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# Locating Value in Artisan Cheese: Reverse Engineering *Terroir* for New-World Landscapes

Heather Paxson

**ABSTRACT** *Terroir*, the taste of place, is being adapted by artisan cheesemakers in the United States to reveal the range of values—agrarian, environmental, social, and gastronomic—that they believe constitute their cheese and distinguish artisan from commodity production. Some see themselves as reverse engineering *terroir* cheeses to create place through environmental stewardship and rural economic revitalization. But a tension is produced: while warranting projects of reterritorialization through defetishized food production, *terroir* marketing may risk turning the concept of “*terroir*” into a commodity fetish. U.S. *terroir* talk reveals attempts to reconcile the economic and sociomoral values that producers invest in artisan cheese.

*Keywords:* alternative agriculture, place, value, food studies, cheese

In Cross Plains, Wisconsin, cheesemaker Diana Murphy transforms the milk of her mixed-breed goats into *chèvre* using a method she learned from Anne Topham, a farmstead cheesemaker 30 miles away. When asked by a specialty retailer why her fresh cheese seems “more whipped” than Anne’s, Diana speculated, “it’s the area that we raise our animals in—she’s on a bit different terrain, has different pasture. We feed them different hays. And [it’s] how we handle that cheese” (conversation with author, July 8, 2008). This notion that distinct ecologies of production generate distinctive sensory qualities in handcrafted agricultural products, such as artisan cheese, is increasingly articulated in the United States through the French term *terroir*.

Initially employed to link viticulture (grape growing) to the character of wine, *terroir* or *goût de terroir* has been glossed as “the taste of place,” with place referring to the material conditions of a locale—soil, topography, and microclimate—and also to the cultural know-how behind agricultural products that helps constitute “place” as a locus of shared custom and affective belonging (Trubek 2008). In his foreword to geologist James Wilson’s *Terroir*, wine writer Hugh Johnson defines it as “the whole ecology of the vineyard: every aspect of its surroundings from bedrock to late frosts to autumn mists, not excluding the way the vineyard is tended, nor even the soul of the vigneron” (1998:4). In her cultural history of champagne, Kolleen Guy (2003) demonstrates that *terroir* is symbolically rooted in the soil of a French nation historically cultivated by a romanticized peasantry. Understood to come “from long occupation of the

same area” and “the interplay of human ingenuity and curiosity with the natural givens of a place” (Barham 2003:131), *terroir* offers a theory of how people and place, cultural tradition and landscape ecology, are mutually constituted over time. It resembles Tim Ingold’s theorization of “landscape” as a congealed “taskscape,” a concretization of practical tasks “carried out by a skilled agent in an environment” (2000:195).

Translated to cheesemaking, the congealed taskscape that might travel by the name “*terroir*” could encompass pasturelands whose flora are selected for by ruminant grazing and human management; practices of animal husbandry; ambient microorganisms, directly or indirectly selected for by hygienic practices, that make their way into cheese; and recipes and artisan methods of making cheese. In contrast to industrial cheesemaking, which begins with standardized ingredients and hypersterile conditions to produce an utterly consistent product, artisan cheesemaking begins with minimally modified milk.<sup>1</sup> Guided by sensory analysis, artisan cheesemakers adjust their methods to work with rather than against seasonal and climatic variations in milk that affect fermentation and coagulation as well as the color and flavor of cheese (Kindstedt 2005). That context-dependent variation gives a warrant to claims of *terroir* taste.

Environmental conditions influence the development of artisan cheese, and the taskscape of artisan cheesemaking also alters landscapes—social as well as natural ones. As a folk category through which people understand their relationship to the land (Trubek 2008:18), *terroir* melds two dominant

anthropological approaches, political-economic and phenomenological, that have characterized the study of place. Terroir is recognizable as the productive outcome of market capitalism and trade regulation while simultaneously speaking to the intimate, sensory apprehension of and semiotic significance given to being-in-location (Escobar 2001:152–153). With transnational consequence and culturally specific meaning, terroir offers, in France, an ideological trope through which “traditionally” fabricated agricultural food products—cheeses, wines, and cured meats—are distinguished from industrially manufactured goods and established as regional and national patrimony (Guy 2003; Rogers 2008). As invented tradition, terroir-based foods contribute to the felt authenticity of French cuisine (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

In this article, I examine what happens when an essentializing category is translated from one cultural tradition to another. In their 2008 article, “Creating the Taste of Place in the United States: Can We Learn from the French?” Amy Trubek and Sarah Bowen ask, “How could a U.S.-based model for place-based products also acknowledge the American emphasis on innovation and change?” (2008:29). Although Trubek and Bowen seek to bring insights of social science to food activism, I take up the question in a more ethnographic register, exploring how terroir is adapted and debated by participants in the current artisan cheesemaking “renaissance” in the United States. Sparked in the 1980s as an offshoot of the back-to-the-land movement and fueled by the spread of farmers’ markets, commercial artisan cheesemaking has taken off in the present decade, with the number of domestic producers more than doubling since 2000. Today approximately 400 enterprises handcraft cheese from milk either purchased from nearby farms or produced by cheesemakers’ own animals (in which case the cheese may be called “farmstead”).<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on fieldwork conducted in the dairying regions of New England, Wisconsin, and northern California, and adopting a phrase from a Vermont cheesemaker, I argue that U.S. artisan cheesemakers are engaged in “reverse engineering” terroir.<sup>3</sup> That is, they think backward from European ideal types—of cheeses suited to the environment of their fabrication, of communities centered around foodmaking—to fashion innovative models of cheese, and terroir, suitable to the nature–culture (Haraway 1998; Latour 1993) of U.S. agricultural and culinary landscapes. For these rural entrepreneurs, culture doesn’t “sit in places” (Basso 1996); culture can be retooled to generate new places. Building on Ingold’s (2000:195) notion that “tasks are the constitutive acts of dwelling,” the connected practices of daily life within a given environment that congeal to form landscapes, I report in this article on cheesemakers wanting to create desired places through promoting an artisanal taskscape of farm-based agricultural food processing. In asking what cheese might best express the character of this land and that agrarian vision, reverse engineering terroir may work to naturalize entrepreneurial innovation, making it seem a part

of nature and therefore as legitimate, inevitable, and even morally good (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995).

U.S. cheesemakers are test-driving terroir as a vehicle for conveying the value of their craft practice and products, in at least two senses. As a value-adding marketing label, terroir may enhance a cheese’s cultural capital and price per pound through promoting place-based distinction. As the website of California’s Cypress Grove Chevre declares, “We like to think that the softness and mystery of the fog infuses our cheese. A Humboldt Fog<sup>®</sup> made in Peoria just wouldn’t be the same!” (Cypress Grove Chevre n.d.). To suggest that physical characteristics of place—here, coastal fog and salty Pacific breezes—leave an indelible mark on a cheese implies that the cheese is so special it could not be replicated elsewhere. This descriptive mode is similar to terroir talk in Europe, but it is not the only way terroir is taken up in the United States.

