



PHOTO • GUNN'S HILL CHEESE

# *Every good cheese tells a story*

A tasty afternoon on The Cheese Trail in Ontario's Dairy Capital  
'If you don't have the touch, you can't make good cheese'

BY DAWN MATHESON

One Friday night last June, our downtown Guelph home was full of more than a dozen Grade 7s shooting Nerf guns and blaring tunes, chaos loud enough that the whole street must have overheard.

"Mom! Neighbour's here," my son yelled into the kitchen where I was loading frozen pizza into the oven.

It was Jen Whyte from over the fence. I

found her in the back porch with a glass of a dark liquid in one hand and a plate topped with a delicate mound of soft velvety heaven in the other. She said it was just the time-out I needed.

"Close your eyes, open your mouth," Jen ordered. "Smell, savour."

All it took was one dewy dollop of buttery, creamy cheesy bliss on the tongue for the Eminem thumping in the living room to silence; the waft of the 13 pairs of stinky running shoes in the porch to vapourize.

It's clear this taste was nothing like the plasticky-goo on the pizzas warming in the oven.

My face melted. "Orgasmic," I told Jen as I washed it down with the dark brown stout. Eating a piece of cheese with Jen is always like a seduction.

"I'm in France, eating Brie on the Loire."

"No, you're not," said Jen, as she launched into the story behind the cheese that just slipped down my throat.

"In fact, you are in Ontario, in Oxford



PHOTOGRAPHY • DAWN MATHESON

Mountainoak Cheese



County, eating cheesemaker Shep Ysselstein's Brigid's Brie from Gunn's Hill."

My neighbour is a cheese snob; there is no nicer way to say it. And her life mission is to make snobs of us all. Jen has booths at the Guelph Farmers' Market year round and in Rockwood at the seasonal market, selling artisanal cheese – cheese produced in small batches by hand, using traditional craftsmanship. By night, Jen curates cheese, beer and chocolate tasting events with her company, Taste of Craft, run with local beer connoisseur, Karyn Boscariol.

Jen's timing in the market couldn't be more perfect: Canadians are craving local specialty cheeses over the giant producers of the manufactured processed brands.

Don't get me wrong: Kraft Dinner still reigns supreme with my kids. It is pretty well Canada's national dish: James Lewis Kraft grew up on a dairy farm in Ontario.

Until about a decade ago — other than cheddar, which was once Canada's second largest export — the great variety of artisan cheeses you found in the cheese shops were from Quebec or imported from Europe.

Today, there are 40-some artisanal producers throughout Ontario — the concentration sprouting up in Oxford County, about 30 kilometres southwest of Kitchener,

where Bright Cheese still produces cheddar on the same land where their cows were milked 142 years ago. In 2015, four Oxford County artisanal cheesemakers were nominated for the Canadian Cheese Grand Prix, and three came home with an award. "It isn't just the amazing quality and range of flavours in artisanal cheese that consumers are looking for, they want the stories behind the food: where it comes from, who makes it and how," Jen says.

Hence, Oxford Tourism's smart marketing move with The Cheese Trail in Ontario's Dairy Capital – [tourismoxford.ca/cheese-trail](http://tourismoxford.ca/cheese-trail) – launched in 2015.

The last famous marketing ploy for the dairy industry in the region was in 1883 when the local dairy farmers got together to produce a 7,300-pound wheel of cheese that toured to the New York World Fair and then to Great Britain.

In the 1800s, Oxford County was one of the most important centres in Canada with 98 cheese factories. On the tour today you can see a period replica cheese factory at the Ingersoll Cheese Museum.

Plans were laid that Friday night in my back porch for an escape to cheese heaven. I mapped out our route and Jen hand-picked the cheesemakers while the 'tweens Nerf-gun demolished my living room and the pizza burned in the oven.

But I didn't care. Soon I'd be devouring lots and lots of luscious cheese produced virtually just down the road.

## MOUNTAINOAK CHEESE

3165 Huron Rd., New Hamburg  
[mountainoakcheese.com](http://mountainoakcheese.com)

Jen suggests we go Old World traditional first and visit a true family farm, one where the whole process happens in-house: the farmer grows the feed that feeds the cows, and milks the milk that makes the cheese. That means Mountainoak cheese isn't only artisanal but also farmstead, where the only milk used for cheese production is from animals raised by the maker.

