

God & Gouda

by JANINE LATUS

photography by NORM SHAFER

At a Virginia monastery, the labors of cheese-making
at times replace hours in prayer and psalm.

The sky is dark and the stars mountainside-bright when the first sisters walk through the disinfectant solution at the doorway of the cheese barn – “crossing the Red Sea,” they sometimes joke – and change into knee-high rubber boots, hairnets and bulbous ear protection. They switch on lights and open valves to send scalding water rushing into the outer ring of a stainless steel, 8-foot-tall double boiler filled with 6,200 pounds of buttery milk from grass-fed cows. A spigot of steam foams the top as if it were a giant latte, the fierce noise further enforcing the sisters’ silence. After half an hour they replace the hot water with cold, and still it takes an hour to cool the now-pasteurized milk enough to begin its transformation into red-waxed rounds of gouda that will wear the name Monastery Country Cheese.

The monastery sits on 507 acres outside Crozet, 13 miles northwest of Charlottesville. A two-lane road winds past white-fenced farms and a genteel horse track, crossing over streams and through the shadows of sycamores, then up a gravel side road that curves around rocks and past embankments before meeting up with the crushed-rock drive to Our Lady of the Angels.

There, 15 Cistercian sisters live by the Rule of St. Benedict, written nearly 1,500 years ago. It is the same Rule followed by Trappists the world over.

“Seven times in the day I have rendered praise to You,” the Psalms say, and the Rule of St. Benedict dictates which prayers the sisters chant and when: “at the time of the Morning Office, of Prime, of Terce, of Sext, of None, of Vespers and of Compline.” They rise at 3 a.m. and spend a total of five hours singing psalms, reciting Bible passages and chanting prayers, interspersed with five hours of cooking and cleaning and caring for the land, plus reading, studying and private meditative prayer.

But not on cheese days.

