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## Montpelier's Jeffrey Roberts spreads the word about Vermont's artisan cheeses

By RICKA McNAUGHTON Correspondent

Photo by Dennis Curran

Jeffrey Roberts of Montpelier claims he can drive to just about anywhere in the country and nose his way to good food. He is more interested than most people in where it came from. Who made it? Where was it grown or raised?

Once while eating at a remote roadside diner in Montana, Roberts asked if the place got its beef from the herd of cattle he could see right across the road. Well, no one knew. So an employee went to check the wrapper on some meat that was still in the cooler. Best he could tell, the restaurant bought its beef from a processor in another part of the country, and there was no telling where the animals themselves came from.

American consumers and their food sources have suffered a giant disconnect over the past 60 years, stemming from the industrialization of food production, the shift from small farms to factory-like agribusiness and the rise of convoluted global distribution schemes. Roberts' eyes tighten as he speaks about it. But he brightens wonderfully when he talks about local artisan foods.

Especially cheese.

Some 15 years ago, on Roberts' second day as a new resident of Vermont, a bit of reconnaissance led him to the Capitol Farmer's Market in Montpelier. He approached a woman tending a booth offering samples of goat's milk cheese, and he asked her, "So who made this?" The woman answered, "I made it myself. What's it to ya?" And thus began a great friendship — and a budding collaboration in growing markets for artisan cheesemakers.

Over several years, Roberts gained more such friends and collaborators. Then, in a pivotal move, he helped bring 85 varieties of American handcrafted cheeses to a prestigious international exhibition called Cheese 2001 in Bra, Italy. The showcase event attracted some 60,000 neo-gastronomes and fired-up cheese tasters from around the world. Begun in the 1990s, Cheese was organized by the group called Slow Food International, which espouses the ideals of "good, clean and fair food." This means food produced in accordance with high standards of quality and safety, and with fair profits to producers.

Until that point, Europeans had long regarded America as a kind of cheese wasteland, on the assumption that we mainly ate mass produced, gelatinous bricks of orange "cheese product" and jars of school-paste-like spreads -- heavily comprising vegetable oils and unsavory chemicals -- that were a cheap staple of many of our childhoods.

But lo, the American artisan cheeses of 2001 were revelatory to the Europeans. The U.S. entries were deemed on a par with entries from Old World countries where cheese artisanship was honed and handed down over centuries. Notably, more than a third of the cheeses showcased at Cheese 2001 came from Vermont producers.

According to Roberts, the best cheese comes from the best science and the best milk sources – including the breed of cow and the milk's characteristic "terroir," a French tongue-twister often associated with the production of fine wine and coffee. Terroir (pronounced terr-whar) is basically the whole enchilada of regional, climate, soil, and onsite influences, both natural and human.

The most interesting production element of artisan cheese may be the human artistry – that is, the ability to subtly guide the natural enzymatic and aging actions that turn milk into luscious varieties of cheese.

"I know a Vermont cheesemaker who explains this process so elegantly," Roberts said. "I call him the Poet of Cheese." And what would Roberts call himself? "Not a poet. I'd have to say a chronicler of cheese."

In 2007, Roberts set down many studiously gathered cheese facts and tidbits in a first-of-its-kind guide called *The Atlas of American Artisan Cheese* (Chelsea Green Publishing). It contains forwards by friends Carlos Petrini, president of Slow Food International, and Allison Hooper, groundbreaking co-founder of Vermont Butter and Cheese in Graniteville and then-president of the American Cheese Society. With this book in hand, now anyone can follow Roberts' nose to the best artisan cheese and cheesemakers in the country.

Roberts also teaches the history and culture of food at the New England Culinary Institute, his perspective informed by policymaking experience in the fields of sustainable agriculture, healthy food systems, land conservation and environmental

stewardship. Consulting with family farmers and small food producers nationwide, he is impressed greatly by Vermonters, whom he thinks may be the smartest and most efficient farmers in the country. But the work is brutal; the financial odds are steep. Underlying all that is the challenge du jour: how to sustain both integrity and viability in a market system that favors economies of enormous scale.

Roberts is optimistic about the future.

He notes much has been gained in the last ten years. For farmers, organic and artisan food production formed new avenues for competition. For consumers, thoughtful shopping and eating choices created influential demand that rattled all the way up the food chains. Consider, for example, that in 2008, Walmart decided to stop selling milk containing the synthetic hormone rBST.

In Vermont, consumers now buy from local producers at five times the national average. It probably helps that, here, we are essentially all neighbors. You might say that community support for "good, clean and fair food" is part of the terroir of Vermont's artisan cheeses.

Roberts' celebration of artisan foods is one way to remind us that the manner of our food production bears heavily on the preservation of our natural resources, and vice versa. Drive to anywhere in the country, and it's clear we can't be reminded too often.

Stay tuned. Roberts is getting set to write a guidebook on American craft beers – another important food group.