

# curd's the word

BY M. LINDA LEE

Take to the hills on the WNC Cheese Trail for a dose of Southern culture

*"Cheese around the curve"* forecasts a small, hand-lettered wooden sign on the side of US 221 North in Marion, North Carolina. Sure enough, just around the bend sits a petite red building with rockers beckoning from the front porch. This is the headquarters of English Farmstead Cheese, my first stop on the Western North Carolina Cheese Trail, a group of ten (the number fluctuates as new members are added) cheesemakers dotting the mountains of Western North Carolina from Robbinsville to Waxhaw.

(You'll be  
glaaaaaaad  
you did)

PHOTOS BY TIM ROBISON



A SELECTION OF CHEESES  
FROM THE WESTERN NORTH  
CAROLINA CHEESE TRAIL.  
**OPPOSITE:** ONE OF THE 400  
PLUS GOATS AT ROUND  
MOUNTAIN CREAMERY.



## English Farmstead

Wearing a blue hairnet over her short salt-and-pepper tresses, Susan English pops out of the workroom adjacent to her shop. “Today is cheese-spread day,” the owner and cheesemaker of English Farmstead announces, and she is up to her elbows—literally—in cheese curds. Each summer, she makes between 200 and 250 containers of savory and sweet cheese spreads a week from the pasteurized milk of the Holstein cows that she and her husband, Terry, raise on the 250-acre dairy farm that has been in his family since 1927. The fact that they use milk from their own animals classifies their operation as a farmstead producer.

At English Farmstead, located four miles south of the Blue Ridge Parkway, Terry runs the Grade A dairy operation, while Susan devotes herself to making cheese, having traded her thirty-five-year nursing career to do so. Their most popular product is Buttercup, a soft, salty cheese that is brined before it is aged. In addition to cheese curds (their best seller), Susan also makes a buttery aged Gouda called Apple Blossom.

### OakMoon Farm and Creamery

From English Farmstead, I weave my way north to Bakersville through the Pisgah National Forest, passing Linville Falls Winery—a convenient place to pick up some wine to pair with any cheese you may purchase along the way—and towns with evocative names like Spruce Pine and Cranberry. I follow the tiny signs for “goat farm” and creep up a deeply rutted dirt road to the top of a hill. There, at OakMoon Farm and Creamery, Dugger, the Sharpe family’s Cairn terrier and the farm’s ambassador, greets me as I emerge from the car.

Cynthia Sharpe has loved goats for as long as she can remember. “I saw the movie *Heidi* when I was ten years old,” she says, “and decided then and there that I had to have a goat.” Unfortunately, her parents didn’t share her desire and she had to wait until she was twenty-four to buy her first goat. Now she has a herd of seventy, mostly Swiss breeds

including erect-eared Alpines, cream-colored Saanens, and bay and black Oberhaslis. She introduces me to a two-week-old black-and-white kid named Haiku and explains that she handles the kids from the time they are born. “You have to work in partnership with the animals,” she says. “By inserting yourself into the process in the first days of a goat’s life, you ensure that they will be open to human handling and milking.”

Most people, whether using pasteurized milk or not, make cheese by adding cultures to milk that has been heated to a certain temperature and then cooled slightly. Once the cultures ripen, rennet (a compound of animal or plant enzymes) goes in, causing the milk to coagulate into curds. When the milk has set up, solid curds are separated from the liquid whey by one of several different processes. Cynthia, however, crafts her cheeses using raw (unpasteurized) milk from her goats and a natural lactic process, which relies



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT (ALL LOOKING GLASS CREAMERY):** SIGN FOR THE CREAMERY; THE CHEESE SHOP, WHICH OCCUPIES THE FORMER GOAT STALL; THE CHEESES IN PLASTIC MOLDS TO DRAIN THE WHEY; OWNER JENNIFER PERKINS PRESENTS A CHEESE PLATE IN HER SHOP.

**OPPOSITE:** LAVENDER-CRUSTED AGED GOAT CHEESE FROM MOUNTAIN FARM.





on the existing cultures in the milk and does not require rennet. The proof is in the tasting. OakMoon's standouts include aged Sotty Clementine (*sotty* meaning "drunken" and Clementine after one of her goats) and Black Oak Boulette, a tangy fresh chèvre redolent with dill and garlic and rolled in black pepper.

Mountain Farm

A turn at the ominously named Copperhead Bend takes me to the last of the three creameries clustered in the Linville area. The smallest member of the trail with only nine goats, Mountain Farm has been a certified goat dairy for four years. The McCade family, however, has lived in the South Toe River Valley for forty years. When they first moved to Burnsville, Marilyn McCade, a nurse, and her physician husband raised goats for milk. "Our children's job was to milk the goats, and they thought they were the most put-upon kids in Yancey County," Marilyn laughs. "Now they're proud of it, and they all noted this on their college applications."

