

vermont CHEESE TRAIL

BY JOSEPHINE MATYAS
photography by gary cralle

One artery-clogging week, I took my taste buds for a drive. What began with the purest of intentions – camping, fresh air, hikes through forests of pine trees – took a culinary detour onto the Vermont Cheese Trail: a calorie-laden, fat-infused, deliciously salty hit of curds and whey. Before I knew it, I was mainlining pasteurized goat's milk.

Good to take the path least expected, has always been my motto. And, in fact, the Vermont Cheese Trail is not the sort of route etched in stone. In that New England-artisan laidback style, it's more a collection of several dozen farms and producers, scattered like buckshot across the hills and expansive valleys of the Green Mountain State. Even better: without a rigid route, a visit becomes a design-your-own cheese tour. Pluck the sites you want to see from the map – goat, sheep, cow, farm, creamery, tasting stop – draw a line from one to the next and...instant tailor-made tour.

Like every good cheese tray, there's a wide variety of tastes and flavours along the Cheese Trail. And, like with a good cheese tray, restraint is a challenge. Here's a sampling of my stops.

Monday: Start big or go home

Start big or go home is my zeitgeist for Day One. In a virtuous blur, I hike from the front entrance at Shelburne Farms, across the fields to the Farm Barn, the hub for the cheesemaking action. They don't just have the cows, the milk, the cheese at Shelburne Farms. They've got the whole sustainability philosophy up and running like a, well, like a perfectly-tweaked solar panel.

"This farm is about people coming here and learning where their food comes from," explains Ned Bacon, Shelburne's head cheesemaker. "It's all about those connections – to understand the story of the land growing the grass for the cows to eat, the cows producing milk, and the cheesemaker making the cheese for us to eat."

The farmstead's sustainability ethos takes many forms: a spider web of hiking trails through the 1,400 acres splashed along the Lake Champlain shoreline, a children's farmyard that goes beyond petting the livestock and into actually milking the livestock, the working cheese factory and a field of solar panels, tilted to capture the glory of the sun.

"We've got a herd of 100 Brown Swiss milkers," says Bacon. →









→ As a cheesemaker he sees a straight line from the mooing herd noshing on grass at point A to blocks of Shelburne's trademark two-year-old cheddar at point B. But, along the way there's a little cheesemaking magic.

Seven days a week, the cheesemaker starts with the fresh milk from the morning's milking. Culture and rennet are added, a little science happens, and the result is the separation of curds (the solids) and whey (the liquid, which is drained off).

After the whey drains, the curds are fused together and the larger pieces cut, stacked and flipped, to push even more of the liquid out. This is the process called "cheddaring."

"There's a bit of a craft to the timing," explains Bacon, who came to this position after studying sustainable agriculture, milking cows and several years as an apprentice cheesemaker. "We make a traditional cheddar recipe, but the experience of the cheesemaker is important – to know when to hurry up or to slow down. It requires patience and waiting. You use all your senses to make cheese."

CHEESE CUBES INGESTED: 4
CALORIES BURNED HIKING: ABOUT 205
HERDS OF COWS ENCOUNTERED: 2
NUMBER OF SOLAR PANELS SPOTTED: 230



Wednesday: City slicker meets farm gate

The further I drive along the dusty side road north of Randolph Center, the more I'm convinced this is a great idea. Pulling into the barnside, gravel lot at Neighborly Farms of Vermont I spot bait for gullible city slickers – a bright red parking meter with the sign "Tourist Parking Only." This is definitely the right place.

Neighborly Farms is the working farm of Linda and Rob Dimmick, who produce organic cheeses that make their way onto shelves in 255 stores nationwide. The award-winning cheeses are a hit, but the Dimmicks have another secret weapon: they have 15-year-old Darrin Messier (just like the hockey player), brimming with excess personality and natural charisma, as their farm's cheese ambassador.

Messier looks me up and down and instinctively knows he needs to start easy. "The calves are given only organic feed, no growth hormones and no antibiotics," he explains. "They need to build their immunity, so they aren't milked for cheesemaking until they are two years old."

Right on time, the mixed herd of Jerseys and black and white Holsteins file into the barn and jostle for positions at the feeding troughs. In an

hour it will be milking time and the daily process begins: flash pasteurization, separation of the curds and whey and the process of cheddaring the slabs to form cheese. Visitors tour the barn, get the lowdown on the newborn calves and – two days a week – watch as cheesemaker Luke Ward creates cheddar, jack, Colby and feta.

COWS IN: at 4 p.m., like clockwork
MILK TO CHEESE: 700 gallons of milk produces 272 kilos of cheese
CHEESEMAKING DAYS: Monday and Thursday
AWARD-WINNERS: jalapeno jack, green onion cheddar, raw milk cheddar
CHEESE CUBES INGESTED: 6
CALORIES BURNED: a paltry dozen or so

Thursday: Cheese meets history

I'm a sucker for historical stops, so a visit to the Plymouth Cheese factory seems like a definite must-do: more cheese tasting and an official State Historic Site.

Leaning over an antique water-heated vat, cheesemaker Jesse Werner is giving me a tour of his history-steeped cheese operation and the small museum of original cheesemaking equipment. "This is the second oldest cheese factory in the country. It was started by Calvin Coolidge's father in 1890 – he was a dairy farmer here in Plymouth Notch. This little valley had four farms and they were making more milk than they could use. So, they decided to make cheese."

"This farm is about people coming here and learning where their food comes from"



→ A stone's throw away (literally) is the Coolidge homestead – the spot where Calvin spent his youth and where he was sworn in as 30th President of the United States. The farmhouse, cheese factory, community church, general store and barns are a snapshot in time – designated a State Historic Site.

“We still make the same recipe from 1890, based on British cheesemaking traditions and techniques that date back to the 1600s,” says Werner. “It’s a true farmer’s curd cheese. Small batch, handmade. No rushing really, that’s the secret.”

CHEESE CUBES INGESTED: lost count
CALORIES BURNED: never kept count
BIGGEST SELLER: original recipe
 Plymouth cheddar
FLAVOURED CHEDDARS: hot pepper,
 sage and herb

In the large, white clapboard cheese factory, my voyage of cheese is really shaping up (I’ve started to think of it as being cheddar: stacked, flipped, stacked again). Vermont’s cheese industry is shaping up to be a true blending of past and present: recipes from their forefathers, still used on a daily basis by today’s collection of hip, artisan cheesemakers who have bucked the trappings of modern professions and are forging successful careers outside the mainstream. They love what they’re doing. And so do I. 🍷

If you go

Vermont is known for its wide choice of B&Bs, historic inns and beautiful parks, so finding a place to stay – upscale or rustic – is never a problem.

The lavish Woodstock Inn & Resort (woodstockinn.com) has a commanding location right on Woodstock’s village green. A local historian commands the concierge chair and can suggest restaurants, theatre, shopping and other attractions. The inn’s restaurant includes local artisanal cheeses on the menu.

It’s easy to get close to nature at one of the beautiful Vermont state parks (vtstateparks.com) 46-site Silver Lake State Park is 15 km north of Woodstock, near the hamlet of Barnard. It’s a short walk from the campground to the Barnard General Store to sit on the wraparound porch, connect to the free Wi-Fi and indulge in an ice cream cone.

Vermont Cheese Trail website
vtcheese.com

General travel info
vermontvacation.com



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