"Farming is not an occupation. It is a way of living," says Adam van Bergeijk, as he welcomes us to his handsome 200-acre dairy farm.

For van Bergeijk, who has farmed most of his life since he took over the family dairy farm back in Holland in 1976, it's always been about the cow.

"I love my Holstein. They are really sweet animals. When I walk in the herd, they come up to me. They know me and I know them by name," says van Bergeijk, who oversees a herd of 200.

"Everything that you do with the cows is

going to be paid back to your milk. If you be good to them, they're going to be good to you," Adam says in a thick genial Dutch accent.

After years of milking, van Bergeijk wanted to try his hand at cheese. In Holland, that meant Gouda, the country's signature cheese and one of the oldest still made today; the earliest recording is in 1184. Nearly 800 years later, in 1981, van Bergeijk and his wife, Hannie, enrolled in Cheesemaking School in the town of Gouda where Adam went on to become an instructor.

Gouda today refers more to a general style of cheesemaking rather than to a specific kind of cheese, the taste varying greatly based on age. My neighbour, Jen, explains: A young Gouda can be described as buttery with a slight mild nutty flavour, while the more mature cheese has a complex and subtle sharpness with hints of butterscotch that can take on an almost whisky-like

flavour if aged over two years.

"It's a myth that Gouda is bland. You're just eating the wrong Gouda."

It's true, says van Bergeijk. Aging is key, but really cheesemaking is all in the hands.

"I have to feel the curd between my fingers. I can tell how ready it is in the process. A good cheesemaker has to have a sense of touch," says van Bergeijk, whose hands massage imaginary curd as he speaks. "If you don't have the touch, you can't make good cheese."

Soon enough, the van Bergeijks' sons wanted to farm for themselves, "but Holland is really, really crowded," says Adam. There just wasn't enough land, and, too many cheesemakers.

In the back of his mind, he had hoped to one day bring the tradition of fine Gouda to Canada.

In 1996, at 45, he bought a farm in Alberta. "It was December," Adam said,

laughing. "It was minus 38. No way!" In a few months, encouraged by a fellow Dutch immigrant farmer, they relocated to Oxford County.

For the next 15 years, Adam and his family established themselves in milk production, but the Gouda dream never died.

"It took us a while to get licences and permits together... plus, really, you need six figures to be in this business."

Today, both van Bergeijk sons farm: one at Mountainoak with Adam; and the other on a dairy farm down the road. Their daughter married a neighbouring dairy farmer.

The first Gouda, made from same-day, non-homogenized and unpasteurized milk, was ready for the public in July of 2012.

Today they make 16 varieties, from a soft and crunchy Aged Cumin Gouda to a zesty Wild Nettle.

Their aging room holds about 3,000 wheels, each turned by hand every other day.

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Six of those wheels won awards at the 2016 British Empire Cheese Awards.

Van Bergeijk is his own best customer. He samples each cheese. “It is about the subtlety – you don’t overpower the gouda with the flavours.”

I ask him the question most producers hate: What’s your favourite? “Today, Black Truffle,” he says, referring to the sublime earthy mushroom flecked in tangy buttery cheese.

Van Bergeijk hands us a paper hat, booties and gloves. We get to tour the facilities and the barn. In the processing plant, I’m taken aback by the sophisticated technology – nothing looks Old World. And, oh, so clean and shiny. There is a slight aroma of smoked apple wood from the Chili Pepper Smoked Gouda made the day before.

Van Bergeijk lets us in on a secret. Rick Mercer, the comedian behind CBC’s popular Rick Mercer Report, was about to feature Mountainoak. We joke about Mercer swimming in the vats of curds and whey, juggling the discs of Gouda, and tossing cow patties in the barn. (You can see what happened at [www.cbc.ca/mercerreport](http://www.cbc.ca/mercerreport) > episodes > Nov 29, 2016.)

Out at the barns, we meet the cows,



PHOTO • MONFORTE DAIRY

Ruth Klahsen, cheesemaker, Monforte Dairy

including a calf just a few hours old.

Van Bergeijk’s son Arjo hops off a tractor and joins us for a photo. “This is the next generation right here,” says Adam. “He is the van Bergeijk boss of the cows now.”

