



Just say cheese

ARTISANS

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Inside the open vat, silken curds like tofu float in a bath of milky whey. Just three hours ago the warm goat's milk was kick-started into fermentation and the cheese is already starting to emerge. Kris Lloyd, the pocket dynamo behind Woodside Cheesewrights, is armed with a gadget not unlike a metal tennis racquet for slicing through the curd. She needs to manoeuvre out the whey without destroying the texture.

"The cut is one of the most important parts of making cheese," Lloyd says, making ragged lines that break the curd apart. "We are artisans and it is done by hand, so it's not absolutely perfect."

Lloyd's ability to produce a range of cheeses that can only be from Woodside has got her thinking. She grew up in a Greek family tradition of homemade fetta, haloumi, olives and dolmades that had their own unique taste. In South Australia she sees artisans like herself making bread, olives, olive oil and charcuterie with similarly distinct regional variations. Her cheese from the Adelaide Hills tastes completely different to cheeses made on the coastal Fleurieu. She dreams of bringing these

artisans together in a creative and commercial hub that would spread learning and promote regional variety. "It's about terroir," she says. "It's the funky stuff that happens in a region, so it's the climate, the soil, the bird life, the indigenous weeds, the flora in the pastures."

The hub would bring producers together to broaden opportunities for learning and promote their high-end produce under an artisan's banner. "It's a way forward for things that are already here," says Lloyd. "It's fantastic to be noted for your brilliant environment and clean raw materials and the beautiful artisan foods you can produce."

Back at the vat she tests the acid level of the milk; it has a way to go but she is on the right track. This particular cheese, the Figaro, is the pride of the fleet. It's a complex, semi-hard, washed rind goat's cheese wrapped in vine leaves. When mature, it has a whiff of age and ammonia and a texture that is mainly solid but slightly runny in the centre. As it ages the leaves dry out and become almost tobaccoey; if left longer than six months they break down and disintegrate on the rind. To a lover





of smelly cheese like me, the Figaro, with its added tang of goat's milk, is a slow and exquisite pleasure.

As the acidity develops, her team of cheese makers gather at their stations. Goat's milk is tricky because the fat globules are smaller and if you disturb it too much it develops what Lloyd calls the "baby sick" smell of Parmesan and Romano. But when the curds are ready, there is only a limited time to decant them. Fast and furious, says Lloyd, but not rushed. "You seriously cannot rush cheese. It has taken me years to understand that," she says. "If I'm in a bad mood and I think, 'I don't want to be here today' – which doesn't happen often because I'm a pretty happy person – I end up with a really bad cheese."

Lloyd scoops up warm whey in a metal bowl and sloshes it over an array of medium-sized cheese hoops, allowing the excess to run onto the concrete floor. She wants the curds to settle. Over the next 24 hours they will shrink to two thirds their size. Throughout the day they will be turned three times by hand, and tomorrow they will be placed in brine to prepare the rind to bloom. "It's labour intensive," Lloyd says. "When I work out my

margins it's, OK, how long does it take from the time the milk leaves the vat to when it's ready for sale?"

Lloyd's career as a cheese maker is a legacy of her marriage to Paul Lloyd, the business manager at Coriole Vineyards. With a background in marketing, she looked after Coriole's food products and was thinking about expanding into bread making or cheese when the Woodside factory came up for sale. "I didn't know much about cheese but I could tell what was good and what was bad," she says. "I got two skip bins in the car park and got the whole lot out of here."

The staff stayed on, which helped, and she asked around the industry for advice. Most kept things close to their chest. This was 14 years ago, before there was much on the internet, so she embarked on a long period of trial and error. "There was a lot of spoilage. No one knew what they were doing, everyone was flying blind," she says. "It took me two years just to manage the milk, especially in spring when we've got thousands of litres coming in and we're still making cow cheeses, so you've got to juggle that."





In the cave – actually a temperature-controlled storage room – racks of cow and goat's cheese are maturing, among them loaves of yellow cow's cheese called Pompeii that conceal a layer of ash in their middle. She also makes Curious Cow, a bar of Camembert-type cheese, and a gentle blue-vein cow's-milk cheese tentatively called the Blue Bitch. "I'm not sure if it's a good idea," Lloyd says, but you get the idea the name has stuck.

Her great love though is goat's milk. A Figaro made from cow's milk would be nothing, she says; it would taste wrong ... boring. "I think the (cow's) milk is too rich. It's not lean enough so you don't get that development that you do with goat's milk," she says.

Little hoops of goat's curd taken from the vat that morning are draining in racks. They will be sold in a few days as fresh chevre – an unadorned and under-rated pleasure eaten with fresh bread, tomato and olive oil – or left for two weeks until the rind develops. Lloyd then transforms them into a Capricorn, dresses them with flowers into a Rubi (it means jewel in French) or rolls them in ash and calls them Vesuvius.

Her Monet cheese exemplifies her approach. It's a picturesque chevre decorated by hand with organically grown flowers and herbs and packed in a clear plastic tub. Two or three years ago she made a few a week and people asked her what she thought she was doing. Now she sells hundreds a week all over Australia. "I love the idea," she says. "I only put two weeks shelf life on it and I won't budge from that because that's when it's good. It's a 'use by' date, not a 'best before', so if you're going to buy it, you'd better eat it."

The Figaro is her own creation that took her two years to work out. She started making it in 2004 and it has become her most highly awarded cheese. It varies with the seasons and she makes it only when goat's milk is plentiful. "We don't make it much in winter time because we haven't got the spare goat's milk, but in winter it tends to be a much wetter cheese," she says.

This is the heart of the artisan process. Compare it, she says, with product from Warrnambool Cheese and Butter or even King Island Dairy, where every day the milk moves through processing equipment to deliver a standardised result. "Every time you buy that cheese it will be the same because basically they are starting with exactly the same material every time," she says. "I don't do that. I get my milk out of the udder into my vat and whatever it is, I've got to manipulate it."

She has trained a team of about eight people who can make very good cheese without her. That leaves her freer for mentoring, experimenting – she has a cultured blue mould butter in the fridge – running Cheesefest, sitting on the SA Tourism Commission, chairing the nation's first Artisan Cheesemaking Academy and raising two teenaged sons. She also gardens, keeps chooks at her Myrtle Bank home, and runs.

She is constantly trying to make things better. It's corny, she says, but at Woodside they talk about "doing it the Woodside way" which means making something you are proud to contribute to.

Before I leave she brings out the Figaro from "the R room" – that's R for raw, unpasteurised milk. It annoys Lloyd that she can buy imported raw-milk cheeses like Rocquefort from the Central Market but is forbidden by food safety regulations from producing them here. She is campaigning for a change in the legislation, and in the meantime makes her own unpasteurised cheeses for private use.

It looks the same but tastes even better; not necessarily stronger, just more flavoursome and complex. "When I go to Italy I have a fresh raw-milk cheese that might be a day or two old, and they are absolutely stunning," says Lloyd. "It's not to say the cheeses we produce here are not stunning, they are, we have gone ahead in leaps and bounds, but we don't have the choice in Australia, and as a producer I want that choice." ●

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Kris Lloyd with a Figaro cheese, and left, the cheese at various ages.