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Embracing divergence
– it's time for the cheese
industry to own the funk of
its past and present and lead
the way on queer inclusion

QUEER CHEESES

Kyra James
Photograph: Spilled
Milk Creative



Carlos Yescas
Photograph:
Vladimir Pudovkin



Pungent aromas pierce your nostrils: sharp, musty, and meaty, conjuring a barnyard where woolly-backed mammals graze. The reactions of others around you instantly outs them. To lovers of cheese, it's the perfume of a perfectly ripened, creamy Limburger; to the rest, it stinks of feet. In this world, what others see as undesirable – mouldy, misshapen, smelly, and strong – is the highest marker of quality.

In other words, cheese is queer.

To be queer is to inhabit an inverted world, one that bucks binary categories and flips cultural norms of 'good taste'. It's no wonder many queer people in the U.S. and the U.K. are drawn to careers in the food industry. While the word was historically a pejorative, queer theorists have reclaimed it as shorthand to refer to all people who are not heterosexual or cisgendered. It's also a lens through which to view and challenge sociocultural constructs of heteronormativity and homogeneity.

"I always felt a little bit irrationally obsessed with this [food] product," says Lilith Spencer, lifestyle editor at Vermont's Jasper Hills Creamery and a former cheesemonger, who is omnisexual and non-binary. "Learning that most people in the industry are like that... was the first time since high school theatre I felt like I fit in somewhere." The renaissance that first put American artisan producers on par with Europe in the 70s and 80s was partially driven by gay and lesbian leaders. In the British market, Nick Bayne, head cheesemonger at The Fine Cheese Co in Bath, England, finds a culture that's largely accepting, even in the more conservative geographies of many cheesemakers. That is, for the cisgendered.

"For the longest time, cheese has been regarded as very open for the LGB community," says cheese expert and

consultant Carlos Yescas, who is gay. "We should maintain that, but also open it up for the T and Q." What's more, the faces of those in power are, like the product, overwhelmingly white. As a result, many of the next generation don't see a place for themselves there, but the industry's intersectional queers are working to democratise cheese – and culture. "We thought of our industry as welcoming," Yescas says, "until we heard this from them."

The performative aspect

A man in a cow costume, draped with gold chains, is freestyle rapping about cheese on a handheld mic. Cheesemongers run between booths piled with sweating slices of Emmentaler and fluffy fresh Chevré, preparing plates. The crowd gasps as a judge drops a fresh cut on the scale and it registers a *perfect* 0.25 lb. All around, crowds are cheering and stuffing their faces. This is the Cheesemonger Invitational (CMI): a biannual competition, seminar, and party in New York and San Francisco that crowns the best cheesemonger in the country. But on this day in 2015, something even more important is happening: marriage equality has just been passed by the U.S. Supreme Court. During a break, one of the cheesemongers grabs the mic and calls his partner to propose (he says yes).

The concept of chosen family is important to the queer community, and CMI is where many queer cheese professionals find their kin; Spencer says it was the first time they felt fully comfortable being out. "There is a unique intersectionality [with] cheesemakers from some of the most conservative parts of the country [and] the world," says Eris Schack, a former cheese program director at New York City's Bedford Cheese Shop, who was also an industry consultant and cheesemonger, "and you're surrounded with some of the most silly, fun, bizarre queer people you've ever met."

But when the Parmesan shavings settle and people return to work, all that big, bold queerness is often relegated to a supporting role. After all, the cheese counter is a stage, and the mongers merely players. Meanwhile, there is no equivalent event in the British cheese industry, which Bayne describes as defined by separation – not only in terms of proximity, with few opportunities for meaningful monger interactions, but in sequestering personal from professional lives. "Many queer people in the U.K. present themselves as visibly queer, with tattoos, piercings, [and] brightly coloured or interestingly cut hair," he says. Yet trade shows, company headquarters, and prominent shops present a homogenous face.

For much of her career, while Schack felt comfortable in customer-facing interactions, she didn't encounter any visibly trans people in the cheese community. Meanwhile, in larger



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markets, the toxic 'boys club' culture of cuisine still permeated. "There's a performative aspect to cheese retail which I really embraced, because at that point I was still closeted, living as a male," says Schack. "I excelled because I got really good at pretending."

Safe behind the counter, Schack, who is also pansexual, told stories about her identity, the products in her case, and the people who made them; all contained elements of truth, obscured by the performance. "I purposely kept myself closeted [for so long] because I thought I was more marketable that way," Schack says, "and I gotta be honest, I was."

In 2016, Bayne co-founded the LGBrieTQ Facebook group (he and Schack remain administrators), which started as a private forum and expanded into an active, global community for queer cheese professionals. It's where, as a member, Schack publicly came out, having presented masculine at work until that point. She found everyone incredibly supportive, including her employer, and continued her successful career – until Bedford permanently closed one of its shops in the pandemic and Schack was made redundant.