Adam tells us the English translation of the Dutch family name is “from the mountain oak.” Aha.

## MONFORTE DAIRY

[monfordedairy.com](http://monfordedairy.com)  
Monforte on Wellington  
80 Wellington St., Stratford

Our next visit is not to a farm or a cheese-processing plant, nor is it a stop even

listed on the Cheese Trail. This is Ruth Klahsen’s Monforte on Wellington eatery in neighbouring Perth County in downtown Stratford.

“She is known for doing things differently,” says Jen, “she is a force of nature. Anyhow, her cheese can’t be missed.”

The products from her dairy (a processing plant in town), the first operating artisanal cheese company to launch in Ontario, are wildly popular, especially in markets and high-end boutiques – she has a Toronto outpost on a trendy strip in Liberty Village – and in 30-plus restaurants, such as Toronto’s high-end Royal York and Cava.

“People die when they can’t get the Monforte Toscano,” my neighbour says, referring to a beloved intense, earthy sheep’s cheese.

The restaurant, which bills itself as an osteria – a small, simple eatery – is a perfect showcase for Monforte products, and for Klahsen as an entrepreneur.

Where van Bergeijks is rural – his relationship with the land and animals paramount – Klahsen is urban. She grew up a city Mennonite in London, Ont., and her connections with “the right people has made for the best ingredients.”

Her life revolves around food: she eats out almost nightly and is intimate with all the food trends having worked longtime in the culinary industry, as a chef in Stratford and at its festival, plus as an instructor at Stratford’s famous chef school where she graduated in the inaugural class in 1983.

Klahsen does not own her animals, she partners with local farmers who do, and not just cows – sheep, goat and water buffalo, too – using only seasonal milk from humanely treated animals.

“Next I want to try cheese made from horse’s milk, like they do in Mongolia,” Klansen says.

It’s easy to detect that she has a nonstop mind that runs on innovation, originality and risk-taking. “Hey, I’m just trying to keep the wolves from the door,” she says when I ask her about her hustle. “This isn’t

an easy business, especially the politics of food production.”

In 2004, Klansen mortgaged everything she owned to start Monforte. She called it her midlife crisis. She couldn’t understand how a province with so much agriculture produced no artisanal cheese. Right before she was set to launch, she says she and her cheesemaker and business partner had a falling out. Klansen became the cheesemaker.

Originally renting space, she has since reinvented Monforte’s model, raising \$500,000 to build the current cheese plant. Subscribers supported the dairy by buying shares, repaid in cheese.

Now they make more than 25 unique cheeses – all ingredients sourced locally and ethically – most sold in person by someone who works for Monforte.

“We sell at roughly 25 to 30 farmers’

markets across Ontario per week, talking and tasting cheese. If you work for me, you sell at markets.”

That’s how she rolls. Klansen doesn’t rely on marketing, doesn’t use any distributors, only sells direct. She’s not worried about not being on a cheese trail. Heck, the restaurant we met at didn’t have a sign for the first six months, yet still drew a crowd and top stars on Trip Advisor.

Jen and I talk and taste with Ruth over a ploughman’s lunch sitting on up-cycled chairs at tables surrounded by handcrafted artsy décor. The menu features a rotating selection of Monforte cheeses, charcuterie, preserves, pickles and other signature specialties.

Our cheese board samples Waltzing Matilda, a soft, Camembert-style cheese made with rich water buffalo milk swathed

in balsam ash, and Bliss, a spring sheep’s cheese rolled in tarragon that tastes of liquorice and lavender in a creamy velvet.

Much like her business style, her food is all about relationships – each cheese has its pairing – ours are honey, a mustard and, of course, beer, which Jen calls “the perfect cheese beverage.”

We follow up with the required cheese comfort foods: a divine sharp mac and cheese, “Monforte KD,” made with Providence Aged Cheddar created in partnership with the Bright dairy, plus a mandatory gooey grilled cheese dipped in local apple butter.

“I always wanted to be a midwife or a doula,” says Klansen. We laugh.

As the Monforte matriarch, she is the midwife of cheese now, her hand guiding every aspect of the business. “Food should



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PHOTOGRAPHY • DAWN MATHESON

Shep Ysselstein, Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese

be beautiful in every way.”

Klahsen is a textbook perfectionist: “You know, I really can’t enjoy my own cheeses because I’m always thinking of how to make them better.”

