

Laura Werlin: the cheese lady of Aspen

She'll present cheese seminars at this weekend's Food & Wine Magazine Classic

BY KELLY J. HAYES

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ASPEN — Laura Werlin is one of those lucky people who pursued a passion and turned it into a profession. In her case, the passion is for cheese. Especially American artisan cheese.

"When I was a little girl, my mother would make me grilled cheese sandwiches," she reminisced recently over the din at the bar of a trendy San Francisco Vietnamese restaurant. "And my first job was at a McDonald's. I would have the cooks make me double-cheese burgers. I think I invented that, but I'm still waiting for the check."

In the years since flipping burgers in Santa Monica, Werlin has become the leading authority and go-to expert on the new American cheese movement. This year she will again be addressing foodies, who have become part of her cult following through her books, presentations and television appearances, as a presenter at the 2008 Food & Wine Magazine Classic in Aspen.

As a part-time Aspen resident (her primary "crib" is in San Francisco), Laura will be "coming home" to host a pair of cheese seminars on both Friday, June 13, and Saturday, June 14.

The early show, scheduled for the 10 a.m. sessions, will focus on "American Raw Milk Cheeses." Her second seminar, which kicks off at 2 p.m. each day, will see her paired with Brian Duncan, the talented wine director of Chicago's Bin 36 and A Mano restaurants and a 2008 James Beard nominee. "The Cheese Course" will be the subject, and Duncan will pair new world and old world wines with the new world and old world cheeses Laura has selected.

They are topics she is intimately familiar with, as her career takes her around the country, speaking to groups, hosting seminars, and essentially acting as an evangelist for American cheese. With her compact, athletic profile, her brighter than sunlight smile and a head of brown curls that cascade about her face like a cluster of lilacs, Laura is easily recognized by those who have attended her presentations and read her books.

"I'll be halfway up Smuggler on a run and pass a group and I'll hear someone say, 'Hey, wasn't that the cheese lady?'" she says with a blush.

The new American cheese movement is a relatively recent phenomenon, according to Werlin. "I would say that the perception and enjoyment of cheese has changed greatly over just the last seven years in this country," she explains. "Americans have traveled to other countries and been exposed to the kinds of cheeses they find in France and Italy. Add that to the growing interest in local and fresh products of all kinds, not just cheese, and the result is a great demand for the artisan and specialty cheeses, as well as growth in the market. I mean, today you can walk into a Costco or a Wal-Mart and find great cheese."

She fails to mention her role as an agent for change on behalf of American artisan cheese. As the author of four books, including her current missive titled "Laura Werlin's Cheese Essentials." (She was nominated by the James Beard Foundation this year in the category Best Single Subject Food Book; the award winners were announced after the closing for this piece.) Laura has almost single-handedly championed the small farms and passionate (there's that word again) people who strive to make the very best cheese possible.

"I'll never know why," she says with a shake of the head, "but farmers are my heroes. Maybe it was because I grew up in the city, but I have always felt that farmers were special people."

Her profiles of 25 cheesemakers and winemakers, in her previous Beard Award-winning book "The All American Cheese and Wine Book: Pairings, Profiles and Recipes," have helped to introduce a whole new group of cheeses and cheesemakers to an audience craving new tastes and new information.



“Laura Werlin’s Cheese Essentials,” subtitled “An Insider’s Guide to Buying and Serving Cheese,” hopes to take some of the mystery out of cheese for consumers. “People should not be intimidated when they go into a cheese shop,” she implores. “The only thing that matters is what you like. Do you like creamy cheeses or firm cheeses? Do you like mild or strong cheeses. Taste and ask, ask, ask. That’s the only way you’ll really get to find out what you really like.”

America is tailor-made for this explosion in cheese. “I think Americans love a food challenge. Cheese parallels the growth of the American wine industry. It may be tough to master cheese, but like wine it presents a challenge,” she says with sincerity. “The biggest obstacle may be that people grew up with cheese as an ingredient not as a stand-alone food. But that’s changing.”

Laura is already looking forward to her next book, and though she is hush-hush on the topic, she will begin writing it this very weekend. “I will be hiking to American Lake to strategize about the project and begin writing on the 12th (of June),” she smiles with an anticipatory twinkle.

No doubt, other hikers will stop and inquire as she passes in her shorts and curls: “Hey aren’t you the cheese lady?”

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