Having come out while already employed, Schack had never looked for work as an out queer person in artisan cheese. With her involvement in LGBTQIA+ organisations now listed on her resume, she had trouble getting interviews, which wasn't the case when she was closeted. When she did get a call, even the most promising interactions wouldn't get her past the first interview. She tearfully recalls how, upon seeing her face or hearing her voice, the interviewer would abruptly end the discussion. "This kind of treatment, from what was supposed to be a safe space, was incredibly hard for me," she says. "I have technically never been hired to a cheese job as an out trans woman."

In 2021, Schack made the difficult decision to leave the industry. She now works as the

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administrative director and intake coordinator at a startup mental health practice, advising on outreach, inclusion, and best practices for LGBTQ and other underrepresented populations. While fulfilled by this path, she will always love cheese, and hopes the industry will become a place to which she can return.

Own your funk

In America, an artisan cheese revival began in the 1970s and was booming by the 2010s: the number of cheesemakers grew from 48 in the late 1970s to 826 by 2012. It was largely led by women, some of whom were queer, which drove greater industry inclusivity from the start, says Greg O'Neill, co-founder of Victory Cheese, which sells cheese boxes to help sustain small U.S. producers during and after the pandemic. As the former co-owner of Chicago shop and deli Pastoral Artisan Cheese, Bread, and Wine, he was part of this wave. In 1997, lesbian co-founders of Cowgirl Creamery Peggy Smith and Sue Conley began producing their accessible, award-winning cheese. Smith and O'Neill served as presidents of industry-leading trade group, the American Cheese Society (ACS); in 2019, Rogue Creamery's Rogue River Blue, by gay cheesemaker/owner Dave Gremmel, became the first U.S. cheese to win World Champion at the World Cheese Awards.

A 'farm-to-table' movement was also taking

hold in wider circles during this period, and the industry's focus on visibility all the way through the food chain found a foothold with the eating public. Artisan cheese is all about storytelling, taking customers on a full-sensory journey from grass to mammal to plate, highlighting makers and farmers. As a result, "I can't think of [an industry] with the potential to be more inclusive," says Schack. "You're not getting the individual biscuit maker's story." But it depends what version of the story is being told.

While it may have been known within the industry, these first-wave gay and lesbian cheesemakers didn't advertise their identities. O'Neill chalks it up to generational differences and the fact that "they felt like they didn't need to ... because [they] weren't feeling 'othered'." Still, this lack of public, queer visibility created a culture where those at the top thought the industry was diverse, and those on the outside saw what they wanted to see. Cheese is a business like anything else, and the culture of the powerful is always perpetuated under capitalism - even when those in charge are queer.

"Internally, [these companies] might be incredibly inclusive," Schack says, "but outwardly, I don't think they're even aware [that they're] white-, cisgender-, and heteronormative-washing [their] culture for consumers." In this way, the trajectory of queer visibility within the industry mirrors

PHOTOGRAPH: HILARY KATZEN



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that of the modern LGBTQIA+ rights movement. It started with New York's Stonewall Rebellion and the UK's Gay Liberation Front, calling for broad equality and led by trans women of color like Marsha P. Johnson, but white gay and lesbian leaders silenced these voices for the more conservative agenda of marriage equality, because only the most palatable persists.

Today, O'Neill sees a lack of understanding about the experience of gender-expansive folks and people of colour dividing the industry from within. "We thought we were woke, but we were only woke to what people were talking about at the time," he says. "Some people just couldn't deal as quickly as other people could, and I think we need to have empathy up and down."

"The industry can seem very inclusive, because there are so many different types of people [with] similar morals, values, and passions. But it's also an industry where people who look like me feel like it's not for them," says Kyra James, a queer Black woman, who owns education and events business Own Your Funk and hosts virtual events at Austin, Texas-based Antonelli's Cheese Shop. "There's a bourgeoisie to it, and because a majority of my community is a minority [in cheese], it's taken them a long time to understand why I love it so much."

Cheese is a paradox, both ubiquitous and exclusive. Particularly for people from

underrepresented communities, the artisan market can feel inaccessible, and this is reflected in its ranks. In her previous position as manager and buyer at Chicago's Formaggio Kitchen, a specialty shop and caterer that offers cheese education, James says she would sometimes go weeks without seeing another person of colour. While she always felt comfortable around her coworkers, she believes this impacted her inability to progress in certain positions: an unintentional, yet equally harmful, discrimination, the result of leaders failing to recognise that true inclusivity involves a sustained, proactive effort.

"You have to talk to people differently," James says. "Because the industry doesn't speak directly to minorities, they don't [often] willingly walk in." A former teacher, she prides herself on her ability to meet people where they are, adapting language, examples, and explanations to the crowd. It's why she started Own Your Funk, which seeks to eliminate real and perceived barriers between people of all backgrounds and artisan cheese.

The path to democratising cheese "starts with the customer," she explains. "If people feel like they belong, they then will want to work [in the industry], support a farm, or even buy a farm." But creating this sense of belonging requires more than filling a few token spots at shops, creameries, and nonprofit organisations. "Restructuring is all

fine and dandy, but people have to actually be comfortable with doing the work. I don't know if this industry is really up for that."