It is time for us to go, and Ruth tells us so. “I have to go yell at the cooks,” she says. I think she’s joking, but maybe not. “Food wasn’t good enough. Crackers weren’t evenly salted. The bread in the grilled cheese was stale.”

All things I didn’t notice in my cheese inebritation. Though, Klahsen is my kind of powerhouse woman: she put the curse words all in the right spots. And, damn, she makes good cheese.

### Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese

445172 Gunn's Hill Rd.  
Woodstock  
gunnhillcheese.ca

Jen and I were meant to visit three more cheesemakers, but we were already two hours behind. Too much talking and tasting. Gunn's Hill would round out our day.

The drive up the lane is all fairytale: rolling green pastures, even the friendly

farm dog running up to greet us.

Shep Ysselstein, 34, is the next-generation cheesemaker. He grew up on his grandparents’ farm right next door, run by his parents now who still milk the cows he uses for his cheese.

Ysselstein is a perfect combination of business prowess, youth enthusiasm, tradition and craft.

“It’s interesting with Gunn’s Hill,” says Jen. “The consumer witnessed no growth period. Ysselstein made three cheeses his first month. Right away they were all excellent, and he still makes each one the same.”

One of those cheeses, 5 Brothers, took the gold for best firm cheese at the 2013 Canadian Cheese Grand Prix just in Gunn’s Hill’s second year. The next year, Ysselstein won the 2014 BDC Young Entrepreneur Award \$100,000 grand prize for his small business. With it he built a 2,000-square-foot, climate-controlled curing and aging extension to his current building so he could double his annual production of cheese to 60,000 kilograms.

Ysselstein grew up milking cows as one

of five brothers working on his parents’ huge dairy and beef cattle farm. He never really thought he’d farm himself. In fact, he went off to do a business degree in Iowa. “I wanted to be far away from the farm so I couldn’t get called home to milk on the weekends.”

In his last year of school, he went on a road trip with roommates to Thunder Bay where he happened upon Thunder Oak Cheese Farm. He recalls thinking that if it can work in Thunder Bay, it can surely work in southern Ontario.

Yet, school ended and Ysselstein returned home to milk cows. “I did that for two years, by myself, just me and the cows, and thought, I don’t want to do this forever.” He had the entrepreneurial spirit. He enrolled in a few cheesemaking courses at the University of Guelph and then at the University of Vermont.

As a placement during school, Ysselstein had worked in a dairy in upstate New York. They needed an extra hand so he returned to help them out. As luck would have it, through a farmer there he learned of a cheesemaker in Switzerland who wanted an apprentice.

“I got to make cheese the same way they did 500 years ago. Milking cows when they are out in pasture in the alps. Making cheese by hand,” Ysselstein says. The romance of it all struck him.

He lined up a job with Vancouver Island’s Natural Pastures cheese company to learn the ropes at the factory before coming home to Oxford County to commit to a business of his own. He bought 12 acres of land right beside his family’s farm and began practising his recipes.

With a \$250,000 loan from a community development fund, Gunn’s Hill Artisan Cheese opened its doors in 2011, offering three cheeses made in the Swiss Alpine style. Two of them do have the signature holes we associate with Swiss cheese –called “eyes.” You can see the cheese being made through the large picture windows in the cheese shop.

5 Brothers is a handcrafted, washed rind cow’s cheese that combines traits from Gouda and Appenzeller. It is creamy with a touch of sweet and zing.

Handeck is produced using the same methods as a typical Swiss mountain style cheese and is a nod to Ysselstein’s early training. The firm nutty cheese is named after the alp in Switzerland where Ysselstein learned his craft, and it just won Best Farmhouse Cheese at the Canadian Cheese Grand Prix.

The third is a young buttery cheese called Oxford Harvest, modelled after a little-known Swiss cheese called Mutchli. To keep up with customer demands for “always something new,” Ysselstein blends this cheese with cumin in one version, garlic and chives in another. Every Friday it’s Curd Friday at the dairy storefront with cheddar curds offered in bulk. Poutine tonight!

From the beginning, Ysselstein’s then

girlfriend, now wife, Colleen Bater, ran the company with him, in addition to her job as a teacher. A business mind herself, she looks after the marketing end with an active Facebook page: “How many cheese wheels in our aging room!?” Lori Chesney guessed 10,500; the actual number is 10,399! She wins a wheel!”