Terroir is also being translated to suggest that the gustatory values that make artisan cheeses taste good to consumers are rooted in moral values that make the cheeses ethically good for producers to make. Drawing on the holism of terroir—what one cheesemaker described as “everything that goes into the cheese”—artisans argue that the commercial value of their cheese is derived from underlying assets that cheese sales also protect: independent family farms, unconfined dairy animals, and working landscapes. Moreover, these assets have the potential to become collective patrimony, constitutive of place—if they are valued as such. And so in its U.S. incarnation, rooted in the Lockean virtue of improving society through improving land, terroir is being reframed as a prescriptive category for thoughtful action, for bringing-into-being from the ground up places where some wish to live and others want to visit. For these rural entrepreneurs, terroir is not an a priori quality to be discovered through selective recuperation of the past; rather, it is something to do to make the future.

In suggesting that terroir may become a model for the instrumental value of artisan foods (at least among producers) by calling attention to—and even motivating the creation of—material and affective conditions of place, I draw on the long-standing anthropological insight that food is never just food. Requiring material resources including labor and offering opportunities for creativity, pleasure, and denial, food is endlessly symbolic (e.g., Ohnuki-Tierney 1993; Sutton 2001; Wilk 2006). Food not only results from human action but also, in fact, “food is meaningful and valuable because it *motivates* action” (Weiss 1996:128; also see, e.g., Mintz 1985; Munn 1986).

To argue that terroir in the United States is reverse engineered is not simply to point out a lack (or loss) of transgenerational cheesemaking tradition. Rather, I mean to emphasize that if “terroir” has meaningful significance in the United States, it is as a model for practice that has yet to become routinized, standardized, and embedded in either taskscapes or landscapes. Terroir in the United States is not simply ideational; it is idealistic. As a colleague commented

on an earlier draft of this article, “it’s less about what the cheese *is* than what the cheese is trying to be”—and what cheesemakers are trying to be, as rural entrepreneurs, ecological stewards, sustainable developers, local citizens, and conscientious dairy farmers. By calling attention to material conditions of production, U.S. experiments with terroir offer opportunity for reterritorialization—for drawing meaningful lines of connection among people, culture, and landscape to invest rural places anew with affective significance and material relevance. It remains to be seen how successful cheesemakers will be in conveying their understanding of the value of what they are doing to consumers. Indeed, it may not matter. So long as cheese sells at a price that fairly compensates artisan labor, whether on taste alone or with appreciation for its instrumental values, producers’ goals for the practice of their everyday lives may be furthered. For this reason, consumer perception is not essential to my analysis.

Nonetheless, insofar as reverse engineering terroir represents a modest attempt at “remaking” the food system, it remains “in dialogue” with the conventional food system (Hinrichs 2007; Sonnino and Marsden 2006). U.S. cheesemakers’ attempts to make terroir meaningful may be visionary, but they are also thickly embedded in market logic and a Eurocentric “global hierarchy of value” (Herzfeld 2004). The social reproduction of class through cultivating taste as a mark of distinction may also be naturalized in accounts of terroir—cheese, after all, has been hailed the new wine (Bourdieu 1987; MacDonald 2007). The tension produced by cheesemakers’ calling attention to the social-material conditions of a cheese’s production to enlist terroir in defetishizing a food commodity while simultaneously capitalizing, however modestly, on that attention is at the heart of U.S. terroir talk. Building on cheesemakers’ insights, I forward a notion of “terroir” as a conceptual terrain on which artisan entrepreneurs negotiate the potentially fraught relationship between the social and ecological values they espouse and the commercial values they seek (Miller 2008).

How, then, do cheesemakers rework the concept of “terroir” for U.S. landscapes, where pastures may be recently carved from woodlands (Vermont) or introduced to cattle after being seeded with wheat (Wisconsin) and in which prior generations of farmers are valorized not as peasants essentially rooted in place but as pioneers taming frontier territories? My first clues came at the 2005 meeting of the American Cheese Society in Louisville, Kentucky, at a panel devoted to “Nurturing Terroir: Encouraging Local Influences to Create Unique Cheeses.” At this panel, enthusiasts and skeptics spoke of “rescaling” and “reverse engineering” terroir. After reporting from the panel to discuss how people in the U.S. recalibrate the scale of terroir, geographically and temporally, I demonstrate how producers reverse engineer terroir to describe and to generate what they view as the true value of their cheese: its potential to benefit the natural and social environments from which it emerges.

## RESCALING TERROIR FOR U.S. LANDSCAPES

The American Cheese Society (ACS) is a grassroots professional organization of small-scale cheesemakers, academics, retailers, distributors, and writers founded in 1983 to support nonindustrial cheesemaking. Membership today exceeds 1,200. The moderator of the 2005 “Nurturing Terroir” panel noted that, compared with France, cheesemakers in the United States “are in 1351,” the year the Burgundy wine-growing region began to control its appellation. He warned that U.S. cheesemakers cannot recreate what the French have done in terms of terroir and that it would be foolish to try because the contexts imagined to generate place-based foods are calibrated to different scales. In other words, the “places”—what geographers characterize as “the cultural settings where localized and geographically wide-ranging socioeconomic processes that condition actions of one sort or another are jointly mediated” (Agnew 2002:90)—thought to generate “terroir foods” are shaped by different ideological commitments in each setting. In France, the supposed authenticity of regionally broad food traditions may reach back centuries; in the United States, entrepreneurial innovation stands in for transgenerational custom. If those in the United States are to import terroir talk, adjustments must be made.

In France, *terroir* is defined as “an area or terrain, usually rather small, whose soil and microclimate impart distinctive qualities to food products” (Barham 2003:131), and the term has come to underpin—as an ideal type—the *Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée* (AOC) products of geographical origin labeling system (Rogers 2008; Trubek and Bowen 2008). Under this politically charged and bureaucratically regulated system, certain agricultural products may be manufactured and sold under registered names—for example, Champagne or Camembert de Normandie—only if production occurs within designated geographical areas and complies with specified methods. For cheese, AOC criteria begin with dairying and may include breed of animal, grazing conditions (alpine or valley), and permissible feed; in making cheese, heat treatment of milk as well as recipe are strictly regulated (Boisard 2003; Rogers 2008; on Italian Denominazione di Origine Controllata [DOC] cheeses, Grasseni 2003).

