

NOTES FROM A FARM: **CHAPEL HILL CREAMERY**
The Magical Science of Cheese-making
A Visit with Flo Hawley & Portia McKnight

NO ONE WAS MAKING COW'S MILK CHEESE IN NORTH Carolina when Flo Hawley and Portia McKnight left their longstanding jobs at Whole Foods in 2001 to start The Chapel Hill Creamery. Mixing rustic with refined, their remarkably popular products exemplify that sometimes deliciousness speaks louder than a heavy-duty marketing plan.

have different types of cheeses.” Or more succinctly: “It just takes some understanding of science, mixed with a considerable amount of magic, to make cheese.”

Flo and Portia have eight employees, a combination of inside and outside workers, with full- and part-time schedules, most of whom have worked with them for several years. Add the fifty exceptionally good-looking Jersey cows (thirty of which are milking at any given time), and you have one big, cheesy family sitting on quite the pretty property just outside the Chapel Hill town center. Unfortunately, the trough of dirty happy pigs oughtn't to be included in the picturesque tableaux since their reality is that they are soon destined for participation in some variation of a bacon program. But the hoggone truth is that we are not all vegetarians, and this is a rather small blip on the largely idyllic cheese-making scene at The Chapel Hill Creamery.

The women regularly bring their cheeses to farmer's markets in Carrboro, Durham, and Cary. The creamery's cheese is also on the menus of revered restaurants all across the economic board—from the upscale Fearington Inn Restaurant to the more casual Crook's Corner Café and Bar, as well as being stocked in deli cases at the Saxapahaw General Store, The Weaver Street Market, and 3Cups. A distributor makes sure their delicacies find their way to many additional outlets, as these women are so busy doing what they love that the business details are not their primary concern. They're not really in this to break the bank anyway—their cheese making truly is a

Says Portia: “Cheese making is an interesting business to be in because most people have no clue how cheese is made. Cheese is just milk treated—or manipulated—in different ways, to be preserved as a variety of different cheeses. But it's just milk, not a bunch of different ingredients, as a lot of people think. Based on how you treat the milk, and what you do to the milk, you will



labor of love and taste.

Which cheese is Portia's favorite? “Depends on what day you are talking about. Fresh mozzarella is my favorite in the peak of summer, since I love it with fresh tomatoes. But come fall, I might say Carolina Moon on some crusty bread.” While Portia is hard pressed to say any one thing that is best about being in the cheese business, she will concede, “Cutting open a wheel of cheese that has been in your fridge aging for eight or nine months, and to have it taste great . . . that's pretty rewarding.” Sure sounds like a bit of science mixed with some considerable magic right there. southerncheese.com/pages/chapelhill.html

AUGUST 1-4: CHEESE RALLY

Raleigh, NC | Raleigh Convention Center | cheesesociety.org

The American Cheese Society invites cheesemongers from across the country for this twenty-ninth annual conference with competitions, seminars, and showcases. This grassroots group is pleased to feature Temple Grandin, expert on humane livestock handling, as its keynote speaker. If you haven't already, rent the HBO biopic *Temple Grandin* (2010) starring Claire Danes, an excellent and moving portrait of this singular and courageous lady.

