

SUNDAY READ

Cheese shop stands alone in the Village

By **Wendy Leung** Staff Writer

CLAREMONT — The Clarke sisters start their work day with a sliver of cheese.

The first piece is from Quebec, a soft-ripened brie infused with vanilla bean. It disappears on the tongue like frozen yogurt on a hot day and leaves behind a vanilla aftertaste.

"Wow," said Lydia Clarke, leaning back. "The vanilla doesn't hit you 'til way, way after."

Lydia and her sister, Marnie, are sampling cheese

Cheese Cave

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for Cheese Cave, a Claremont Village newcomer. A distributor recently paid a visit and arranged a variety of Canadian cheeses for the sisters to consider selling this holiday season.

"This is what we do all day," said Lydia, 33. "Try this,

CHEESE A8

CHEESE

From A1
oh, let's try this."

It's hard work but somebody has to taste them all. Inside their deli refrigerator, there's 125 varieties, all tasted by the sibling cheesemongers one time or another.

Next up is an ash-covered soft-ripened goat cheese. It's an award winner that the New York Times called "a goat cheese with a Cinderella story."

Marnie, 26, is in no hurry. She holds the goat cheese up to her nose and inhales. She pinches the cheese with her fingers. She doesn't eat the cheese, she savors it. Most sommeliers would have finished a whole glass of wine by now.

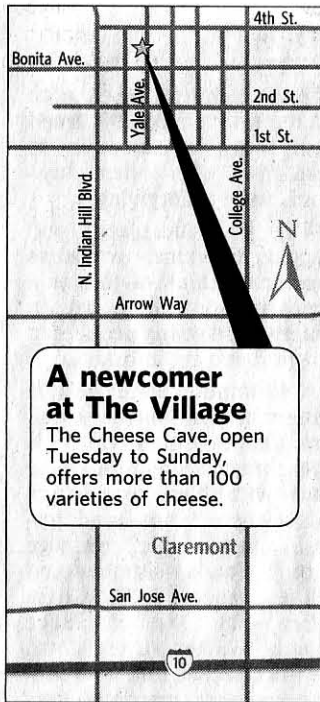
"It's kind of like a story," Marnie said about all the components to appreciating cheese. "There's a beginning, middle and an end."

The Cheese Cave, which took over the space previously occupied by a travel agency on Yale Avenue, delivers its milk curds with a side of poetry and prose. The sisters are so inspired by the creaminess of fresh mozzarella or the heady stink of a washed rind, they've turned into writers who have finally discovered their muse.

Before they opened in the summer, the Clarke family posted a poem about their impending arrival on the window. A passer-by and cheese lover responded with another poem. Since opening, customers in a poetic mood continue to pen cheese-inspired stanzas, which are displayed in the front window.

On pink Hello Kitty stationary, one customer wrote, "On a walk one day/my daughter said/'Cheese is love'/She was 3 and wise."

Another wrote, "Thank you, cheese family for opening this store. To find good good



Google Earth; staff graphic

cheese, I must travel no more."

Susan Benson of Rancho Cucamonga used to drive to Whole Foods to buy cheese and all the accouterment that make up a good cheese plate.

"I think this is just what this area needs," Benson said. "Pasadena is really too far."

For those who don't know the difference between ricotta and Roquefort, being confronted with more than 100 types of cheese can be intimidating. But the tongue-in-cheek descriptions, most penned by Marnie, help.

The Grayson is described as "stinky, soft and sweet. Will almost kick you out of an airport."

"Cheddar-like texture curds are soaked in chocolaty porter beer" to make Cahill Porter cheese. "Now you don't have to buy cheese and beer separately," read the description. "But please do."

Here's how Humboldt fog is

described: "If a handcrafted samurai sword made of vegetarian ash sliced through a tangy lemony wedding cake of cheese, it would be Humboldt fog."

It's obvious that the sisters are having fun. The La Verne residents, often found in cow print aprons, could eat nothing but bread and cheese for the rest of their lives. So becoming proprietors of cheese is really a dream job.

Lydia, a bubbly woman with streaks of pink hair and graying bangs, said bread and cheese are just "good for life."

Marnie, the cheesemaker with blond and purple hair, talks about cheese as if she's found the meaning of life.

"There's so much happiness," she said. "You should always be stoked eating cheese."

They are the third generation of a dairy family with roots in the Midwest. Their grandfather, one of 17 siblings, left Missouri to work in the California dairies. Their father became a dairy man, too, and owned large swaths of dairy land that the family eventually sold. Lydia and Marnie weren't far behind when their father and grandfather traveled to trade shows. Milk runs through their veins.

"It's always been a part of our lives," Lydia said. "Everything I eat and cook is based around dairy."

Four years ago, their father and grandfather died the same year, leaving the sisters with a desire to continue the family legacy. Armed with notes her grandfather wrote about the dairy business, Marnie began making cheese and became an apprentice to a local cheesemaker.

Today, the sisters are like cheese encyclopedias. When they hand out samples, which they dispense generously, they explain not just what kind of cheese it is but what farm it's from, who ages the cheese and what it goes with.

"Try this," Lydia said, smearing a soft goat cheese spiked with lavender on a piece of waxed paper. "It tastes like summer."

Marnie and Lydia have learned a lot about this college town through cheese. Customers come to them talking about that summer spent studying in Madrid and tasting manchego for the first time. They talk about that after-dinner cheese plate they tasted on a Parisian vacation. They don't know the name of their favorite cheese but perhaps Cheese Cave can help.

There's one customer whom Lydia has dubbed "the French guy," a cheese lover who once talked about going to a string of Blondie concerts when a Blondie song came over the store's speakers.

"He loves those stinky cheeses," Lydia said.

After they developed a rapport with "the French guy," a woman walked in one day to buy cheese and identified herself as "the French guy's wife."

The Clarkes also sell food that go along with cheese. One shelf boasts truffle sea salt and spaghetti made with cabernet sauvignon. Another shelf has peanut brittle with

bacon and a jar of pesto that Lydia told one customer, "If you don't like it, bring it back and I'll buy it back from you."

One woman on her lunch break on Tuesday picked up a baguette sandwich with Italian cheese, prosciutto and melon and wondered out loud, "That's interesting, I never thought of having melon in a sandwich."

It was \$6. She bought it.

A man pokes his head in the store.

"Hello, do you have any capers?" he asked.

"We have caper berries," Lydia replied. "They're like crazy intense."

A newcomer enters excitedly.

"I was just walking by and saw cheese," he said. "I had to come in."

Customers have a tendency to get stuck in the Cheese Cave. Tasting all the cheese that Marnie and Lydia recommend could take a good 10 minutes.

"There's no express lanes here," explained Donna Clarke, the owners' mother, who helps out with all aspects of the business that don't involve a computer. "It's a place to linger."

One customer lingered a minute too long. While shopping, someone stole her bicycle, which was left unlocked outside. A disappointed Marnie quickly set up a lost bike fund and described the incident on Twitter, offering a cheese reward. When another customer heard the story of the stolen Trek bike, she dusted off her own Trek bike in the garage and donated it. It was a random act of kindness all because of cheese.

It's no wonder that a community has evolved.

One group of friends comes for a game of Canasta on the kitchen table at the back of the store. Another customer started a "Conversation Salon," a Tuesday night discussion over cheese. During a recent conversation, which was aimed for "the post-college, pre-retirement set," participants wondered whether it's better to be right or to be kind.

The intellectual conversation coupled with artisan cheese seems quintessential Claremont. Cheese Cave has been opened for just four months, and it's hard to imagine this town without it.

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