But this sort of collective, regionally circumscribed practice, codified throughout the European Union under the Protected Designation of Origin label, is not gaining much traction among cheese producers in the United States, who are disinclined to embrace this degree of bureaucratic control. At the ACS panel, the U.S. liaison for the Parmigiano-Reggiano producers’ consortium exclaimed, “If Marin County were in Italy, they’d all be making one cheese!” Although multiple cheesemakers can and do claim that the cool nights and foggy air of coastal Marin influence the development (and enhance the quality) of their cheese, no one suggests all Marin cheesemakers milk the same species (let alone breed) and conform to the same recipe to produce a uniformly recognizable “Marin County cheese.” “Instead,” the speaker continued enthusiastically, “we have this

wonderful biodiversity within one ecosystem!” Referring to the variety of novel cheeses emerging from a cultural landscape that is thereby transformed, the metaphor of biodiversity recognizes, as it naturalizes, proliferation through innovation.

U.S. cheesemakers are entrepreneurs seeking recognition for the creativity of their productive activity. They do not want to be “incarcerated” by place, “confined,” in Arjun Appadurai’s words (1988), by ecological niches to which the collective practices and worldviews of “natives”—such as European “peasants” (Rogers 1987)—are supposedly well-adapted.<sup>4</sup> Nor do U.S. producers want to organize into unions or pay lobbyists to negotiate regional regulatory regimes with state bureaucrats (Cavanaugh 2007; Rogers 2008). Placing more faith in the market than in government to ensure quality, they want to be left alone to do their own thing.<sup>5</sup>

Unfettered by tradition or concern for authenticity, U.S. cheesemakers enjoy free reign to make Camembert-style cheese from sheep’s milk or to play with novel bacterial cultures. Acknowledging such individualism, claims to *terroir* taste in the United States tend to scale down to the privately owned farm, rather than up to encompass an entire region—less a matter of patrimony than intellectual property. The website of Marin County’s Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese, joining Cypress Grove Chevre in claiming the influence of Pacific breezes, proclaims not regional affinity with Humboldt Fog but, rather, a similar source of distinctiveness: “What makes Farmstead cheese so special? The French have a word for it . . . ‘Terroir.’ From the land. About the land. Of the land. The *terroir of a farm* has everything to do with the end product” (Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company n.d., emphasis added).

Temporal rescaling also occurs. The commercial and sentimental value of French “*terroir* products” is based on their perceived ability to showcase elements distinctive to a landscape “constituted as an enduring record of—and testimony to—the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left something of themselves” (Ingold 2000:189). As an ACS conference participant put it, “*Terroir* is not magical thinking. It happens because of people. We steward the land whether we want to or not” (American Cheese Society 2005b). Taking seriously the temporal depth of French *terroir* claims, the panel moderator argued that any material effects on so-called *terroir* taste in the United States would also occur because of people who decades, even centuries ago, deforested, cultivated, and developed land now grazed by dairy animals. “From the point of view of *terroir*,” he challenged, “many lands in our country have been raped.” Among today’s grass-based dairy farms are yesterday’s wheat fields depleted through monocropping of in situ mineral resources and plant biodiversity. Reaching further back in time, another participant criticized as naive attempts to restore so-called “native pastures,” pointing out that, unlike French pastures with (in some cases) hundreds of years’ grazing history, pastures in

this country have “pre-cow” histories as “native grasses . . . worked for other purposes by non-Europeans.” As environmental historians remind us, the patchwork feature of New England landscapes and the open prairies of the Midwest owe their formation in part to Native Americans, use of fire to clear fields and to hunt and manage buffalo (Cronon 1983:48–49; Krech 1999:104–106).

When *terroir* appears in U.S. cheese marketing, it is usually to call attention to the influence of contemporary environmental conditions such as a foggy climate. There are many possible reasons for such shallow temporalities—the association of an “American” cheese tradition with Kraft Singles<sup>®</sup> is one. Still, it is worth noting that to dig deep historically would risk running up against the dispossession of Native American lands or, in the South, recognition that farmlands were originally cultivated under plantation slavery, not by independent pioneering families. As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson write, “by always foregrounding the spatial distribution of hierarchical power relations, we can better understand the process whereby a space achieves a distinctive *identity* as a place” (1992:8). In considering landscapes, temporal distributions of power relations are also salient (Ingold 2000).

U.S. producers create the value of distinction by adjusting the “scalar narrative” (Swyngedouw 1997) of *terroir* such that a place-based food—a Humboldt Fog<sup>®</sup> or a Point Reyes Original Blue<sup>™</sup>—may be circumscribed by individual property lines, both farm and intellectual property. However, in attempting to reverse engineer the imagined community of others, U.S. cheesemakers may underestimate the pull of their own place-making histories, including the environmental degradation of industrialization. A Vermonter at the American Cheese Society meeting suggested that if a regionally distinctive Northeastern *terroir* taste exists, acid rain might account for it. Moreover, regional histories matter to the dynamic processes that create dairy landscapes as well as to how residents and outside observers give meaning to these landscapes. Briefly, in northern California, artisan cheese is embedded in landscapes of food tourism mapped first by the wine industry, although state support for dairying is focused on industrial economies of scale. In Vermont, whose dairy industry has ceased to compete with the West, state boosterism and marketing boards support artisan cheese as a value-added product that might save small dairy farms. And in southern Wisconsin, where the Kraft brothers first industrialized cheesemaking, a new generation of artisans work alongside third- and fourth-generation master cheesemakers who handcraft brick, Limburger, and cheddar in artisan factories, flattening hierarchies of symbolic and economic value that are heightened in coastal urban markets (Paxson in press).

## REVERSE ENGINEERING TERROIR

What excited participants at the ACS panel was a growing consensus that realistically rescaled *terroir* might successfully be created. In scathing response to a question from

the audience—whether any U.S. producers were trying to recreate French pasture mixes of grasses and wildflowers to nurture more Frenchlike cheeses—the moderator argued that such a market-driven approach of forcing U.S. land to meet the demand of Europhilic taste was wrongheaded. Instead, he suggested that we should be asking “what production is suited to this land?” (American Cheese Society 2005b).

Offering an example of U.S. producers reverse engineering terroir by determining, based on European models, what production might best be suited to their landscapes, the panel moderator brought up David and Cindy Major, who nearly 20 years ago developed Vermont Shepherd cheese on the model of Basque Ossau-Iraty Brébis. After years of experimentation and throwing tons of cheese on the manure pile, Cindy Major mailed British cheesewriter Patrick Rance a description of their cheesemaking travails along with photos of their sheep and Vermont farm. In a handwritten reply, Rance suggested the Pyrénées as an ecological analogue. So the Majors traveled to southern France and were taken under the wing of cheesemaking shepherds who taught them their craft. Returning to their Vermont farm where David’s family had raised sheep for meat and wool, the Majors worked with the philosophy of terroir to develop a product whose fabrication suited a rocky, hilly landscape (fine for sheep but not cows); whose gustatory profile worked in their market niche (at the farmers’ market where they first sold cheese, their hard-aged variety sold better than their attempt at feta); and whose fabrication method fit their boot-strapping ethos.

