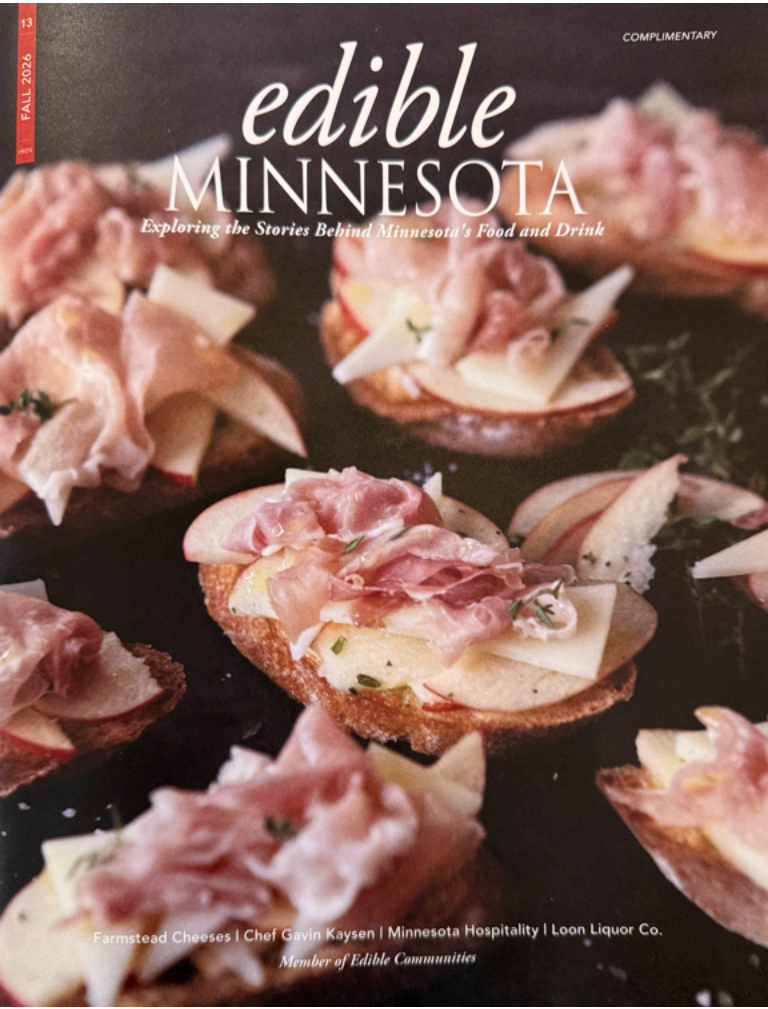
13
FALL 2026

COMPLIMENTARY

edible MINNESOTA

Exploring the Stories Behind Minnesota's Food and Drink



Farmstead Cheeses | Chef Gavin Kaysen | Minnesota Hospitality | Loon Liquor Co.

Member of Edible Communities

FESTIVELY FARMSTEAD

ENTERTAINING WITH MINNESOTA-MADE ARTISAN CHEESE

BY NANI FERREIRA-MATHEWS

Cheese has a long history rooted in craft, care and stewardship for the land. Distinct regional flavors and styles are shaped by the local environment, the type of milk used and different cheesemaking methods. American-made cheeses are often reduced to industrial, mass-produced blocks and plastic-wrapped singles, but there's another side to the story: a thriving artisan cheese industry, with small creameries across the nation reviving old traditions and crafting cheeses rooted in place.

Minnesotans are lucky to have a vast variety of local cheeses at their fingertips, from approachable cheddars to meticulously aged and crafted small-batch wheels of tomme to a perfectly moldy blue cheese. In fact, the first blue cheese in the US was born in Minnesota, and it's one of many delicious cheeses to consider for your next cheese board. As we approach the holidays and the endless pursuit for the perfect hostess gift, look local. There's something for all preferences right here from Minnesota cheesemakers.





