ForeWord Reviews

COOKING

Cheesemonger: A Life on the Wedge
Gordon Edgar
Chelsea Green
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What is a Cheesemonger? A person who buys and sells cheese? A wielder of knives and lugger of wheels? An aproned liaison between farm flies and foodies? Come in the Worker's Only entrance of the Rainbow Grocery Cooperative in San Francisco, and meet cheesemonger Gordon Edgar, ex-punk rocker, (slightly) subdued social activist, cheese doler, and storyteller. With briny, down-to-earth candor, Edgar takes us behind the counter, into the storeroom, the factory, the convention centers, and the farms, clarifying misconceptions, breaking down illusions, poking at the ridiculous, and sharing his great passion for good cheese. Like any punk refusing to be labeled, this often hilarious and always tasty book is part cheese guide, part memoir, and part social critique, delivering all with a lip-smacking bite that makes it hard to put down.

Stumbling into a job in the cheese department at the Rainbow Cooperative, rebel punk Gordon Edgar was not a big fan of cheese. He certainly never dreamed he would become an impassioned advocate, let alone a nationally acclaimed cheesemonger. Oddly, his outsider's perspective made him uniquely suited to bridging the often conflicting societal spheres that necessarily intersect as cheese moves from raw material to product and from counter to consumer. Though he proclaims the book is *not* a guide to cheese, Edgar offers up a tremendous amount of information that gives even the dedicated cheese lover a lot to chew on. Though organized more by societal encounters than by cheese specifics, each chapter weaves fascinating cheese particulars into engaging personal experiences that not only demystify the often fetishized world of fine cheese, but offer up a better understanding of people in many walks of life.

Fifteen chapters with titles like, "Herd Animals, Farmers, Foodies and Co-op Workers" and "*Terroir*, Trucking and Knowing Your Place," provide clarification of misunderstood cheese concepts, along with many side-splitting encounters. Each chapter closes with a description of one or two of the author's favorite cheeses, a bit about the maker, its price, availability, and comparable cheeses. There is also an informative and equally delicious

glossary, offering not only cheese-y terms like *affinage* and Bovine somatotropine, but also not-so-mainstream social activists like Danny Cohn-Bendit, Jose Bove, and the punk band Bikini Kill. An appendix, "Cheese Buying for Beginners," gives the reader tips for approaching the cheese counter and not feeling unduly foolish, though in truth, the whole book could be a crash course in how to talk about cheese and not look like a fool or worse, a pompous putz.

If Edgar writes to demystify the world of cheese, he also works to explore the over-simplified socio-political nature of food and food production. What does it mean for low-income America if the only food it can afford is mass-produced and chemically altered to barely resemble food that was eaten 100 years ago? And how can small dairy survive if the only product that turns a profit is one only an elite few can afford to eat? And if leftie food advocates knew that many of the family farms they support donate to the Republican Party, would their support diminish?

Over and over Edgar is told by cheese distributors and representatives to "tell the story": *The story of the cheese will sell the cheese.* But which story to tell? The Brigadoon story in which generations fight to maintain tradition and integrity while the busy manufacturing world whirls around them, or the story of flies and spoilage, overhead and trade-offs?

While often poking fun at people who pretend to know a good deal more than they do, Edgar maintains that there is room for all kinds of cheese crafters, cheese lovers, and even (gulp) cheese abstainers. Having traveled to many farms and factories across the nation and abroad, sold cheese to tens of thousands and listened to countless spiels by gritty cheese reps, not to mention maintaining his position in a worker-owned cooperative which walks a tightrope catering to an ever-changing San Francisco demographic, Gordon Edgar sits in the hub of a great wheel of cheese. At his hand, rural meets urban, foodie meets social activist, and the raw meets the well-refined. With all the thoughtful intention we wish for anyone wielding large knives regularly, Edgar offers up a delicious sampling of the sometimes sweet, sometimes bitter, and always a little salty, story of cheese. Cheese lovers of all sorts, as well as anyone who has ever worked in retail, on a farm, in a co-op, or who would classify themselves as a social activist, punk, or foodie, will undoubtedly find much to laugh about in this rich and raucous book.