Eventually the family branched into agritourism by planting two acres of lavender and using it to scent soaps, lotions, vinegars, and teas. "Lavender was our niche for ten years," says Marilyn. Though she no longer raises lavender for commercial use, a labyrinth displaying three different types (Provence, an English hybrid; deep-purple Hidcote; and Grosso, the tallest) crowns the hill just up from the farm shop, where it commands a sweeping tableau of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The shop overflows with lavender-scented soaps and other items, but these days Marilyn uses her lavender mainly to distinguish her aged goat's-milk cheeses. Ashes from dried, burnt stalks of lavender cover pyramids of bloomy-rind Mountain Fog, while lavender smoke infuses Smoke on the Mountain. Lavender Garden is crusted with lavender buds that Marilyn first roasts in a dry cast-iron skillet to soften their piney overtones. "Making cheese gives me a great feeling of accomplishment," she beams. "I feel like I'm part of something that people have been doing for hundreds of years."

Looking Glass Creamery

The driving force behind the WNC Cheese Trail, Jennifer Perkins has operated Looking Glass Creamery in Fairview with her husband, Andy, since 2009. Prior to that, she worked as the assistant cheesemaker at Blackberry Farm in Walland, Tennessee. Inspired by the Vermont Cheese Trail, she organized a similar nonprofit effort in 2012 with the goal of increasing awareness and marketplace presence for the cheese artisans in Western North Carolina.

"It's hard for small producers to get into farmers markets, and you really need that direct-to-consumer sale," states Jennifer, who makes only 400 to 500 pounds of cheese a week. "The trail is a way to bring the farmers market to us and to highlight area farms as destinations."

A twenty-minute drive southeast of Asheville, Looking Glass is an artisanal cheese producer, meaning they make cheese with milk (from both cows and goats) that they purchase from other area farms. Today she is making Carmelita, a *cajeta*-style goat's-milk caramel, in a traditional copper pot. Here, it will cook down with sugar for hours over a low flame,

resulting in a thick, velvety sauce that is just as finger-licking good right out of the jar as it is as a topping for ice cream.

Jennifer's cheeses, available for sale in her small farm shop, run the gamut from the aged Alpine-style Bear Wallow, the only raw-milk cheese they make, to Chocolate Lab, a washed-rind cow's-milk cheese rubbed with crushed cocoa nibs from the French Broad Chocolate Factory in Asheville. The creamery's award-winning Ellington is a bloomy-rind goat cheese named for Douglas Ellington, a prominent early twentieth-century architect who designed a number of Art Deco buildings in downtown Asheville. A pyramid of creamy cheese cloaked in a line of ash under its white rind, Ellington displays earthy notes reminiscent of a blue. I fawn over the new Connemara, a delightful goat's-milk cheddar, despite Jennifer's insistence that it would be better if it aged longer. "The bane of small producers," she laments, "is that they don't have the time and space to hold onto their cheeses long enough to make them great."

Different Strokes

The beauty of the WNC Cheese Trail is that everyone does their own thing. Take Victor Chiariza for example. A glass artist by profession, Victor is currently the only trail member who makes blue cheese. At his tiny artisanal operation in Fairview, the owner of Blue Ridge Mountain Creamery channels his creative energy into European-style cow's-milk cheeses, aging the blues separately in a small room adjacent to his glass-blowing studio. The rest of Victor's cheeses—triple-cream mozzarella, provolone, Grana Padano, Asiago, Tomme—mature in an atmosphere of fifty-one degrees and 95 percent humidity inside the cave he hewed out of the bedrock next to his studio.

For Linda Seligman, it's all about goat's milk. The only Grade A goat dairy farm in North Carolina, Round Mountain Creamery in Black Mountain lies within easy striking distance of Asheville. As an extension of her dairy, Linda makes goat cheese from the milk of her herd of 400 goats, mostly Alpines and earless LaManchas.

She concentrates her efforts on fresh chèvre spreads in twelve different flavors, from Nutty Blueberry to Jalapeño Firebomb. The chèvre is sold frozen and will keep that way for up to a year (try grating frozen chèvre directly on omelettes or roasted root vegetables). Aged cheeses, like Round Mountain's prize-winning Amber Moon, a nutty washed-rind goat cheese, are sold fresh.

Linda has seen an increase in business since she joined the trail. "It's been a fabulous thing for all of us up and down these mountains," she says. "We [the trail members] have great respect for each other and our differences."

"The WNC Cheese Trail has been very beneficial for our business, which we got up and running about the same time as the trail," echoes pioneer Jennifer Perkins. "And it has definitely increased cooperation and communication between the member cheesemakers."

Going forward, Jennifer would like to see the WNC Cheese Trail become a statewide effort under one central North Carolina Cheese Council. And all members hope the trail, like the cheeses they make, will become even better with age.



ABOVE: MILKING MACHINE AT ROUND MOUNTAIN CREAMERY. OPPOSITE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): AN ASSISTANT AT MOUNTAIN FARM HOLDS LAVENDER FOR THE CHEESE; CHEESE AGING AT LOOKING GLASS CREAMERY; HERB-ENCUSTED GOAT CHEESE FROM LOOKING GLASS CREAMERY; THE DRIP ROOM AT ROUND MOUNTAIN.