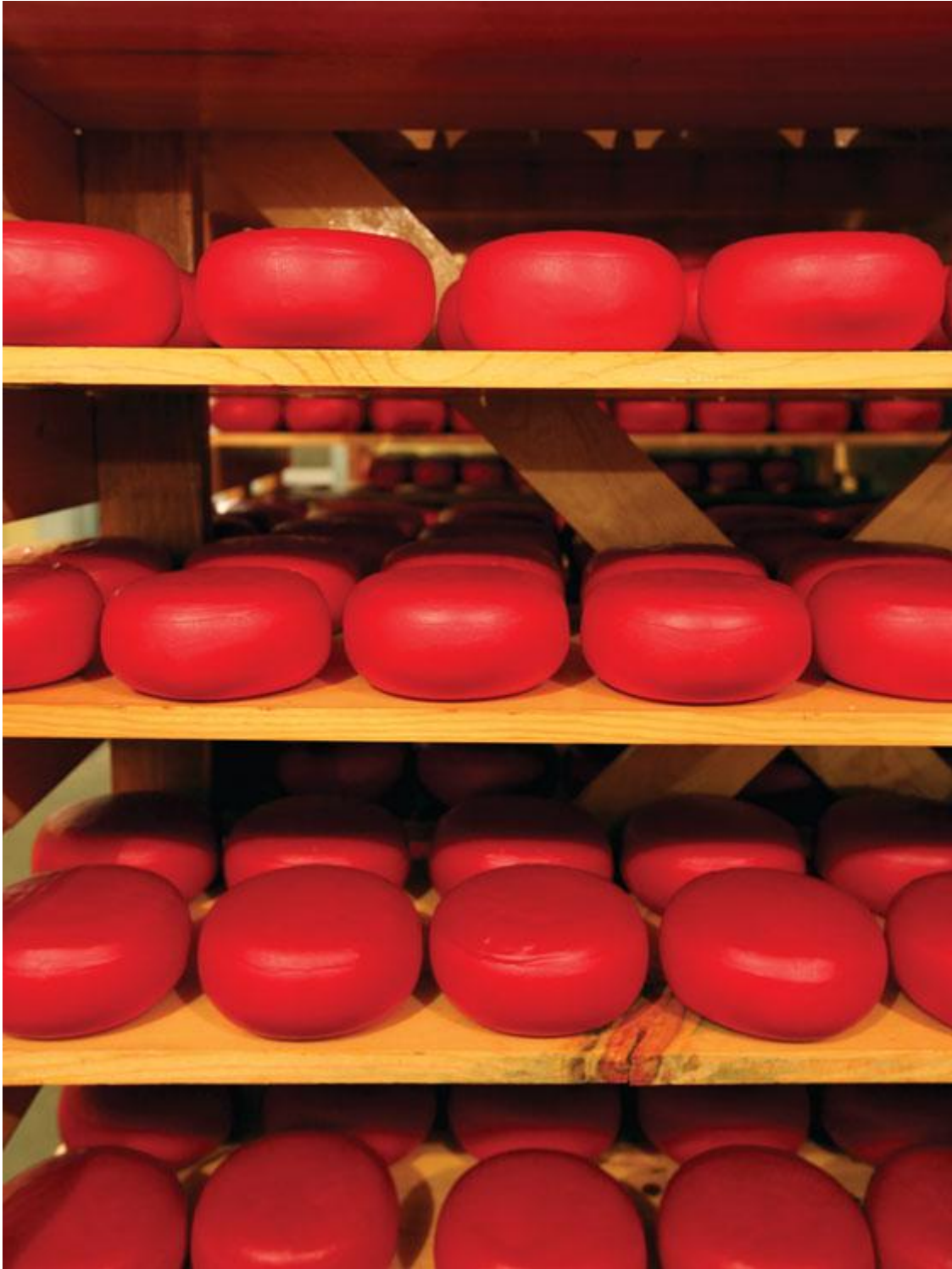


On 32 days a year the sisters sleep in until 4 a.m. to rest up for the laborious work, and adapt their prayer sessions to accommodate the inflexible schedule of the cheese.

At 8 a.m. – after two sessions in their too-small chapel – a second shift of sisters sends the milk gushing from the tank to the 720-gallon stainless steel settling vat, where today's cheese cook, Sister Maria Gonzalo Garcia, 35, adds a bacterial culture and starts a pair of orbiting paddles that are nearly as big as she is, while other sisters fan out to clean the now-empty holding tank, insert heavy stainless steel parts into the pre-press vat and prepare the white plastic bowls that will give the cheese its shape. Around them are crucifixes and racks of rubber gloves, wrenches as big as a woman's forearm and a pump valve so heavy it's chained to a foot-long bar from a body-building machine so that two sisters can work together to lift it into the sink full of scalding water. The sound is of plastic clattering against metal, of high-pressure water hoses and of the occasional quiet banter between sisters, the accents from New York and Spain, India and Nigeria and South Carolina. Theirs is the youngest Trappist monastery in the United States, founded in 1987 and originally peopled by six nuns sent down from the only women's monastery in the country at the time, Mount St. Mary's Abbey in Wrentham, Massachusetts.

After 20 minutes Sister Maria adds rennet, an enzyme that in early cheese-making was taken from the fourth stomach of a calf, which used it to curdle its mother's milk. Today, for economic and humanitarian reasons, rennet is manufactured in a lab.

The milk thickens and Sister Maria removes the paddles to let it congeal. In half an hour she'll insert paddles that the nuns call harps because they're strung with wires as tight as harp strings, one set vertical and the other horizontal. She sinks her arms up to her biceps into the curds and whey, contemplatively cutting the clumps along the wall of the vat with a hand-held tomato slicer. The curds squeeze through her fingers like jelly.



Sister Maria grew up in Spain and became a religious when she was 19. She spent years in an active congregation, where she went to college to study social work and theology and performed pastoral work with prostitutes and ex-cons, helping them find jobs. But then she felt the calling to become a monastic, and change the world through prayer.

“Our goal is to bring the world to God and God to the world,” she says as she squeezes curds through her fingers. “We want to be an open window between the two.”

Sister Maria tastes a spoonful and smiles at its sweetness. As with wine and oysters, milk’s taste depends on local bacteria and weather and soil chemistry, because those affect the

flavor of the cattle's feed. This milk came from a Mennonite farm an hour away, where a herd of Holsteins and Jerseys and Swedish Reds produces milk that's 4.7 percent butterfat, far richer than the 3.5 percent farmers get from Holsteins alone. More fat equals more cheese, and the sisters are now getting 750 pounds or more per vat, up from their old expectation of 620.

Sister Maria nods and she and Sister Kathy Ullrich wrest a heavy stainless-steel grate into one end of the tank. Wrenching open a valve, they send whey surging into another vat, making room for Sister Maria to add hot water to raise the temperature of the milk. Soon the curds no longer squish through her fingers but clump, like cottage cheese. Still she cuts. This is the sisters' 647th batch and they've never had a bad one. The recipe is precise, the record-keeping endless.