Katie Bonow of Capra Nera Creamery with her pasture-raised goats. Photo by Becca Dilley.





TOP: Sheep grazing at Shepherd's Way Farms in Nerstrand. Photo by Katie Cannon.

BOTTOM: Raw milk farmstead goat cheese at Capra Nera Creamery. Photo by Becca Dilley.

FARMSTEAD CHEESES

Quality cheese starts with quality milk, either from sheep, goat or cow. Cheesemakers can source milk from farms, or choose to raise their own animals for milk. If a cheese is made from milk sourced from its own herd, it's called a farmstead cheese. Once the milk is sourced, three big factors contribute to the final result of the cheese: bacteria, time and touch, or *affinage*. Affinage is all the caretaking that happens after the cheese goes into wheels–the aging, maturing and ripening process. An affineur is the person who cares for the cheese, a sort of shepherd of cheese wheels. Minnesota has some wonderful offerings of farmstead cheeses from makers across the state. If you want to fully experience Minnesota cheese, check out one of the cheeses from these makers.

CHEESEMAKERS

Shepherd's Way Farms, Nerstrand; *Sogn Tomme - Sheep Milk*

The Sogn is the latest creation from cheesemaker Jodi Ohlsen Read at Shepherd's Way Farms. This tomme-style cheese is semi-hard and made from sheep's milk aged in a "wild rind that reflects the flora" in their aging room. Shepherd's Way only makes this cheese in small batches of 25 wheels at a time. It has a creamy mouthfeel and a complex flavor with notes of brown sugar and caramel at first, before rotating toward notes of earthy mushroom, bay leaf and a forest floor finish. This cheese won two awards from the American Cheese Society, including the 2023 winner in the aged farmstead sheep milk category. Limited availability makes this cheese a must-try if you see it at your local cheese shop or farmers market.

Redhead Creamery, Brooten; *Little Lucy Brie - Cow Milk*

The Little Lucy Brie is Redhead Creamery's first and most popular cheese. Cheesemaker Alise Sjostrom grew her family's dairy farm to incorporate cheesemaking over ten years ago. The six-ounce cheese wheels are the perfect addition to any cheese board or holiday gathering. Little Lucy features cow's milk from her dairy farm in Brooten. Since the cheese comes directly from the cows on the farm, you'll find even more creaminess in the winter months as the cows move from grazing grass to a diversified winter diet of hay, alfalfa and grain, producing a milk with much higher fat and protein content. Tasting notes include pristine white button mushrooms, grassy and green tea notes, with an incredible creaminess and melted marshmallow texture. The young cheese rind releases a tanginess that fills the nose with each bite. Pick up a wheel of Redhead's brie at your local food co-op, cheese shop or Lunds and Byerlys.

Donnay Dairy, Kimball; *Chèvre - Goat Milk*

Kimball recorded a population of 799 people in the 2020 Census. Unreported were the 140 goats at Donnay Dairy who produce a whopping 20,000 pounds of cheese annually. This small town rural farm is family-owned and operated for four generations and boasts a sustainable model of cheesemaking. Tiny but mighty, Donnay's goats graze on 10 acres of pasture and only eat locally sourced feed on their pesticide-free farm. Their flagship offering is a classic goat cheese, or chèvre. Tasting notes capture the vibrancy of tangy goat milk, with bright lemon giving way to cool cucumber water and a salty finish with a classic goat hide musk on the exhale. Dress it up with seasonal herbs or serve on toast with seasonal fruit. Donnay Dairy is widely available at Minnesota food co-ops.

"I'M REALLY FOCUSING ON MAKING NATURAL, HANDCRAFTED CHEESE, AS OPPOSED TO BEING INDUSTRIALIZED AND FROM MILK THAT'S NOT VERY INTERESTING."

