

From Literature to Fine Cheese: Journey of a Columbus Cheese monger

The historic North Market in downtown Columbus is a vibrant hub of vendors, filled with the aroma of fresh spices and the light chatter of patrons. Near the back of the market sits Black Radish Creamery, a shop with an inviting atmosphere and neatly arranged cheeses.

For Rob Shields, cheese monger at Black Radish Creamery, it's the backdrop for his passion. Behind the counter, he helps customers discover new flavors and shares the details behind the cheese.

Shields' love for cheese began when he was a student at The Ohio State University, working at a deli counter in Kroger to make extra money. At the time, he knew only basic cheeses like cheddar and provolone. It was there that a group of older women "stole" him from the deli and introduced him to the world of fine cheeses.

"I remember trying a triple cream cheese for the first time" he said. "I was like...this is so buttery, and it's got these extra components going for it."

From that moment, he was hooked. The curiosity sparked behind the deli counter eventually inspired him to leave a career in copywriting and pursue cheesemaking — a job where his hands could transform simple ingredients into something delicious.

Importance of Consumer Education

Shields understands that many consumers are hesitant to pay high prices for artisan products. Explaining the concept of artisan cheese is important, as the average person may not be familiar with the term or understand the difference it makes in quality and taste.

"We need to teach people that artisan cheese is worth it, that there's a reason it costs more," he said.

This effort involves explaining the difference between larger cheesemaking facilities and artisan operations, the latter often using traditional hands-on methods. Shields bridges the gap between price and process, showing customers that the higher cost reflects the commitment and time set aside for artisan cheese. This education also involves explaining how artisan cheese is a form of art.

This perspective was echoed by Tracy Enslin, vice president of business development at American Dairy Association Mideast. She defined artisan cheesemaking as an artistic pursuit, saying:

"It's truly an art form. It takes a lot of work, commitment and high-quality milk to make a good cheese. The time and the effort... It's not something that you can produce within the same day. It can take months, even years to produce high-quality cheese."

Passion for the Craft

For people like Shields, their work is driven by a love for their products.

"Those who make cheese are passionate about the products they produce," Enslen said.

At Black Radish Creamery, owners and staff share this dedication. Shields noted their pimento cheese as an example of the company's commitment to detail:

"We make it with olive oil instead of mayonnaise because a co-worker has an allergy to eggs," he said.

This act proves that devotion to quality extends beyond a product's flavor; it is a philosophy applied to the entire operation.

Rob's journey from a literature student to an experienced cheese monger is an example of the diverse stories of Ohio's artisan cheese scene. He shows that an individual pursuing a passion can better a local food system, one wheel of cheese at a time.