



Driven by Taste

Your palate will thank you at every stop on the new Western North Carolina Cheese Trail.

By Ivy Lamb

★ | I once had a friend who asked everyone she met a very revealing question: “If you had to choose between having cheese or chocolate for the rest of your life, which would it be?”

A tough call, but my answer has to be cheese. Much like fine wine, cheese is endlessly variable and complex, ranging from fresh, soft chèvre to aged, hard cheeses such as Gruyère or Parmesan. Maybe I’m biased because of my family — my own mother is a farmstead cheese maker — but personally, I just can’t imagine life without salty crumbles of feta, oozy slices of Brie, or nutty wheels of Gouda.

So, when I find out my home state has its very own cheese trail — a collective of small, artisanal

cheese makers in the mountains of western North Carolina — I know I have to take a cheese-themed road trip.

I’m driven by more than just my taste buds; I also want to meet the people who are keeping a culinary tradition alive. With more than 40 producers scattered across the state, North Carolina is a leader in the South in terms of farmstead cheeses. Inspired by the Vermont Cheese Trail, a group of ten cheese makers formed the Western North Carolina Cheese Trail in 2013.

“It’s like a wine trail,” says Jennifer Perkins of Looking Glass Creamery, a founding organizer of the trail. “You get that connection with the cheese maker, and you’ll probably discover and learn a lot about cheese while you’re out there.”

English Farmstead Cheese

A handmade wooden sign tells me that I’ve arrived at my first destination: “Cheese around the curve.” Located on U.S. 221 North between Boone and Asheville, English Farmstead Cheese is tucked

LEGEND

1. Blue Ridge Mountain Creamery
2. Daddy’s Girl Dairy
3. English Farmstead Cheese
4. Heritage Homestead
5. Looking Glass Creamery
6. Mountain Farm
7. OakMoon Farm & Creamery
8. Ripshin Goat Dairy
9. Round Mountain Creamery
10. Yellow Branch Cheese

Diversions |

into a small mountain valley. Holstein cows dot the steep pastures, and inside the bright red farm store the shelves are stocked with local meats, jellies, baked goods, and of course, cheese.

Susan English greets me and shows me the special room just behind the storefront where she makes cheese by hand in small batches. Although she started making cheese only a year ago, the dairy farm has been in the family for six generations. “We’ve been selling commercial milk since 1926,” she says. “And in all that time, we’ve missed only one milking.”

From the sample table, I taste the cheese, which ranges from classic cheddar to flavored jack. The Ashford cheddar is firm yet creamy, with just enough tangy acidity. It makes the pre-shredded stuff you find in the grocery store taste like sawdust. My favorite is the Buttercup, a rich, salty, pale-yellow cheese that’s brined before it’s aged.

Susan’s husband, Terry, milks and cares for the cows, and their children

TRAVELING THE TRAIL

The Western North Carolina Cheese Trail stretches a little over 200 miles, from Jefferson to Robbinsville, so it’s best to plan ahead. Some stops have regular hours, and others require an appointment. While you’re traveling the trail, the Blue Ridge Mountains offer beautiful vistas at every turn — so you’ll never be bored. Another bonus: Buying directly from the cheese maker is almost always cheaper than buying from the grocery store, so be sure to bring a cooler and a sense of adventure. wnccheesetrail.vpweb.com



Sarah at Mountain Farm



Looking Glass Creamery cheese

and grandchildren pitch in at the store. It’s clear that this farm is still a family endeavor. “It’s a good life,” Terry says. “It’s no way to get rich, but we get to do what we want to do.”

Round Mountain Creamery

A few hours south, in Black Mountain, I stop at Round Mountain Creamery. As the only Grade A goat dairy in the state, Round Mountain sells fresh, pasteurized goat’s milk as well as cheese. Owner Linda Seligman gives me a behind-the-scenes tour.

Seligman starts with the milking room, where a raised stand stretches across the room. Using a machine, the staff can milk roughly 180 Alpine and LaMancha goats twice a day, every day. It’s clear that she’s used to giving tours — call ahead and she’ll be happy to show you around — and it’s a fascinating glimpse of how the milk goes from animal to finished product.

