



Living by the Work of Their Hands

Mollie Cox Bryan

Photos by Laura Merricks

The nuns at this Trappist monastery support themselves by making transcendent Gouda.

A gray, misty fog hangs over the Blue Ridge Mountains. A red brick monastery sits high on a grassy hillside, where poppies, buttercups, and bluebells dot the landscape. A swallow flies overhead, and an exuberant Golden Retriever circles the walkway. As a nearby stream babbles and trees rustle in the breeze, a nun robed in black and white opens the door, with a wide smile and open arms.

This would be Sister Barbara Smickles of Our Lady of the Angels Monastery. She is one of the women making some of the best Gouda cheese on this side of the Potomac. Crafted with fresh milk from grass-fed, pasture-living cows in the Shenandoah Valley, the cheese is a smooth, creamy delight.

Cheesemaking as Vocation

“Our cheese business has allowed us to be completely self-supporting,” she says, which is important to this Cistercian (aka Trappist) community tucked in the mountains of Crozet, Virginia, just outside Charlottesville. “It’s so satisfying to be earning our living by working with our own hands.”

Members of this religious order combine the work of prayer and prayerful work. They seek to produce goods that will generate income for their monasteries. The most famous of these goods is Trappist beer, such as Chimay and Koningshoeven.

All 11 nuns who live in the monastery take part in the cheesemaking, even if that’s simply cleaning the equipment and



418 W. Main Street
Charlottesville, VA
Monday - Friday 7 - 6
Saturday 7 - 5

albemarlebakingco.com
434-293-6456

www.artisanscenterofvirginia.org
434 - 825 - 7541



The 15th Annual Artisans Studio Tour

November 7 & 8, 2009
10 am - 5 pm

30 artisans in 15 studios
around the Charlottesville area

tasty delights and chances
to win prizes



the building where the cheese is made, which is an enormous job. "I sometimes think half my life is spent cleaning the cheese barn," Sister Barbara laughs.

They embrace hard work, which drew the attention of the neighbors in Crozet. "There aren't many Catholics here, so I think the local people didn't know what to think of us at first. But one day we were out painting the barn in blistering heat and some of the neighbors came to help. The next thing you know, we were very accepted by everyone. I guess we are the nuns who work hard, and they could relate to us," she teases.

But make no mistake—their work is intended to support a life of prayer and service to God. They don't advertise their cheese and have no plans for growing their business. In fact, their cheese gained recognition through no effort of their own.

Humble Beginnings

A group of these nuns came together in 1987 and lived in two log cabins in Crozet. A local woman taught them to make cheese with a native Dutch recipe and a cheese culture shipped from Wisconsin. After the woman's marriage dissolved and she moved away, she gave her cheese business to the nuns. By 1990, they were crafting their own cheese.

"We were so naive," Sister Barbara says. "We just thought, 'Hey, let's make cheese.' It wasn't that simple. We learned to take one thing at a time."



During cheese-producing months, 6,200 pounds of fresh Grade A milk is delivered to the monastery each week from farms in the Shenandoah Valley.

Soon after the nuns took over the business completely, a *Washington Post* food editor stumbled upon their handiwork and wrote about their cheese. The next thing the Sisters knew, their customer base skyrocketed to over 1,000 people.

Their business, which is mostly mail-order, has continued to expand. Its growth has given them the funds to build a monastery and a chapel.

"We make as much cheese as we can without cutting into our prayer and meditation routines. There are only 11 of us, and some of us are getting older," she notes. "If we get more Sisters, we may increase productivity. But for now, we have no ambitions or [expansion] plans." Currently, the Sisters produce about 21,000 pounds of cheese a year.

Our Daily Cheese

From mid-January to mid-November, the Sisters of Our Lady of the Angels Monastery make cheese once a week. With time





off for holy days, and other community activities, this means they make cheese about 33 or 34 days a year.

During cheese-producing months, 6,200 pounds of fresh Grade A milk is delivered to the monastery each week from farms in the Shenandoah Valley. After the morning delivery, the milk is pasteurized, poured into a huge cheese vat, and heated. The culture is added to produce curds, which are cut by hand, packed in forms (called hoops), and pressed. The finished cheeses are immersed in salt brine and then cured in the cooler, where the nuns inspect the cheese each day.

During the first four days of production, the cheese is dipped by hand into food-grade polymer, which allows it to breathe while it ages. The cheese takes on a rich golden color as it begins to ripen. Before shipping, each two-pound wheel of cheese is dipped in red wax to protect it.

The Sisters recently purchased a new machine that eliminates some of the heavy lifting, pushing and pulling of the cheese in the first steps of the process—steps done manually until now—because some of the Sisters were suffering from the heavy-duty work and repetitive motions inherent in making cheese. “Our new PPV [pre-press vat] from Finland is

definitely making our lives easier, but our hands and prayers and love still go into our cheese. I always think of the huge cheesemakers and think of the poor little cheese not touched by human hands,” Sister Barbara says playfully.

Touched by (Sisters at Our Lady of the) Angels

The Sisters always want to have personal, physical contact with the cheese and the cheese equipment. “It provides a good balance for us,” explains Sister Barbara. “Otherwise our life of prayer could be too sedentary. It’s an intense way to live.”

This approach to cheesemaking—part of the monastic rhythm of prayer, work, and study—is one their small community can sustain. And it’s one that their customers can celebrate with every bite.

Mollie Cox Bryan is the author of Mrs. Rowe’s Little Book of Southern Pies and Mrs. Rowe’s Restaurant Cookbook: A Lifetime of Recipes from the Shenandoah Valley.

Our Lady of the Angels Monastery

Crozet, VA
(434) 823-1452
cheese@www.olamonastery.org
www.olamonastery.org
*Cheesemaking facilities not open
to the public*

The William Cox Inn

original home circa 1770

artisanal and handcrafted hospitality
relax and enjoy our mountain views
savor seasonal farmhouse meals
fresh from our garden
reunions, meetings, small weddings

Janet and Tom Call, Innkeepers
Stanardsville, Virginia
(434) 985-8139
www.williamcoxinn.com



Funk Bros. Furniture

feast on this



farm tables

wine tables

sideboards

custom furniture

featuring locally sourced
and antique reclaimed lumber

Charlottesville, Virginia
434-293-9562

www.funkbrothersfurniture.com