

Andrew's Cheese Shop (cont.)

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to opening a cheese shop, but it did call for an entrepreneurial spirit, and business sense. The latter Andrew was able to develop as general manager of another restaurant, the Foundry, also in Los Angeles, his last stop before opening his cheese shop at Lincoln and Montana Ave. in 2008.

As he tells it, "I had the idea to open a cheese shop but was a long way from having the financing in place, when the perfect location opened up on Montana Avenue. Ideal retail location, and it came with customer parking! So I had to jump really before I was financially ready. As a result I almost had to shut the doors several times in the first few months. I also made the mistake of pouring money into a PR firm for advertising early on, when (a) I couldn't really afford it, and (b) if it had been successful, it might have been a disaster: I wasn't ready for an onslaught of customers...I'd be basically doing a bad job and they'd never come back. But luckily all I did was waste the money. The business has grown at about the pace I can handle." And he added that the best advertising has been free, anyway...features in local food sections, in online foodie sites, some radio talk, and a couple of NPR stories have all whipped up a lot more interest than his ad campaign did. People looking for artisanal foods seem to trust those sources more than they would an ad.

The shop is ideally situated on a busy street with other food establishments nearby, in a classy shopping district that tends toward boutique and gourmet interests. Andrew is also blessed, as he noted, with a right-sized parking lot behind the store, so that LA's carbound chore-runners can count on a place to park. Unlike a drug store, say, where people go because they have to, a cheese shop has to create a retail market, as well as specific interest in itself as an example thereof. Andrew knew he would need to have some branches into related retail. He began by offering, in addition to cheese, a smattering of international gourmet condiments and pre-dinner snacks like nuts and crackers. He also added sandwiches, which are very popular, and as of last year he's been able to add wine and beer. The combination has worked well, as business has been steadily growing, and he has built a solid base of regular customers, including some well-known names from the entertainment industry. The balance of cheese and non-cheese items has been just about right; "The non-perishables, like nuts and oils, and crackers, make me the most money. The markup on alcohol is not that high, but it's good to have it to go with the cheese, and the profit from cheese, at least the way I do it, isn't tremendous due to the necessity of waste. If you're going to be selling high-quality

artisanal cheeses, you can't just leave them around. When they go, they go. In this business, maintaining quality means throwing things away."

While chatting with me for this interview, Andrew was behind the counter and had to wait on customers and take the occasional phone call. One came in from a caterer for whom he was providing cheese for an event that night, and Andrew spent much of the time trying to talk her out of a selection, suggesting a replacement that would look the same, would taste almost the same, would hold up much better sitting out for a while, and was cheaper. His general tone was "Of course I'll give you what you want, but believe me, this is a better idea." As this conversation illustrated, at the heart of the philosophy of Andrew's Cheese Shop are a love of cheese, absolute honesty, and Andrew himself. Asked what his principle of selection was, he said, "Simple. If I like it, I sell it. There are famous cheeses out there that are basically bland factory products, and I won't sell them, no matter how much a customer asks. And there are artisan cheeses, too, that are going for a kind of mass-market appeal to make a few bucks, or are making the same cheese all year round when their milk is no good for half the year, and I won't sell those, either. My philosophy is to sell what I think is good, to give everyone a taste before they buy, and to know as much as I can about the cheeses I sell. I like to talk about cheese with customers. My idea for the shop is a kind of a throwback, a small-towny thing, where people know me, and talk to me, and I know them, and they learn to trust me and I learn their tastes. I really wouldn't want to do business any other way."

Indeed, part of what makes Andrew's Cheese Shop work, for his own business and for all of those whose cheese he sells, is Andrew himself. He is a personable man with a good sense of humor and an engaging manner. He clearly loves to talk about the cheeses he sells, and when he offers customers a taste, he wants to know what they think. He keeps these impressions in mind, and in so doing develops a kind of community conversation about a cheese. Just about every time we go to the shop, our and the other customers' conversations with Andrew are joined in by who's ever there, and recommendations and experiences are passed around. The scuttlebutt is then on hand for your own experience of the cheese, later, perhaps with your guests. And it doesn't hurt to occasionally find yourself discussing mac-and-cheese recipes with a movie star in her Saturday sweats, as happened to my wife and me not long ago. But the real stars in the shop are the Gubeen, the Scamorza, the Winnimere, and the

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