

A new culinary superstar: The artisan cheesemaker

By John von Rhein

Tribune staff reporter

FOND DU LAC, Wis. — In this silo-studded heart of America's dairy country, amid rolling hills and pastureland that stretches like a lush green carpet as far as the eye can see, an Old World tradition of cheesemaking that dates back centuries is being lovingly preserved.

Never mind the blandly anonymous wedges of supermarket brick and cheddar most folks, including Wisconsin's own cheeseheads, associate with the state.

We are talking artisanal cheese here, a multimillion-dollar industry that produces a select number of specialty cheeses among the 350 varieties made in the state.

These cheeses bypass Wisconsin dairy cases (where there's hardly any market for them) and go directly to big-city distributors such as Giles Schnierle of Chicago's Great American Cheese Collection, who sells them to various high-end restaurants such as Spiaggia, Les Nomades and Tru in Chicago and to natural food, grocery and specialty shops in the Chicago area, around the nation and in Canada.

It's not only their richly varied flavors and textures and their exotic names — including Mobay, Grand Canaria, Rofumo and pepato — that set these gourmet cheeses apart.

Tempo road trip

Another in our summer-long series of stories on places, characters and other curiosities in the Midwest.



"They really are just a sample of what's happening all over America where, all of a sudden, artisan cheesemakers are becoming superstars, like winemakers were 20 years ago," says Tony Mantuano, executive chef of Spiaggia.

Although most Wisconsin cheeses are produced in large, highly automated plants that can turn out up to 9 million pounds of cheese a year, it's the signature touch of each artisan cheesemaker that gives each cheese its distinctive quality.

These craftsmen have adapted centuries-old techniques of cheesemaking to the methods of modern mass-production — and for that cheese connoisseurs are greatly in their debt.

Consider the example of Armando Ferrari, a master artisan of Italian cheeses who left his na-



AP photo by Morry Gash

Lena and Armando Ferrari in the Park Cheese aging room. "There are few people in Wisconsin who make the real Italian cheeses we make," he says.