groups, because there don’t need to be,” Ms. Weiser said.

The A.C.S. said there were over 2,000 entrants in the Annual Judging & Competition last July, a kind of Golden Globes for the curds-and-whey crowd, up from 89 in 1985. Winning second place in the category of “Farmstead Cheeses Aged 60 Days+ With a 39 percent or Higher Moisture Content (Cow’s Milk)” was Womanchego, a familiar sight near the She Wolf Bakery booth at the farmers’ market in Union Square in Manhattan, where many high-powered restaurateurs shop.

“It’s very quickly the one that people gravitate toward the most, and now they are extra-delighted because of the sexual and political climate,” said Mark Gillman, 48, a founder with his mother of Cato Corner Farm in Colchester, Conn., which has manufactured Womanchego since 2004. The farm later added spinoffs: Wise Womanchego, aged more than one year, and an elusive middle-aged version, Mrs. Robinson (all christened by women, Mr. Gillman hastened to add).

Sarah Marcus, 49, who formerly worked for the music industry, named her Briar Rose Creamery in Dundee, Ore., after a song invoking Sleeping Beauty, a

woman who wakes up to her passion. On its roster are Freya's Wheel, a Norse name for the constellation more commonly known as Orion; Iris, after the Greek goddess of the rainbow and, for a goat cheese washed in beer, Lorelei. "She's delicious and luscious, but Lorelei is a river mermaid, a siren," Ms. Marcus said. "She lured sailors to their doom." Happy Thanksgiving!

Down South is Kathryn Spann, who practiced international law in New York City for a dozen years, for a time alongside Eliot Spitzer when he was attorney general. She is now an owner of Prodigal Farm in Rougemont, N.C., and sells, among other cheeses, Bearded Lady, a reference to her goats. There is also Dirty Girl: a reclaiming of sorts of an often-pornographic phrase used as recently as 2010 as the title of a movie about a sexualized high schooler distributed by the now-disgraced Weinstein Company.

To Ms. Spann, 49, Dirty Girl connotes something different. "To me, in my head, it's always a little farm girl in overalls," she said. "She's innocent, she's a working girl. She's not being foofy and image conscious, she's just herself."

A new label in progress for the cheese shows an image of this girl: flanked by animals, smiling as she looks hopefully toward a boundless sky.

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