



MAKERS OF
FINE GOAT MILK
CHEESES

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HUMBOLDT COUNTY OUTFIT PUTS A LITTLE BIT OF FOG RIGHT IN THE CHEESE

— Few American artisan cheeses created in recent years have penetrated the national market like Humboldt Fog. Whether because of its striking appearance or superior flavor, consumers have embraced this unusual goat cheese with ash in the middle.

In supermarkets that make no pretense of offering a quality cheese selection, there's Humboldt Fog. On the menus of small-town restaurants aiming for a little sophistication, there's Humboldt Fog. Cheesemaker Mary Keehn says she felt she had really arrived when an acquaintance told her about seeing the cheese in Europe.

Keehn's Cypress Grove Chevre in the Humboldt County town of McKinleyville makes or markets several award-winning goat cheeses, including an aged cheese made in Holland called Midnight Moon. But Humboldt Fog is its star. Created about a dozen years ago, the cheese comes in both 5-pound and 14-ounce formats, but I think the larger wheel has a more appealing proportion of paste to rind and more potential to mature gracefully.

Keehn uses goat's milk from five nearby farms, and she pays a premium for exceptional quality. The goats are on pasture at least part of the day. She pasteurizes the milk at her dairy, using the low-temperature, long-duration method that does the least harm to the milk. But Keehn says

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the secret to her cheeses' fine flavor is the cultures. Cheesemakers typically use a purchased culture that produces the qualities they like. Keehn uses at least two, sometimes more, and believes the mix gives her cheese more complexity.

Like many fresh goat cheeses, Humboldt Fog is coagulated largely with acid, not rennet. The cultured milk ripens overnight, like yogurt, giving the bacteria time to consume the milk sugar and produce lactic acid and other flavor components. A few drops of vegetable enzyme help the coagulation along, but it is mostly acidification that causes the milk protein to coalesce into curds.

The molds are half-filled, then the curds are sprinkled with a layer of salt and vegetable ash -- the same white-pine ash used in Morbier. The remaining curds go on top, then after some draining and drying, the wheels are coated with more ash and inoculated with the culture that will develop the bloomy white rind. The wheels are ready for shipping in three to four weeks, depending on the size.

A ripe Humboldt Fog will be creamy under the rind, firm and dense at the center, maturing from the outside in. These contrasting textures are a large part of its allure, so I wouldn't buy a wedge that didn't show some of that development. The paste will be chalk white, with the fine grey line of ash that is meant to suggest the morning fog. The flavor will be mild and frank, not goaty, with salt and acid present but balanced.

Many wines can partner Humboldt Fog successfully, from Sauvignon Blanc to dry rosé to a youthful, medium-weight Pinot Noir. Walnut bread is a nice accompaniment.

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