



## FLAVOURS

WORDS **FOOD & WINE EDITOR DAVID SLY**

# CHEESE SCHOOL

**H**AVING GROWN MORE THAN 30 PER CENT in the past five years, the network of specialist cheesemakers in South Australia is thriving – although growing pains have also been evident. With production undertaken mostly by self-taught artisans, consistency between batches of cheese has been a critical issue, identified as a concern by wholesalers, retailers and customers alike. This is why an innovative Cheesemaker in Residence Program has been in progress for two years, bringing international expertise into South Australia for specialised education and masterclasses.

Ranee May, a food science professor at Wisconsin University in the US, arrived in Adelaide during May to spend 10 days visiting cheesemakers in the Adelaide Hills and on Kangaroo Island, working with them in their factories to solve problems, identify improvements and discuss possible new products. “I don’t try to be too prescriptive,” says Ranee (*above*). “I listen to what they have to say, then I try to offer solutions.”

This process started when Kris Lloyd of Woodside Cheesewrights – also the chair of local cheese industry association Cheese SA – joined the Premier’s Food Council, and learnt about the State Government’s Thinkers in Residence program bringing a food expert into South Australia for a strategic evaluation of the food industry. “I thought it was a good idea, but then wondered why the cheese industry couldn’t have a Cheesemaker in Residence. Quite simply, we needed experts to help the industry move forward. Fortunately, people could see merit in this idea, and the wheels got put in motion.”

After a gap analysis report was undertaken by the SA dairy industry, two French cheese experts, Professor Eric Spinnler and Sebastien Picoulet, visited South Australia in July last year, conducting assessment and education seminars. Structured as a joint initiative between the SA Cheese Industry, Food Tourism and Hospitality Skills Council, Regency TAFE and PIRSA, it proved an instant success, with cheese wholesalers and retailers identifying improved local product consistency after the French experts’ visit.

“There was an exchange of information levelled straight to those of us who are self-taught and without a scientific background,” says Kris. “It was valuable enough for a follow-up to be organised this year, and we invited Ranee because of her reputation.”

With more than 30 years’ experience in the dairy industry, Ranee is familiar with cheese production in more than 22 countries, having been involved in US aid for economic development in Third World countries – which has seen her make camel milk yoghurt in Central America and yak’s milk haloumi with nomads in Tibet.


“In truth, the problems of SA’s artisans are no different to those faced by all cheesemakers,” says Ranee. “I can see and feel the passion of the local cheesemakers, but many don’t know enough science to get out of trouble when it happens. It’s mostly about moisture and salt content, so it points to very specific chemistry and microbiology behind the cheesemaking system. That’s what is so good about me talking to these cheesemakers in their workplace, getting specific about their own production methods. I can see the light bulbs flickering on as we analyse and discuss their production issues.”



The aim for quality and consistency in cheese also points to the local milk supply. "At the moment, the cheesemakers can't test milk for protein and fat content, so we tend to take the milk that we're given," explains Kris Lloyd. "We have to be confident enough as an industry to challenge that. To keep improving, milk suppliers and cheese producers will have to grow together."

Ranee says she is surprised that South Australia mostly produces simple white mould cheeses and doesn't yet have a cheese unique to this region. By comparison, her Wisconsin students created Cobblestone Red, a sweet dessert cheese made with blackberry and cherry wine to produce distinctive red marbling. It has now become trademarked and is a commercial favourite, and Ranee believes the same boldness should be employed by local cheesemakers.

"Australians are not afraid to be inventive with new techniques to improve agricultural products – wine is the great example – but much of the cheese currently being made here is similar to what you'd find worldwide. I think the local cheesemakers need to broaden their view, to think outside the square. I see this happening all over the world. Maybe feral camel is the next cheese; I've heard of a mare's milk cheese in rural Russia. Possibilities really are endless."

Renee's departure from Adelaide marks the conclusion of the Cheesemaker in Residence program, although Kris Lloyd hopes its significant benefit has established a model that will now be embraced by other industries. "I think we've identified a very valuable self-help program, to ensure improvement right across an industry sector," she says. It will also help develop a more rigorous cheese education program, with plans to build Regency TAFE cheesemaking courses into diploma status, with components added for specific expertise that local cheesemakers don't already have. "I really want South Australia to become the home of cheesemaking schools," says Kris. "It's something we can – and should – be doing ahead of the rest." 

### **Cheesefest 2011 - October 15 and 16**

Now in its sixth year, Cheesefest presents more than a dozen South Australian artisan cheesemakers offering their wares for tasting, in the company of a selection of South Australian wineries, local brewers, restaurants and food producers.

**Details:** [www.cheesefest.com.au](http://www.cheesefest.com.au)