In spring of 2004, I was able to work for two weeks alongside David Major and his two employees, helping in all facets of farmstead sheep-cheese production, from making pasture and milking sheep to crafting and aging wheels of Vermont Shepherd (Paxson 2008). One stormy evening during my stay in the barn’s bunkhouse, Cindy invited me over for tea and to look through a photo album from the Majors’ “life-changing” visit to the Pyrénées. In the photos, I recognized from working with David techniques they had adapted from the Basques, such as molding curd in plastic bowls with holes punched in the bottom. Another series of photos showed men and women standing over gas-heated kettles with their arms elbow-deep in whey; they were consolidating curd into the “prepressing,” accomplishing with their hands what David and I had done with sheets of plastic pasture fencing and salt-filled PVC tubes.

In addition to practical cheesemaking tips, the Majors brought back from the Pyrénées an appreciation for the collective sentiment of a regional cheese syndicate. Shepherds they visited pooled their milk and, working collectively in mountain huts, made and aged wheels of cheese that, once fully mature, would be distributed equally among families (see Ott 1981). Inspired by the cooperative community of the Basques, in the late 1990s David and Cindy developed a guild of Vermont farms, training couples to milk sheep on their own farms, craft Vermont Shepherd, and send the fresh, “green” wheels to Major Farm to be collectively

ripened, labeled, and marketed. Encountering the complexity of cross-cultural translation when it comes to material constructs, the guild lasted only a few years, although its influence on Vermont farmstead cheesemaking endures. Once they got the hang of sheep dairying, members moved on to develop their own labels and cheeses, using techniques adapted from Vermont Shepherd and milking flocks seeded with the Majors’ lambs. Not only were guild members just as entrepreneurially minded as the Majors, the prices they received, without the boost of government subsidy, was insufficient compensation for the artisan labor they added to their milk.

Reverse engineering terroir cheese—that is, developing cheese styles and generative contexts well suited to one another—exemplifies what John Law (1987) calls “heterogeneous engineering.” In Donald MacKenzie’s (1993:28) phrasing, this is “the engineering of the social as well as the physical world” required to promote a specific technology. Heterogeneous engineering in artisan cheesemaking entails navigating regulatory as well as market demands. As the website of Cypress Grove Chevre notes, “By skillfully managing a number of practices, Cypress Grove has created a unique terroir. . . . In our cheesemaking process, we let as much local environmental influence into our creamery as regulations allow” (Cypress Grove Chevre n.d.).

Commercial creameries must be certified as meeting health and safety standards that vary from state to state; regulations that may constrain “local environmental influence” on a cheese’s development include some states’ disapproval of the wooden drain boards used in David Major’s aging cave as being unsanitary. Perhaps most significantly for terroir claims is the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s federal mandate that cheeses aged fewer than 60 days (e.g., fresh cheeses such as chèvre and soft-ripened varieties such as Camembert) be made from pasteurized milk. Pasteurization kills 95 percent of milk’s microbiota; to make cheese, pasteurized milk must be reseeded with bacteria cultures, usually laboratory-isolated, commercially available strains. On both sides of the Atlantic are those who argue that pasteurization erodes terroir-specific taste development (Paxson 2008). For this reason, cheesemakers particularly interested in creating “terroir taste” are committed to making cheese from unpasteurized milk, despite the fact that fresh (pasteurized) cheeses sold immediately after fabrication would provide a source of quick cash flow.

Another exemplar of “reverse engineering” terroir cheese is Mike Gingrich, a panelist at the ACS terroir session, who makes Pleasant Ridge Reserve from the raw milk of cows who graze the tallgrass prairie of the Wisconsin Uplands. Seeking a value-added product to showcase the milk of the dairy that he and his business partner, Dan Patenaude, converted to grass based, Gingrich read Steve Jenkins’s *Cheese Primer*, selected a dozen French and Italian cheeses traditionally made from grazed milk, acquired as many varieties as he could order by mail, and hosted a tasting party. The winner was Beaufort d’Alpage, an AOC cheese

from the Haute-Savoie. Working within Wisconsin and U.S. regulations, Gingrich developed a make procedure adapting AOC protocol. Like Beaufort AOC, Gingrich and his crew make cheese from warm (unpasteurized) milk straight from cows' udders; unlike the AOC, they use commercial bacteria cultures rather than homemade whey cultures and make smaller wheels, using a Gouda mold, for more rapid aging and cash flow. At a comparative testing at the ACS conference, Mike attributed a flavor difference between Pleasant Ridge Reserve and Beaufort—"I think our cheese is sweeter and has a longer finish"—to a difference in pasturage, from soil microbes to grasses.

Pleasant Ridge Reserve has twice won Best of Show at the American Cheese Society annual competition. Its success is partially attributable to Gingrich's ability to operationalize the artisan mantra that high-quality cheese begins with high-quality milk. Coming from a career in executive management, financial security has afforded him the opportunity to make Pleasant Ridge Reserve only when the pastures, and hence milk, are at their prime; in times of severe draught, he ships fluid milk at the going commodity price (at a financial loss).<sup>6</sup> Guided by an understanding of the material basis of cheese, of "terroir," Gingrich's selective production schedule helps ensure the remarkable consistency of his cheese.

Reverse engineering terroir cheese by asking "what production is suited to this land"—analyzing Old World models and techniques for inspiration and then breaking from them to create something innovative—is quintessentially "American." One effect is to reinvent the "New World" by discovering hidden potentials inherent in and on the land, values that do not exist without human intervention. Vermont Shepherd gives new life to an 18th-century barn that housed sheep during a 19th-century craze for Merino wool and was later converted to a cow dairy. It gives David Major no small sense of satisfaction during lambing season to sleep in the shelter of 250-year-old timbers to be on hand for difficult middle-of-the-night deliveries. And thanks to Pleasant Ridge Reserve, once-marginal Wisconsin prairie is now the basis of an award-winning, profit-generating food that offers locals rural employment and has "put Dodgeville on the map," as one of Gingrich's neighbors congratulated him. In rescaling terroir for U.S. cultural topographies, cheesemakers begin also to remap their communities.

#### FROM VALUE ADDED TO VALUES BASED

Claims to terroir taste remain controversial. One consultant told cheesemakers at the ACS panel, "You're discovering place"—that is, isolating distinctive flavor profiles—"even though you're not necessarily looking for specific characteristics" (American Cheese Society 2005b). Regarding terroir, there is something to the materiality of taste: David Major, for example, once told me that if a sheep eats a stray thistle, he can taste it in the next batch of cheese. In response, though, the moderator warned, "Just because the potential exists doesn't mean it's *in* the cheese." He continued, "If

people off the street can tell the difference"—between, say, a cheddar made in Vermont and one made in Wisconsin—then maybe we can talk terroir. "Otherwise," he chided, "it crosses the line into marketing" (American Cheese Society 2005b).

