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# Nuns devote themselves to worship, work and cheese

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PHOTOS BY BOB BROWN



The path to Our Lady of the Angels monastery follows a series of country roads that ramble deep into the wooded foothills west of Charlottesville, eventually crossing a one-lane bridge and turning onto an even narrower, somewhat inhospitable rocky lane that has inspired more than a few travelers to wonder if they're hopelessly lost.

"People tell us they have to have faith that there really is something at the end of that gravel road," said Sister

Barbara Smickel.

Rest assured there most certainly is: divine scenery, blessed solitude and lots of Gouda cheese, the latter representing the handiwork of the dozen nuns who call the monastery at the foot of Pigeon Top Mountain home.

The 2-pound wheels of cheese provide the source of income that supports the sisters' lives of prayer and charity, and the manual labor required to make the cheese serves as a perfect balance to an otherwise quiet, reflective way of life.

"You look for some means of support, so this was really ideal," Sister Barbara said of the farm that was acquired in 1987 and included a building of cheese-making equipment that had been unused for several years. "It really held promise. But we were very naïve."

She laughed, recalling that she and the other nuns thought, "Well, we'll get a few lessons and a little bit of milk and make some cheese!"

It proved to be not quite that easy, but over the past two decades the sisters have created a successful business through determination, the kindness of others and, of course, good cheese.

**Sitting on the** side of a hill above that gravel road, the handsome brick monastery is the centerpiece of a 507-acre secluded slice of prime real estate in Albemarle County. Life typically begins to stir here at 3 a.m. when the nuns begin a day of worship and work. Thursdays, the usual cheese-making days, are the exception, when the sisters are "decadent," Sister Barbara said with a smile, and sleep until 4. Self-reliance is a Trappist tradition. Centuries ago, those leading a monastic life might have operated a farm, raising what food they could and bartering for the rest. Today, that's not a practical approach, particularly for a community of a dozen women ranging in age from 33 to 80, so cottage industries such as cheese-making have become the more typical pursuits.

Only two of the founding nuns from 1987 remain at the monastery: Sister Barbara, 74, who grew up in Southern California and became a nun at 19, and Sister Mary David, 80, a former hospital operating-room nurse who felt the spiritual pull to what the sisters call "The Life" in her late 20s.

For many of the nuns, the path to the monastery has been as twisting, though in a more spiritual way, as for visitors trying to find the place. One worked at a bank; another is an artist. Sister Maria, the youngest at 33, grew up in Spain.

"It is a calling from God to a person," said Sister Barbara, who handles much of the external communications for the monastery. "But how the person discerns that and what is the first thing that turns them in that direction varies so much."

No matter how they got here, the nuns share a deep commitment to their faith and to one another.

"We consider it like marriage," said Sister Barbara. "Something sacred. Not to be taken lightly without adequate thought and prayer and experience."

Their days are rigidly scheduled, with time for prayer, work and communal gatherings. They don't take a vow of silence, though they do abide "an observance of silence," Sister Barbara said, so as not to forget their reason for being at the monastery, which is to "praise God, to love God and to serve God. You just can't do that and be chattering all day."

But that doesn't mean a nun won't yell for her sisters to come quick when one of the monastery's beloved pet dogs, Amber and Jesse James, is doing something ridiculously cute on the lawn.

After all, they didn't take a vow of dullness, which becomes clear on cheese-making day. They pull on their sunflower smocks and knee-high rubber boots, and go to work in the cheese barn down the hill from the monastery.

The nuns save their chattering for Thursdays. The cheese-making process begins with a Wednesday delivery of about 6,000 pounds of milk, which will result in about 600 pounds of cheese. The milk, from a Shenandoah Valley farm, is pasteurized and a culture added to produce curds.



**As with the chores** at the monastery, everyone pitches in to make the Gouda, a soft, mild cheese prepared with a Dutch recipe (and to clean up afterward, which is nearly a weeklong proposition to make sterile the stainless-steel-and-cinderblock industrial kitchen for the next week's batch). The sisters clearly enjoy themselves, though the work is hot and physically demanding, whether it's stirring the heated curds and whey or quickly packing and pressing the cheese in form-shaping hoops during an extremely time-sensitive stage.

Asked if the sisters ever utter bad words when things don't go according to plan, Sister Barbara said, "Not out loud."

In 2007, the nuns installed a new pressing machine from Finland. "Quite an invention," Sister Claire said appreciatively on a recent Thursday as she cut the

sheetlike curds that came out of the contraption. The machine greatly reduced the strain on the sisters' aging backs and shoulders. Even so, the work is hard; the nuns' strong hands and muscled arms are evidence of that. One joked they didn't need gym memberships.

After the cheese takes shape and the whey is drained away, the rounds of Gouda float overnight in a cold brine — "saltier than the Dead Sea," said Sister Barbara — and later will be hand-painted with a special rind that preserves the cheese and provides a surface for a protective coating of wax. The cheese is allowed to age, enabling development of a richer flavor, for several weeks to several months.

The nuns sell all of the Monastery Country Cheese they can make — with travel and other responsibilities, they make cheese about 30 times a year — and have no intention of increasing production. The income derived from the cheese is sufficient for their needs, and they don't want their cheese-making to take away from their spiritual pursuits.

The months leading up to Christmas are the busiest for sales. The nuns sell by phone, mail or in person; they haven't advanced to online sales. Visitors are welcome at the monastery every day to worship or pray in the tiny chapel, or to buy cheese. But don't expect a fancy little gift shop. The nuns will welcome you in and then go fetch a 2-pound wheel of Gouda from their refrigerator.

"People always say to me, 'Sister, can you just rub your hand over it or bless it with holy water and all the calories and cholesterol will go away?'" said Sister Barbara. "Afraid not. Moderation, you know."

However, she does tell such questioners that the cheese contains secret ingredients: "Love and prayer."