Capra Nera Creamery, Altura; *Contadina - Goat Milk*

Katie Bonow has been rearing goats since she won her first goat in a 4-H essay contest at the age of 12. Today the young cheesemaker, now in her thirties, is raising around 75 goats for milk, cheese and meat on her 12-acre farm in Altura. Bonow makes raw goat milk cheeses on a super seasonal basis at what she calls a "microcreamery." Between June and October, goats graze on pasture, resulting in a clean and sweet milk. "Goat milk kind of gets a bad rap because it can taste really bad if people don't practice proper hygiene when they're milking and they don't cool the milk properly," Bonow says. "I really focus on flavor quality over everything else. That's super important to me." She makes cheese every three days with fresh goat milk. At the end of the season, the microcreamery produces around 1,000 pounds of cheese.

Capra Nera Creamery only produces raw milk cheese, which can be sold in Minnesota as long as it's aged longer than 60 days. The youngest cheeses are a two to three month asiago and gouda, but her hero cheese is the Contadina, a semi-hard cheese aged for four to nine months. "I describe it as a cheddar Parmesan cross. It's firm, very sliceable. It's got a real nice nutty flavor with just a little bit of a cheddar zing to it," she describes. Tasting notes range from grassy, nutty and brothy the longer it ages.

Bonow honed her cheesemaking skills during her college vacations in Vermont and Italy. "I do European-style cheeses, not so much in variety that they make in Europe, but that I'm doing a farmstead cheese. I'm really focusing on making natural, handcrafted cheese, as opposed to being industrialized and from milk that's not very interesting."

Capra Nera Creamery cheeses are most easily found in the winter months after the milking season wraps. Find them at the Rochester Winter Farmers Market and Radish Farm Stop in Minneapolis.

These cheesemakers remind us that cheese isn't just something we eat. It's something we gather around, explore and obsess about, and it tells a story much bigger than the wheel or wedge on the table.

Nani Ferreira-Mathews is an author, freelance journalist, musician, and food pathways storyteller living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Nani is Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian), born in Oregon and raised in Georgia. Her writing focuses on race, indigeneity, decolonization, agriculture, and gender and sexuality. She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from Georgia State University. A recent transplant to Minnesota, Nani brings her love of tasting, terroir and community to exploring Minnesota's cheese scene in this article. With a background in coffee tasting and roasting and a fascination with complex flavors, Nani explores how a simple, quality ingredient like milk can be transformed into a delightful range of distinct cheeses.



OTHER CHEESES WE LOVE

Caves of Faribault

Fifty miles south of Minneapolis is the Caves of Faribault, where the first American-made blue cheese was born in 1930. The sandstone caves were originally carved out in the 1850s as storage for the German-immigrant brewery Fleckenstein Brewing Co. and used until the brewery closed during Prohibition. The caves remained unoccupied until re-discovered by cheesemaker Felix Fredrickesen in the 1930s. He eagerly transformed the sandstone caves to a cheese aging warehouse after seeing their potential for crafting America's first blue cheese. Minnesota quickly rose as the top-producing and top-consumed origin of American-made blue cheese across the US after WWII, outpacing European imports.

The Caves of Faribault have changed ownership since the 1930s, but the caves, now expanded, still produce Minnesota-made blue cheese. Grab the St. Pete Select, aged for 100 days or more in the caves, at your local cheese monger or food co-op, to get a taste of the sandstone cave legacy. This blue cheese is earthy and complex with a creamy mouthfeel and finishes with a hint of grapefruit rind.

CannonBelles Creamery

Woman-founded and led, CannonBelles Creamery offers a variety of approachable cheeses,including colby, cheddar and gouda as well as beloved cheese curds. Spice up your cheese board with their Grim Reaper Cheddar, a spicy white cheddar filled with jalapeno, serrano, habanero and Carolina Reaper peppers.

This trio of women cheesemakers is dedicated to local partnerships for all ingredients, including dairy, peppers, herbs and seasonings. In 2017, their Queso Fresco was awarded first place by the American Cheese Society. Check their website to locate one of their many distribution locations.