But how to draw meaningful lines of distinction between one "terroir" and the next? In Europe, this is a political and legal question fought out by producers' unions and bureaucrats; but in the United States, thus far, it is up to the claimant's discretion. The moderator's skepticism echoed a caution I heard elsewhere: that claims to a taste of terroir in the United States are at best untested and at worse disingenuous because the cheeses in question are at most decades old, which is seen as insufficient time for terroir—as a nature-culture hybrid on the French model, at least—to develop. French cheesemakers, it should be noted, do not expect "people off the street" to taste terroir; in fact, as with wine (Ulin 1996) and chocolate (Terrio 2000), they recognize that people must be trained (at such sites as the Comté museum in the Jura) to taste place-based distinction. Taste education to socialize locally "situated eaters" in France begins in elementary school, where children are introduced to regional foodways through school trips and curricula (Leynse 2006); there is nothing like it in the mass-market, media-saturated United States. The ACS moderator's hypothetical "people off the street" test may have represented a democratizing impulse, a plea not to exclude "average" U.S. palates, and wallets, from artisan food networks by resisting the class-reproducing fetishizing of connoisseurship.

As artisans work to redefine "American cheese" as a handcrafted food best savored on its own (and priced accordingly), rather than as a commodity ingredient melded into casseroles or sandwiched between presliced bread, they may run up against charges of exclusivity and elitism. Undoubtedly, terroir has long been a value-adding label (Ulin 1996). But to many U.S. cheesemakers, the notion is bankrupt if it is nothing but a label legitimating high retail prices. They are seeking more complexity in their claims of terroir, a nuanced sense of the values of production and place that might find expression in well-crafted cheese. These cheesemakers are not content to rescale terroir as a marketing tool; instead, they wish to reinterpret it as a prescriptive model for perpetuating the values they believe it can embody.

The values framed by such terroir talk are not going to be about age-old tradition because that is not how U.S. markets assess quality. Instead, producers are after the sort of community-minded places common to alternative agriculture movements (e.g., Belasco 1989; Hinrichs and Lyson 2007). In 2009, at the third annual California Artisan Cheese Festival in Petaluma, I attended a tasting organized to "address the terroir topic." To "talk about cheeses in terms of the place they're made in, and how place contributes to the cheese," Cowgirl Creamery's Peggy Smith and Sue Conley started us off with their simplest cheeses, fromage blanc and triple cream Mt. Tam, explaining that their cheese milk comes from the organic dairy of their neighbor and friend,

Albert Straus: “We want to showcase his hard work through our cheese . . . how he’s taken care of the land and his animals” (Cowgirl Creamery 2009). This marks a discursive shift for terroir: from showcasing the nature of pasture grasses or coastal fog to showcasing the labor and care of stewardship. In addition to being a value-adding label, then, many want to see terroir as a values-based label, along the lines of “fair trade” (Trubek and Bowen 2008).

The final speaker at the ACS terroir panel articulated just this sort of vision, describing the social and even emotional relations of production beginning with her goats and extending to the consumers of her cheese. Anne Topham has for 20 years made goat cheese in Wisconsin down the road from Mike Gingrich’s Uplands Dairy. During my visit to her modest, hand-built farmstead, we spoke in wonderment at the diversity of tastes and textures that result from essentially the same simple ingredients and similar techniques. “For years,” Anne said, “I just haven’t been able to figure out why everybody’s cheese doesn’t taste like ours” (conversation with author, July 9, 2008). Yes, she acknowledged, it matters what the animals eat. And perhaps, she speculated, there may be something to the idea of geological terroir: “With all the limestone in the area, the pastures are different and the grasses—I think it makes a difference to the milk” (conversation with author, July 9, 2008). However, when she reflected on her own cheese and cheesemaking practice, she returned to her animals.

A few years ago, when her ailing parents required her attention, Anne boarded her goats with a goat-keeping friend and neighbor. The two herds had intermingled before so the animals were not strangers. All that summer to make cheese, Anne would drive over to pick up milk pooled from their temporarily combined herds; “So it was my milk, in a sense, but it wasn’t all my milk” (conversation with author, July 9, 2008). But the cheese she made when her animals were elsewhere was definitively not the same. When she could no longer bear to be separated from her goats, she brought them home “and the cheese got better.” She explained:

I always have thought it was because of having that close-tied relationship to the animals. I remember one time, on a Sunday afternoon, I was in making cheese, hand-ladling cheese. It was just really, really quiet, it was a beautiful day, and I was ladling the cheese and I was, like, feeling all of the goats in the room. It’s like they’re there every time I do the cheese. And I need that. I need that relationship. I make lots better cheese when I have that. I don’t think you could measure the difference in the milk. It’s another kind of difference, it’s about their life here. [conversation with author, July 9, 2008]

Anne described her embodied sensibility of working alongside and in collaboration with her dairy goats to make cheese. When she could no longer see, hear, and feel them wandering around outside her cheese house, “it felt different to me. . . . And I felt the cheese was different” (conversation with author, July 9, 2008). This, for Anne, is part of the ecology of farmstead production that might travel by the name *terroir*.



**FIGURE 1.** Anne Topham (left) at the Dane County Farmers Market, July of 2008.

Anne Topham sells nearly all her cheese at the Dane County farmers’ market in Madison, Wisconsin. In her ACS presentation, she described her vision of terroir as a “circle” encompassing her goats, her pastures, herself, and—and this she underscored—the people who buy and eat her cheese. When Anne says terroir is “expressed in the mouths of tasters,” she seems less interested in what they taste—in what flavors they discern—than in the fact of all these people sharing the experience of tasting her cheese. When people stop at her market stand for a sample, this act “completes the circle” of terroir, uniting production and consumption in an ongoing feedback loop (see Figure 1). At the market, she teaches people about cheese and goats, explaining that her cheese is “fluffier” when the weather is hot and her goats drink more water. But she learns from her customers, too. If there is too much salt in a batch of cheese, they let her know and she readjusts. If someone returns from France having tasted an ash-coated cheese, she may try to recreate it. Topham said in a 2000 presentation, “What we have done is build a network of connections: to this place and to the people who buy and eat our cheese. A network of connections which continues to nurture, support and sustain me. And the people who come every week to the Farmers’ Market have a connection to our farm, to the goats, and to the work of my hands” (Topham 2000). If terroir is, as she put it at the ACS panel, “everything that goes into the cheese” (American Cheese Society 2005b), Topham speaks more passionately about the contribution of her customers at the market, 35 miles from her farm, than about the inherent qualities of her “unimproved” pastures. At the ACS conference, she acknowledged, “I don’t think this fits into the French concept of terroir” (American Cheese



Society 2005b). But it is telling of what *terroir* is becoming in the United States: a coin of value by which artisan food producers “represent the importance of their own actions to themselves” and to others (Graeber 2001:45).