Next, I learn how milk is bottled and made into cheese. After the tour, Seligman lets me sample an array of flavored goat cheese spreads, ranging from nutty blueberry to spicy chipotle and jalapeno. She also makes an aged goat cheese called Amber Moon, which tastes nutty and grassy. Her true passion, though, is for the animals. “I just fell in love with the goats,” she says. “In

my heart, I feel like they are human beings on four legs.” When she pours us each a little cup of fresh goat milk to try, her toast is fitting: “To your health and the health of the farm.”

Looking Glass Creamery

Located in Fairview, about 20 minutes outside of Asheville, Looking Glass Creamery sells both cow and goat milk cheese, crafted on-site by cheese maker Jennifer Perkins. Although Perkins doesn’t raise her own cows or goats, she buys milk exclusively from local dairy farmers, including Round Mountain.

The cheese-making facility and store are both housed in a renovated barn overlooking a mountain meadow. Like English Farmstead, the little store is filled with cured meats, bread, crackers, and wine — perfect for a picnic — but the main attraction is the cheese.

As I try the samples, I’m astounded at the range of textures and flavors. The Chocolate Lab, a hard cheese coated with sea salt and crushed cocoa nibs, is rich and slightly pungent. The Pack Square tastes milky and mild, with a creamy interior typical of Brie. But the most striking cheese, and the one Perkins is perhaps most proud of, is the Ellington. A dramatic pyramid of white goat-milk cheese coated in a thin layer of ash and wrapped in a soft, snowy

WeatherTech®

Automotive Accessories

Laser Measured
FloorLiner™



All-Weather
Floor Mats

Available in Black, Tan and Grey
for Virtually Any Vehicle

WeatherTech.com • 800-441-6287



For US Customers :
WeatherTech.com

©2014 MacNeil IP LLC



For Canadian Customers :
WeatherTech.ca



For European Customers :
WeatherTechEurope.com

Diversions |

riend, this one tastes earthy and velvety — and it might be my favorite.

Each cheese is unique, and Perkins enjoys putting her creative stamp on her product. “Cheese making is physical work, which I like, but there are also lots of ways to creatively influence what you’re making,” she says.

It’s a sentiment that others on the trail have echoed. Each place I’ve visited has its own personality, methods, and products, but all of these farmers and cheese makers share common traits: They care about their animals, they care about their product, and they march to the beat of their own drum. It’s clear that making cheese isn’t just a job — it’s a lifestyle. As I return home with a cooler full of flavors, I’m grateful for having met them and to have my cheese-over-chocolate bias finally confirmed. ❏

Ivy Lamb is a former editor for this magazine. She resides in Columbus, Ohio.

Hungry? Come eat at Scottsdale’s best hidden gem!



OLD TOWN
**TORTILLA
FACTORY**
SCOTTSDALE

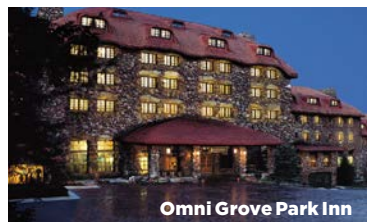
Stargazing, Homemade Tortillas, Fresh Southwestern Cuisine & AZ’s Best Margaritas offered nightly on our award winning Patio.



(480) 945-4567

6910 EAST MAIN STREET, SCOTTSDALE, AZ 85251
WWW.OLDTOWNTORTILLAFACORY.COM

WHERE TO STAY



Omni Grove Park Inn

Originally opened in 1891, Blowing Rock’s **Green Park Inn** offers access to the northern trail stops. The hotel’s graceful Queen Anne architecture recalls an earlier era, but the newly renovated Chestnut Grille restaurant serves sophisticated comfort dishes such as the pecan-crusted North Carolina rainbow trout. greenparkinn.com

Further south in Asheville, the **Omni Grove Park Inn** pairs history and elegance with modern amenities. The lobby features 36-foot stone fireplaces and sweeping views of the mountains. You’ll see why the resort was a favorite of luminaries such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Henry Ford. (And after a day on the road, there’s nothing better than relaxing in the 43,000-square-foot subterranean spa.) groveparkinn.com

PHOTO COURTESY OF OMNI GROVE PARK INN