"We say that our secret ingredients are love and prayer, so it's bound to succeed," says Sister Barbara Smickel, laughing. "To be more serious, part of our tradition, our way of life, is to just do whatever we do the best we can, so that becomes a part of the cheese making."

It is a tradition for Trappists to do some form of labor to pay their living expenses, give to those in need and to save for future capital expenses – a new roof, a new car, the church they need to replace their cramped chapel.

Their primary work, though, is prayer; it's the most important thing they do, Sister Barbara says.

"We believe prayer is of benefit to the world, that it influences outcomes," she says. "I don't just believe it, I *know* it's true. Otherwise I wouldn't stake my life on it."

The sisters are not cloistered from the public. They run errands and see doctors and vote in elections, always in their habits, and often people come up to them in the grocery store aisle and ask them to pray for an ailing family member, a spouse who has lost a job. They are safe harbor, even to non-Catholics.

Sister Maria gives the word and the curds and whey are pumped from the settling vat into the cheese makers' newest piece of equipment, a pre-press vat. Until five years ago they did everything in the settling vat, fitting it out with heavy stainless screens and huge weights for the pressing, and doing all the subsequent cutting by hand. Now, the sisters stir with plastic paddles big enough to power a canoe as the new machine's holey top slowly lowers, squeezing out the whey and leaving a 4-inch-thick mat of curds.

The sisters speak quietly but still they don't chatter. They are nearly silent in their habits in their home, their focus always on "quiet presence to God and to one another and to prayer," says Sister Barbara. There is no TV, very little Internet, very little travel into town. Each sister owns nothing. Each lives in mutual obedience to the others.

"The rhythm of our life helps to disperse distractions," says Sister Kathy, 51, who spent 15 years in the Air Force and then served an active ministry in Honduras before coming here in 2001. "I'm not wondering what to eat or what to wear or what to do every day, and it's out of that rhythm that I can more easily enter into prayer.

In the cheese barn the sisters wear scrub tops, blue with yellow sunflowers, and baggy pants and rubber boots. Those who wield pressure hoses wear royal blue shin-length aprons to keep their clothes from getting soaked. Their movements are constant, their smiles serene.

After an hour, the pre-press vat lowers a blade that cuts off about 4 inches, like a giant length of white Velveeta. Another blade dices that slab into 4-inch cubes, which a sister drops into one of the hundreds of plastic bowls, then passes it to the Mother Superior, Marion Risetto, 71, to be weighed. Each wheel of finished cheese must come in at 2 pounds in the end, and experience guides Mother Marion in pulling off or adding clumps of whey-heavy curd to get there. She passes the bowls to other sisters, who line them up in a stainless steel trough. The women move quickly, because if the cheese cools it won't knit as well. When all of the bowls are in exact alignment, a sister turns on a piston that pushes each bowl against the next, pressing more whey out of the cheese. When that pressing is done, nine sets of hands flip the cheeses over to be squeezed again, giving the cheese round its distinctive curve.

Once again the sisters' fingers fly as they release the silky smooth goudas and wheel them into a pristine room kept at 45 degrees. There the cheese will float overnight in a brine that's 25 percent salt – saltier than the Great Salt Lake.

The next day they'll be coated with a food-grade polymer that will protect them from mold and give them a pebbly surface so the wax casing will stick. A few days later they'll be arranged on a grate and lowered twice via chains into a tank full of molten red wax. It takes three nuns working for 2½ hours to do one batch of cheese. Finally, the red rounds are arranged on pine shelves in a walk-in cooler, where they'll age for at least a month as they wait for an online order or a customer knocking at the monastery door.

Tomorrow the sisters will rest.

Sister Barbara, 76, was 19 when she became a monastic.

"I would have gone to the ends of the Earth, I wanted it so badly," she says, smiling fondly. "I just wanted to give God everything. There's a little bit of romance in that, but there's nothing wrong with romance when you're 19, whether it's divine or human. What my soul was saying was if there was a way I could give myself completely to God, I wanted to do it." So she moved from her home in Southern California to Massachusetts, then 31 years later moved here.

"I think the basic task of any human being is to learn to love," she says. "Our fathers and mothers back in the 12th century called the monastery a school of love. It's not a school from which you ever graduate, of course. I think any true vocation as opposed to just a career, it does that for us, if it's fully entered into, it teaches us to love."

Some of that love, it goes into the cheese.