### TERROIR AS PRESCRIPTIVE OF PLACE

The theme of the 2005 Cheese Society conference was “Creating Tradition,” explicitly asking what kind of tradition is worth creating. U.S. projects of reverse engineering *terroir* are striking in the degree to which cheesemakers, aware of how “places are made through human practices and institutions even as they help to make those practices and institutions” (Gieryn 2000:467), are self-conscious about the construction of landscape and the invention of tradition. Representing a critical response to the deterritorializing effects of commodity pricing that has led to the collapse of small farms and their consolidation into huge, industrial dairies, artisan cheesemakers invest their productive activity with potential not only to express place through taste but also to create place. In so doing, the cheesemakers I discuss here are both “after nature” (Escobar 1999; Strathern 1992) and, regarding a relative lack of U.S. artisan tradition as opportunity for innovation, “after culture” (Helmreich 2001).

I turn now to discuss two cheesemakers, operating on different scales, working prescriptively with the notion of *terroir* to remake place. They take up *terroir* as a model for practice, a call for thoughtful stewardship of pastureland and grazing animals, mindful too of the place of agricultural communities. In their view, *terroir* encompasses a grass-roots political ecology “concerned with finding new ways of weaving together the biophysical, the cultural, and the technoeconomic for the production of other types of social nature” (Escobar 1999:4). The “social nature” of this alternative agriculture embodies a sense of place and purpose whose particular form is emergent. There’s nothing nostalgic here. In Doreen Massey’s words, “This is a notion of place where specificity (local uniqueness, a sense of place) derives not from some mythical roots nor from a history of relative isolation—not to be disrupted by globalization—but precisely from the absolute particularity of the mixture of influences found together there” (1999:18). In the wake of agriculture’s industrialization, the appropriate tasks of small-scale dairying and artisan cheese making and marketing are being worked out experimentally.

Arriving from her local coffee shop in Bodega, California, Patty Karlin pulled up in her Toyota Matrix just as I reached her rambling farmstead. Patty led me past goats fenced in on either side of the drive, a variety of small barns, the creamery and attached goat-milking parlor, a yurt, and small cabin, all interspersed with fruit trees and vegetable and herb gardens. Inside her wood-frame house, she set out a tray of her rustic cheeses for me to taste, paired with tomatoes, turnips, and braised artichokes, declaring, “We have lost our connection with the land! And so I’m very devoted to the idea of *terroir*, which is to me much more important

than organic, biodynamic, and all the rest, because if you take care of your soil, if you’re not compacting it with big machinery, you stand a better chance to have a better product springing up from the soil” (conversation with author, August 4, 2008). Only after my half-day visit, including a walking tour of her “permacultured” property terraced for rainwater catchment, did I grasp the full sense of Patty’s notion of *terroir*, which was as expansive and visionary as the Majors’ guild.

After Peace Corps work in Northeast Brazil, Patty Karlin trained as a nurse and married a Peruvian, the son of a Lima cheesemaker. They acquired goats in the mid-1980s to provide Patty’s father-in-law with a potential business when he joined them in the San Francisco Bay area. Eventually, she and her husband expanded the farmstead goat cheese business, moving to Bodega and adding other varieties to their Peruvian cheeses. Patty and her husband have separated; he took the business name while she kept the land. Developing her own brand, Bodega Artisan Cheese, Patty sells cheese through farmers’ markets and local restaurants.

More ambitiously, Patty is developing “team farming”: her small farm hosts several live-in residents and as many as ten people work its 7.5 acres. A gardener rents a greenhouse to raise organic microgreens for restaurants. Cooperatively, tenants tend vegetable gardens and raise chickens and pigs. The pigs eat whey left over from cheesemaking, and roaming chickens fertilize the vegetable gardens. “We do once-a-month potlucks to discuss common problems. We swap a lot of stuff” (conversation with author, August 4, 2008). They barter pork for organic lamb from next door and for wild salmon from local fishermen in town. Patty makes cheese three days a week and rents her creamery to other cheesemakers: “I’m setting up a cheese guild. Everyone can have their own label, and they will have their separate business” (conversation with author, August 4, 2008). They will share equipment and overhead costs including utilities and dairy inspector fees. Eventually, “this little plant will be producing twenty-one hundred pounds of cheese a week but it won’t be one sole proprietor getting bigger and bigger and getting into the national distribution network, letting it include middlemen. We will all be artisan; it will all be hopefully organic—and it will all be *terroir* . . . we’ll be able to do it by the spirit I grew up in,” reinforced by her Peace Corps work with credit co-ops, “which is cooperative spirit” (conversation with author, August 4, 2008).

Patty’s conceptualization of *terroir* extends beyond her 7.5 acres to the unincorporated town of Bodega (population 571), which was first settled by Italian farmers. “When anything needs to be done, like a roof or whatever, people involve the whole town by organizing fundraising dinners or making quilts to raffle. The coffeehouse is the gathering place in the morning and the village well and a lot of business gets transacted. If I need a carpenter, an electrician, I don’t call them, I go down to town!” (conversation with author, August 4, 2008). Her farmstead exists because of this local economy, which she in turn helps sustain through

her bartering and hiring practices. This is central to Patty's conceptualization of terroir, as material as it is discursive. On a diversified farm such as Patty's, terroir is not just "everything that goes into the cheese," it is everything that goes into the complement of the farm's products: her pigs are fed the by-products of dairy processing (whey, spoilt yogurt) and also slop from the restaurant service of Bodega's tavern, which serves Patty's cheese. Patty wants to sell her cheese, and she wants to encourage others to reflect on their own use of natural resources. To demonstrate permaculture strategies and the taste of thoughtful attention to practice that constitutes the place of her farming community—and to generate a little extra income—Patty offers "ecotours and cheese tasting." But her core goals are modest. She wants to live well on her seven acres, and she wants to do so in the company of others, doing what she loves, in a way that will not mess things up for generations to come.

I encountered a related articulation of terroir, although on a far grander scale, in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, a hardscrabble land of tenacious, poverty-level farms south of the Canadian border. Mateo and Andy Kehler, college-educated brothers who vacationed here as kids, bought a deteriorating farm in 1998, intending to make a living through sustainable agriculture (they considered microbrew beer and organic tofu before settling on cheese). Mateo Kehler describes their raw-milk Jasper Hill cheese as "a vehicle to present the land" to consumers (American Cheese Society 2005a), but what he and Andy add to an appreciation for mixed pasture and the digestive power of cows is political concern for local economies. Rather than import organic grain from further afield, Mateo explains their preference for buying hay from an "old school Vermont dairy farmer" neighbor: "We're working here with the concept of terroir, and that's local grass" (Davies n.d.). Terroir means local grass not just because the resulting cheese will showcase milk flavored by local pastures but also, Mateo told me when I visited the farm, because buying local grass "keeps the money in town" (conversation with author, March 21, 2004). At the general store down the road, the Kehlers retail their cheeses at their usual wholesale prices.

