

A One-Woman Flavor Crusade

BY DAVID GIBBONS

A fiery young woman from the Philadelphia suburbs, sporting a shock of wild curls, falls in love with Spain her junior year abroad and spends three months touring the Iberian Peninsula in the back of a converted Mr. Whippy ice cream truck.

A few years later, a handsome young Italian man strolls into a hotel lobby in the province of Viterbo, near Rome, to sell a yellow Rolls Royce to a client from New Jersey. A chance encounter with Miss Curly Hair, who's in town to help organize a golf tournament, leads to romance.

These are but the opening chapters of a long and serendipitous saga, begun in the late 1980s, whose protagonists, Michele Buster and Pierluigi Sini, founded Forever Cheese and built it into one of America's leading fine-cheese importers. Their romantic partnership ended years ago, but their professional one is still going strong.

Before Forever's official launch in 1998, Buster and Sini's mission was to shore up U.S. sales of Genuine Fulvi Pecorino Romano, which his father acquired in the '70s. Much of the Pecorino Romano sold state-side was dry, soapy, oversalted and not even made near Rome; Fulvi was a rare authentic example—softer, mellow, eminently palatable.

"I said to Pierluigi, 'If we're successful with your family's cheese, you should let me go find the best Spanish Manchego,'" says Buster. "It was an offhand remark, but I meant it." A nearly two-year odyssey led her to the Corcuera family. On her initial visit, Carlos, one of two brothers who ran the firm, cut open a wheel on the hood of his car: "The butterfat that oozed out of that cheese stopped me in my tracks," she recalls. The Corcuera's El Trigal six-month-aged Manchego became one of Forever's flagship products and competes at the top of its category.

Meanwhile, Forever targeted small-production Parmigiano-Reggianos, upward of 85 pounds, capable of developing multifaceted flavor profiles with outstanding fruity-acid balance and the coveted tyrosine crystal-laced moist-yet-crumblily texture. Sold under the Mitica label, these Parmigianos are now best sellers among Forever's 150-plus cheese offerings, alongside a dozen Manchego options; the Fulvi Pecorino; and a Queso de Murcia al Vino, which Buster rebranded the Drunken Goat for the United States.

Over the first decade, Buster gave countless in-store demos, relentlessly recounting family stories and regional histories. "She laid all this groundwork, and we came a long way," says Sini. "The last 10 years have been different. I think she's definitely a main reason why there's a market for specialty cheeses from Italy, Spain and Portugal in America today."

Forever's success relies on Buster's ability to forge personal links. "The people we work with, the livelihoods we touch ... It's really hard to separate the relationships from the cheese," she says. "I can look at some of our



Michele Buster

cheesemakers and say, 'I watched him grow up.' When I walk into a cheese shop, my biggest joy is to look the cheesemonger in the eye and be able to say, 'That's Giovanni's cheese, that's Josep's, that's Lorenzo's.'"

Always hunting, Buster focuses equally on tradition and innovation: "In cheese, I look for great personality and depth. As asymmetrical as I am, I look for balance of the lactic, buttery qualities with the salt and the acidity. Also some earthiness: I want cheeses that reflect their *terroir*."

On a vacation to the Dalmatian Coast in 2005, she succumbed to some gentle arm-twisting from a Croatian acquaintance and took a half-day detour to the island of Pag. She had her first taste of Paski Sir ("cheese from Pag"), drizzled with extra-virgin olive oil, and was captivated.

No Pag cheese had ever been exported, so it took five years to establish trust and a viable pipeline. Made from the rich milk of the diminutive local sheep—weighing no more than 70 pounds each, they scuffle for wild flowers and herbs across the island's barren, rock-strewn terrain—Paski Sir is a highly flavorful, well-rounded world-class Pecorino type.

In 2008, Buster met brothers Bruno and Alfio Gritti, who had converted their family dairy in northern Italy, Quattro Portoni, to water buffalo. Soon she orchestrated the U.S. debut of 100% aged buffalo-milk cheese with their Taleggio-style Quadrello di Bufala. Around the same time, Buster linked up with another northern Italian innovator, Fattoria Fiandino, creator of the intriguing thistle-renneted cow's milk Gran Kinara, in a Grana Padano style, and Lou Bergier Pichin ("the little shepherd" in the local Occitan dialect), a rich alpine tomme that was a stand-out in a recent tasting of more than 30 Forever selections.

Ask Buster "what's new?" and it's a guarantee you'll encounter at least a few similarly worthwhile delicacies. Among the latest is an exclusive line based on the award-winning Maxorata, a Majorero-type goat cheese from Grupo Ganadores de Fuerteventura in the Canary Islands. On a pilgrimage there in 2018, Buster met Ganadores' chief, Esteban Alberto Pérez, and his family, paving the way for its sister cheeses, Alisios (a paprika-rubbed cow-goat mix), Cabra al Gofio (rubbed with toasted cornmeal) and the Smokin' Goat (lightly smoked), three welcome additions to Forever's roster, all featuring that sought-after combination of balance and character.

David Gibbons is co-author of Mastering Cheese.

Forever Cheese (forevercheese.com)

Alva	From Portugal, with nice goaty, salty and bittersweet notes
Bettelmatt	Like an Italian Emmentaler—softer, sweeter but just as funky
Garroxta	A Catalan classic, irresistibly complex, balanced and addictive
Izar-Gazta Idiazabal	A Spanish aged goat cheese, savory, earthy and elegant
La Dama Sagrada	A satisfying goat version of the classic sheep's-milk Manchego
Queso de Oveja Anejo	Delivers an eye-opening dose of milk-chocolaty flavor
Queso Los Cameros	A seamlessly blended, oh-so-inviting three-milk hybrid
Ubriaco al Pinot Rosé	Imagine an English farmhouse Cheddar, in Italy, drunk on rosé
VerdeCapra	A goat's milk Gorgonzola Dolce, bittersweet and mouthwatering