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Cheese Chose Me

by Laura Martinez, The Pasta Shop

Almost daily, a customer selecting a delectable morsel of cheese will look at me wistfully and say, “You must love your job.” I lean over the counter and whisper, “Yes, and my first day here included a two-hour cheese tasting.”

“Cheese chooses people,” Juliana Uruburu, our Cheese Manager, told me in my interview. “It’s alive.” Then she launched into a discussion of goat, sheep, and cow milks, pasteurized versus raw milk, salt content, rennet, curd development, cutting, cheddaring, seeding, molding, wrapping, washing, turning, pressing, and aging. She talked about limited cheeses made from seasonal milk, regionally unique artisan cheeses, farmstead cheeses, cheeses from France, Greece, Spain, England, Ireland, Colorado, Vermont, and California. After the interview I lingered over the cheese case, in the hopes that cheese would choose me.

Several agonizing weeks went by before I received the call. In the meantime, whenever I felt I could do so unobtrusively, I slipped into Market Hall and lingered over the cheeses, making wild, silent promises about how well I’d take care of them. I thought about having my kids provide testimonials. I read up on cheese making, cheese countries, cheese types, and cheese pairing. Finally, much to my relief, I was in.

The first week as I waited on customers I relied on two simple questions: “What kind of cheese do you usually enjoy?” and “What else are you serving?” I hung back as long as I could, watching and listening to Mariko Thompson and Kate Hill guide customers to satisfying and delicious cheese selections. I tried to absorb their awesome knowledge, to copy how cleanly they wrapped each piece of cheese, how



beautifully they sliced it. I stumbled through the register codes for days relying on the phrase, “I just started.”

Late in my second day on the job, I saw a couple shyly eyeing the olive bar. Mariko and Kate were busy with other customers so I took a deep breath and said, “Can I help you?” Advising the couple on their olive selection turned out to be easy so I moved on to enquiring what sort of meal they were putting together. “A picnic,” they said. It was pouring rain outside. The woman looked at me sheepishly. “We like to get a blanket and put it in the middle of the living room on a rainy day.” “Then you need champagne and Constant Bliss,” I said, referring to the silky, raw-cow’s milk cheese, handcrafted by Jasper Hill Farms. By the time we were through, their picnic was stocked with Hondrelia and Cerignola olives, Constant Bliss, Colston Bassett Stilton, and Ossau Iraty.

Mariko, who it turns out had been watching the whole time, congratulated me later on my first big sale. I thought to myself how lucky I am that cheese had chosen me.

(Laura is currently working at the Cheese Counter at The Pasta Shop on Fourth Street.)