Calling Jasper Hill Farm his personal "response to globalization" and "a tool to help define terroir, a process that will take generations," Mateo aspires to develop the rural economy of northeastern Vermont in an environmentally sustainable way (personal communication, January 6, 2009). Vermont prides itself on being a dairy state but only contributed 1.4 percent of the nation's fluid milk in 2008. "We can't compete with the economies of scale in California," Mateo told me, citing a dairy in Barstow with 19,000 cows (conversation with author, March 21, 2004). Whereas in 2007 the average herd size in Vermont was 117, in California the average herd size was 814 (U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agriculture Statistics Service 2008). The Kehler brothers want to help reverse the trend of farm closures in Vermont. As they have calculated, a Vermont farm family can make a good living with 30 cows if it adds value to milk

by making high-end cheese—and gets a high-end price for it. Noting the region's old barns, like theirs, built in rolling valleys to house 25–30 cows, the Kehlers argue this is the scale at which Vermont agriculture should work: "This is what the land was meant to do" (conversation with author, March 21, 2004), they explain. When I first met the brothers in 2004, Mateo, who majored in international development at a liberal arts college, articulated his goal to help "reverse engineer" (I have borrowed the phrase from Mateo) a kind of appellation for northeastern Vermont through which producers could collectively benefit from regional branding without having to conform to a unified product. Mindful of the cautionary tale of the Vermont Shepherd guild, Mateo envisioned rescaling up taste of place, from farm back up to region, in a way that respects local values like independence and entrepreneurialism.

Four years later, the Kehlers launched an ambitious project to operationalize their vision: "22,000 square feet, seven underground vaults and a dream as big as the American cheese movement," The Cellars at Jasper Hill is a \$2.3 million facility for collective cheese ripening and distribution intended to relieve regional farmstead producers of the labor of aging cheese and getting it to market (see The Cellars at Jasper Hill n.d.). The Cellars differs from the example of the Vermont Shepherd guild because it allows producers to create their own cheeses under their own labels. Five different climate-controlled aging environments mean, according to Mateo, "We'll be able to ripen just about any type of cheese that a producer in the Green Mountains could possibly dream up" (Rathke 2008). Implicit, too, is belief that Jasper Hill can capitalize on its own brand to garner high prices nationally for smaller Vermont makers, although it remains to be seen how many farmers seeking value-added income will make and sell the Kehlers unripe cheeses (currently, two out of ten cheesemaking partners are heritage dairy farms). The taskscape of a reverse-engineered Vermont cheese terroir, as the Kehlers envision it, is a 21st-century neopastoral landscape in which Leo Marx's (1964) "machine in the garden" includes the infrastructure of a distributed marketplace: refrigerators, vacuum-packaging machines, highways, and UPS trucks. This terroir is "a kind of place marketing," as Elizabeth Barham writes of similar efforts in Quebec, "but one that does not simply create a surface association with a place through a product in order to build sales. Instead, it reflects a concerted effort to literally create the social and economic basis for claims of uniqueness and place reputation for quality or high value-added products" (2007:279).

For Mateo, a primary value of artisan cheese lies in its potential to preserve and showcase the aesthetic and economic values of farm and pastureland kept open by the hayfields and grazing of the state's dairy industry. In his words, "Conserving Vermont's working landscape is part of our mission as a company. Cheese is the vehicle to meet our mission" (Marcel 2008). The "working landscape" of open hillsides dotted with wooden barns that lure tourists to Vermont and Wisconsin is regenerated by foraging goats and grazing cows



**FIGURE 2.** Retail display of the Cellars at Jasper Hill's Cabot Cloth-bound cheese, featuring a cheesescape photo of Jasper Hill Farm.

and sheep, as well as by human tasks of making pasture, milking, and crafting value-added products that fetch sufficient income to care for the animals (see Figure 2). Articulating a version of terroir, the taste of a “working landscape” finds further substantiation in prescriptive mappings of the Vermont Cheese Trail, an agritourism initiative sponsored by the Vermont Cheese Council, a collective of producers, in collaboration with the state. Highways, gas stations, restaurants, motels, and inns have become part of the “working landscape” productive of a taste of place—of place created from the commercialization of available tastes. If in France, “terroir can . . . designate a rural or provincial region that is considered to have a marked influence on its inhabitants” (Barham 2003:131), the Kehlers imagine the inverse: terroir in which a region’s inhabitants can have a marked influence on the ecosystem, landscape, and sense of place by providing an ecologically sustainable means of rural economic revitalization.

Working landscapes are by no means unique to Vermont, but only in Vermont did cheesemakers (not only the Kehlers) speak to me of the value of their enterprises in such terms. Calls to protect “the working landscape” from development and reforestation crop up in Vermont gubernatorial campaign rhetoric as well as advertising, perhaps because the state’s landscape has historically undergone such dramatic change. Sheep flourished where wheat did not on the region’s thin-soiled hilltops; by the 1840s, when Merino wool could fetch a dollar per pound, sheep outnumbered humans six to one. After the wool market crashed midcentury as new railroads flooded eastern markets with cheap wool from the West, hilltop farms, carved by loggers’ axes

and cleared by sheep’s nibbling, were abandoned to encourage tree regrowth. Property values plummeted. In the late 19th century, 30 percent of Vermont’s land was forested, 70 percent cleared; today, we see the inverse: 70 percent forested and only 30 percent cleared (Albers 2000:203). It is that 30 percent that many imagine as Vermont: gently rolling valleys dotted with farmhouses set against forested hills that turn red-orange in autumn.

The “working landscape” that sells postcards and attracts tourists is a dairy landscape, created for and by cows—and it was named one of the “true values” of dairy farms in a keynote speech given by Robert Wellington, Senior VP at Agri-Mark dairy cooperative, at a 2004 Vermont Farm Summit Meeting. Noting that 2,600 miles of snowmobile tracks stretch across Vermont agricultural land, Wellington explained without irony that, without dairy farms, “we’d lose all that snowmobile tourism!” (Wellington 2004). The Kehlers, like David Major, with whom I attended the summit, might be surprised to hear noisy, gas-guzzling snowmobiling named one of the “true values” of dairy farms, integral to the “working landscape” they desire to sustain through revenue generated by the refined taste of cave-aged cheese. But place, like taste, is a relative, relational category. Creating place does not mean that unified meanings are thereby created.

