

California Artisan Cheese Festival tours Fiscalini, Nicolau Farms



It stinks.

I'm in a dark, cold room with more than 500 wheels of cheddar weighing 60 pounds each. They're aging, emitting an intense perfume and sprouting green mold in the process.

I follow the crowd into another dark, cold room. There's even more cheese. The same kind of cheese, actually. But it's older, stinkier. Wheels look caked with brown dust. Only it's not dust. It's a herd of mites.

Gross. I decide cheese is totally gross.

And delicious, obviously. One of my favorite things ever.

I'm a big believer in the importance of seeing where your food comes from. When I was a student at UC Davis, I took a meat processing class so I could come face-to-face with animal slaughter and butchering. So, signing up to tour some cheese farms seemed like a why-didn't-I-do-this-sooner moment.

California's Artisan Cheese Festival took place last weekend, and for the first time, it included some activities outside the usual cheese bubble of Marin and Sonoma Counties. Specifically, two different "Capitol area" farm tours took place north and south of Sacramento.

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Looking for a job?

I ventured south to Modesto, specifically to gawk at Fiscalini Cheese Company's bandage-wrapped cheddar. This is the stinky stuff in that dark, cold room.

This is also the cheddar deemed the World's Best Cheddar at the World Cheese Awards in London. Not just once, but three times. It's the only American cheddar to ever win, in fact. Aged 14 months, it's nutty, earthy, crumbly and wonderful.

Sliding on the sanitized floor, wearing a hairnet, surrounded by men in hairnets and beard nets, I felt like I got very close to Fiscalini's cheese. I smelled its sweat and I still couldn't wait to eat it.

I also met a room full of Fiscalini's famous original San Joaquin Gold, and some of the 1,500 cows that help make it.

Why does good cheese taste so good? Brian Fiscalini, a fourth generation dairy farmer, said there are a lot of different factors, but the main thing is the milk. Clean milk with a super low white cell blood count leads to great cheese. And in the case of the Fiscalini family, the cows also provide the farm—and some of Modesto—with electricity.

"Everything you just saw is powered by poop," Fiscalini said.



Brian Fiscalini // Janelle Bitker

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Fiscalini cows: cheese producers and electricity generators // Janelle Bitker



Nicolau Farms resident cat // Janelle Bitker



Nutcher Milk tasting // Janelle Bitker



Walter Nicolau emerges with a baby goat // Janelle Bitker

With that, our tour bus took off for Nicolau Farms, a self-sustaining farmstead in Modesto. Surrounded by almond orchards, Nicolau looked shockingly pristine, with a manicured lawn, idyllic backyard and palm trees. It's also on 30 acres, with 200 goats inadvertently contributing to creamy chevre and a variety of flavored cheeses.

There was also a resident kitty and milk tasting bar. Yes. Milk tasting. The glass bottled goods came from Natcher Milk in a variety of colors and flavors, including root beer. It tasted like a root beer float, with one homogeneous, milky consistency.

Walter Nicolau, another fourth generation dairy farmer, started the family's cheesemaking enterprise. None of his stories, however, got visitors as excited as when he uttered the words "baby goat."

Nicolau jumped into the spacious goat pen and pulled out an adorable white goat, born just that morning. The blue-eyed, pink-nosed baby got passed around, always with an audible gasp at its remarkable lightness. A photo shoot ensued.

When the goat got to me, I was overcome with cuteness, but also, with cheese thoughts. This goat was going to make such awesome cheese one day soon.

Cheese is life.

:::posted by **Janelle Bitker** @ 2016-03-21 10:46 AM [permalink](#) 