Not all those wheels are strictly Gunn’s Hill’s. Ever the smart businessman, “I wanted to maximize capacity at the dairy so started making cheese for other people.”

In 2012, local farmers had an excess of sheep milk and no one to buy it. With no cheese-making experience, they asked Ysselstein for help. Crossroad Farms Sheep Milk Gouda was born as a partnership product.

Then, Ysselstein started producing cheese for an Amish co-operative, Hope Artisan Dairy Co-op in Alymer. Due to strict beliefs around the use of electricity, Shepherd’s

Harvest sheep cheese and Elgin Buffalo Gouda is made by Gunn’s Hill on their behalf.

Now with cheese in more than 300 locations across Ontario, Ysselstein and Bater are busy, to say the least – especially now that they have a child, Willem.

Ysselstein divides his day in three: baby time all night; cheesemaking in the early morning – sometimes with baby onboard; and running the booming business in the afternoon – also baby onboard.

In the shop, you can peek into the dairy through the viewing windows. Ysselstein invites us to taste a bit of his current favourite. “Last night I ate a whole wheel of this for dinner,” he says.

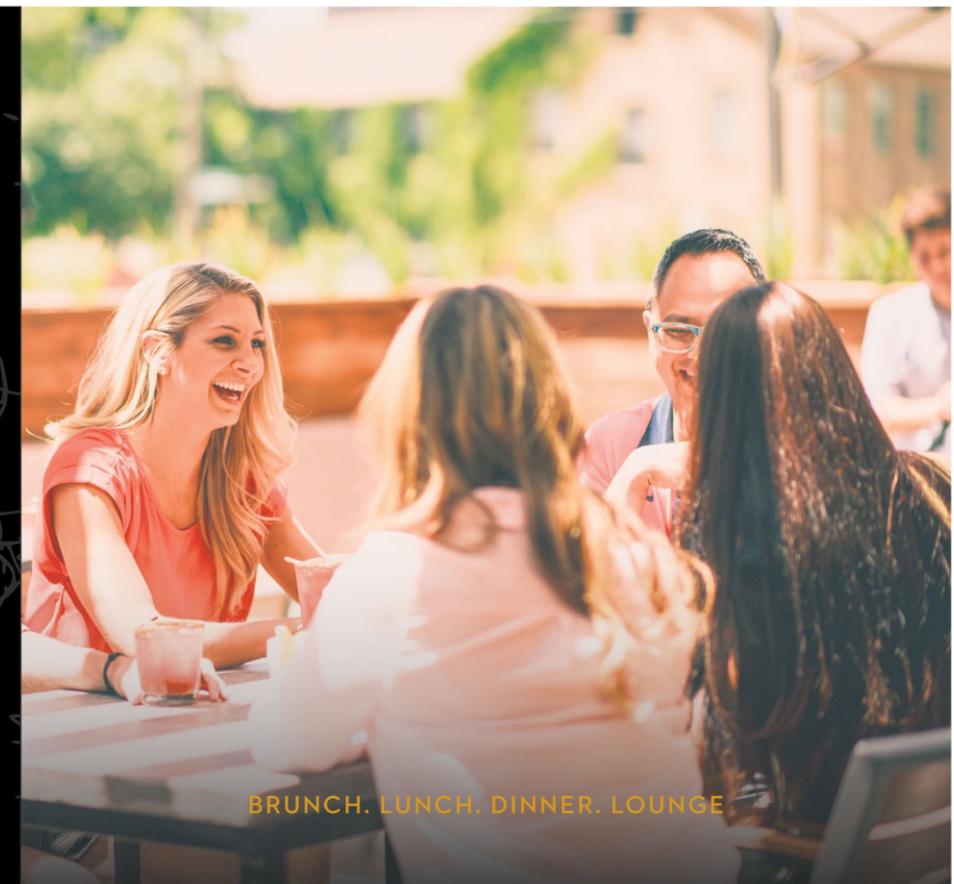
That’s Brigid’s Brie, the very one my neighbour, Jen, brought over that night in my back porch. Named after his wife’s mom, Brigid is the patron saint of dairy farmers. Jen says it is the best Ontario Brie she has had. 

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