### RETHINKING THE TASTE OF PLACE

Cheesemakers’ experiments with terroir and artisan agricultural practice demonstrate how people create place as they go about the quotidian tasks of agrarian livelihoods that physically shape landscapes and situate people’s senses of place (Gray 1999; Hirsch 1995). Gingrich’s rotational grazing of cows, Topham’s farmers’ market conversations, Karlin’s bartering of whey-fed pork, and the Kehlers’ collective affinage are all “constitutive acts of dwelling” that might constitute terroir: the material, affective qualities of place that generate, are expressed in, and are in turn regenerated by artisan cheese (Ingold 2000:195). These tasks of place making are not only enskilled but also intentional, motivated by ethical commitment. Value, then, is not just materially extracted from or discursively inscribed on place; in return, moral values can inspire place-making practices, with potentially durable effects.

Taste of place is not the same as taste of proximity. Patty Karlin and Anne Topham sell all their cheese through local farmers’ markets and restaurants, but Uplands Dairy, Vermont Shepherd, and Jasper Hill are keen to distribute nationally. The latter cheeses do not conform to dominant U.S. conceptualizations of “local food” or food-system “localization,” measured in “food miles” by the length of commodity chains separating production and consumption. Might they become “local” foods along European lines, “in which particular characteristics of a terrain or territory are attached to a commodity, imbuing it with environmental and/or social qualities” (Allen et al. 2003:64) such that a food is recognized as “a concrete symbolic representation of local values

and ways of life” (Cavanaugh 2007)? I think not. What any given “Vermont cheese” might “taste like” in Manhattan or Chicago is not what it will be in the Northeast Kingdom, just as the place of Vermont means something different to leaf-peeping tourists, snowmobilers, agrarian-minded “flatlanders” who move there to farm, and residents whose family roots date to the American Revolution. Place and taste are neither idiosyncratic reflections of the mind’s eye (or palate) nor extant things in the world. We might think of place and taste in terms of constructed yet embodied objectivity, what Donna Haraway (1988) calls “situated knowledges.” This is one reason why the success of cheesemakers’ projects of “doing” terroir is not dependent on consumers buying into their visions; the views (and tastes) of consumers in Madison or Berkeley will always be differently situated than those of producers in the Wisconsin Uplands or Marin County.

In calling attention to material and affective relations between food making and place making, however, terroir might yet become a U.S. folk model for the instrumental value of artisan foods. There is much latitude in how relations between place and production can be framed—and, therefore, in what instrumental values are valued. For the Kehler brothers, like the Majors before them, terroir is a holistic model for environmentally sound rural economic revitalization. At a more modest scale, Patty Karlin sets her sights on making the most of her 7.5 acres. And Anne Topham includes her customers and her goats as colleagues in “doing” terroir with her, generating a “network of connections” that help constitute the taste and texture of her cheese. Each of these cheesemakers is well aware that their goals—the instrumental values of their cheese—depend on another aspect of cheese’s value: its exchange value. Terroir offers cheesemakers a means of accounting for the “spectrum of values” produced by their nonalienated labor; like communication in Daniel Miller’s (2008:1131) analysis of “the uses of value,” terroir “adds value when it is used as a bridge between forms of value that are otherwise difficult to reconcile.”

Nevertheless, although U.S. experiments with terroir are often motivated by the promise of reterritorializing taste by defetishizing a food commodity, terroir discourse—as recognized in skepticism about terroir taste claims at the American Cheese Society meeting—risks turning terroir itself into a commodity fetish. Patricia Allen and Martin Kovach (2000) have argued this of organics labeling, explaining that labeling something organic—not organic methods of production—adds value to a tomato or lemon; obscured by the fetish of the label are the social relations that go into certification. Robert Ulin argues much the same about AOC wine, suggesting that Bourdeaux gains status over Medoc, a *vin ordinaire*, “from a process of invention that transforms culturally constructed criteria of authenticity and quality into ones that appear natural” (1996:39). How might it be possible to convey and reproduce instrumental values of artisan and farmstead cheese, which many invest with op-

portunities for land conservation, rural economic vitality, and humanized market relations, without undermining the intrinsic value of those goals? That, ultimately, is the “terroir question” in the United States.

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## NOTES

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1. For industrial cheesemaking, commodity dairy farmers accomplish year-round consistency in milk through feeding grain instead of seasonally variable hay or pasture grasses and through staggered breeding so as to blend the different fat and protein compositions of early lactation and late-lactation milk.
2. There are no direct data on U.S. artisan cheese production and sales volumes. State and federal statistics do not differentiate between artisan and specialty cheese (“specialty” includes industrially fabricated cheeses of “foreign” origin [e.g., feta, asiago, Hispanic-style] as well as specially designed cheeses in limited supply [e.g., waxed cheddar cut into the shape of Wisconsin]). Nor does the National Agricultural Statistics Service release production data on cheese made from goat and sheep milk; producers are so few, particularly at the high-volume end, that release of data might compromise proprietary information for the largest facilities. From a nationwide survey of artisan producers I conducted in early 2009, I estimate domestic artisan cheese production for 2008 at eight to ten million pounds, compared with 429 million pounds of specialty and artisan cheese (combined) produced in 2009 in Wisconsin alone. Note that 37 percent of survey respondents produced fewer than 6,000 pounds of cheese in 2008. Domestic production and sales have risen steadily for a decade, while import figures are falling.
3. Research included site visits and interviews with 44 cheesemakers (2004–08); interviews with retailers; participant-observation at cheesemaking workshops, cheese festivals and tasting events, and meetings of the American Cheese Society (2005, 2007, 2008). In January to February 2009, I conducted an online nationwide survey of artisan cheesemaking businesses ( $n = 177/398$ ; 45 percent response rate). Paper copies were mailed when no e-mail address was available.

4. This stereotype obscures a similar if more muted trend toward experiment in continental European cheesemaking; Britain is witnessing an artisan efflorescence similar to the United States.
5. The market will weed out producers who make lousy cheese, I was repeatedly told, because taste and consistent quality sell cheese. My analysis is that competency in inventory and accounting, finding appropriate markets, and lucky breaks are as important as artisan skill in determining business success. My survey found ( $n = 172$ ) that 53 percent of artisan cheese businesses turned a profit in 2008, 32 percent did not, with 16 percent unsure (usually these respondents had yet to do their 2008 taxes).
6. American artisan cheesemakers have started out with a range of economic resources. My survey ( $n = 141$ ) produced the following data on start-up capital initially required to “build, equip, and license” an artisan creamery (dates would range from 1980 to 2008):

< \$10,000	11.35%
\$10–25,000	11.35%
\$25–50,000	10.64%
\$50–100,000	24.11%
\$100–250,000	26.24%
\$250–500,000	5.67%
\$500,000–1,000,000	1.42%
> \$1,000,000	9.22%

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#### FOR FURTHER READING

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