"While remarkable, the number of gay and lesbian people in artisan cheese has not opened the door for queer people of colour," Yescas adds, despite the fact that Hispanic and Latino people are upper management in many large cheese companies. "They are cheesemakers in their own right... but we don't know their names. It mirrors the [U.S.] restaurant industry, where the main chef is the white man, but everyone in the kitchen is Mexican."

Starting a farm or agricultural business is hard even for those with comparative privilege, and dairy, O'Neill says, is an industry with notoriously high costs of entry. These challenges are compounded for underrepresented people, who also face systemic obstacles like discriminatory lending that block access to capital. The latest U.S. farm census found that farmers were more than 92 percent white and 86 percent male; data isn't even collected on sexual orientation or gender identity. The same goes for the U.K., where on top of this, government data on non-white farmers is so small, it's statistically insignificant.

As a result, cheese retail in the U.S. and U.K. is more diverse and inclusive than production and farming, and the same goes for urban versus rural areas. Bayne, who is omnisexual, finds the U.K. to be comparatively more queer-progressive, with the middle of England more aware than middle America. In 2015, the U.K. received Europe's highest ranking in advocacy group ILGA-Europe's 2015 review of LGBTI rights (86 percent "progress toward full equality").

At least, that is, for the LGB. By 2020, that ranking dropped to 66 percent, largely due to a wave of anti-trans backlash. Bayne says he doesn't know of a single visibly trans person in British cheese, and despite having addressed

the Bath shop about the proper use of a non-binary employee's pronouns, "Guess how many people use them?" he asks. "Just me."

The artisan ideal

The industry's greatest strength has always been the passion of its people, united by shared values around protecting and supporting local ecosystems. "The real artisan ideal," Yescas says, "is that the people who have a hand in making the product share the economic profit." But while canon holds that workers rise through the ranks to become makers, managers, and company owners, that's often not the reality. All said, there are still no long-term commitments to building pathways for underrepresented people in artisan cheese.

Despite being hit the hardest by the pandemic, independent shops and dairies have the opportunity - and perhaps responsibility



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- to lead by example, say the cheese professionals I spoke with. Yescas observes that smaller companies are better positioned than larger ones to take so-called economic risks like hiring or promoting for enthusiasm over experience. Meanwhile, "independent shops can do a lot in terms of making their workplace comfortable and respecting pronouns part of their written policy," Bayne says. "Most have a clause against discrimination based on sexual orientation; very few [based on] gender identity. This should extend to people who present as visibly queer, he adds.

Meaningful change is about ownership, whether it's owning one's identity or enabling underrepresented people to become owners of shops, farms, and production facilities. Queer and intersectional groups have been systematically denied access to opportunities such as land, loans, education, training, and hiring and promotions, while facing unequal perceptions of who artisan cheese is by and for. To this end, James works with the Cheese Culture Coalition, a nonprofit that promotes equity and inclusion for BIPOC in the industry and brings cheese education to school-aged children in underrepresented areas.

"[Cheese] doesn't have to be fancy," Spencer says, "but also, everyone has a right to eat something fancy."

Schack still has a vision of turning LGBrieTQ into a nonprofit organisation for advocacy, professional development, and bridging divides. Bayne would love to see LGBrieTQ or a similar group expand in the U.K., yet members have gone quiet as pandemic-era promises fail to materialise. "The more work we do, the more [we realise] there is to be done," Spencer notes, "and some companies have lost momentum as they [see] how deeply rooted these issues are."

Creating a culture of safety starts with education about LGBTQIA+ issues. To help,

Schack created a logo, a universal symbol of belonging: a pink, upside-down cheese wedge, mimicking the Pride triangle. "A queer cheesemonger could put this symbol in their cheese case, and maybe customers on the other side would have no idea what that means, but [queer folks] within the industry would know this is a safe space," she says.

Yet the onus shouldn't fall entirely on queer cheese professionals to raise awareness. "I would love to just be Carlos the cheese expert, but instead, I'm Carlos, the gay Mexican cheese expert," Yescas says. "I want more than identity politics. I want real conversations about the inequality created by capitalism. Otherwise, we will just end up being part of the hegemony."

Besides, if it's all about marketing, driving demand from underrepresented customers could turn capitalism's own weapons against itself. "We think we need more people working in the industry [and] more money into the farms, [but] we just need to talk to the right people," James says. "There needs to be active work to bring new types of people in, and it starts from inside."

Ultimately, the industry must own the funk of its past and present, embracing divergence in all its forms. That's what makes cheese a unique part of the food and beverage world - and why it needs to lead the way on queer inclusion. Just as there is no one way to be queer, there is no single solution that will remedy the industry's woes. To find the way forward, the artisan cheese industry needs to look no further than its own product: richer and more complex than its appearance; thriving in unexpected places; and constantly changing, turning rot into a new and beautiful life.

"I can fault them for the past," James says, "or I can embrace the future. And that's what I'm trying to do, in terms of [the industry] and my queer identity."