

## Former Sunshine cheese guru James Ayers now at Yountville's Atelier

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### A few of James Ayers' favorite cheeses

-- Andante Dairy in northern Marin County: "Soyoung Scanlan has some of the most divine goat cheeses. Beautiful presentation, beautiful rinds and the cheese is delicious."

-- Mountain cheeses like Bufort: "A beautiful cheese from the Rhone Alps. Think of it as a big gruyere. Think of it with fondue. It's great with white wines."

-- Old Quebec aged sharp cheddar: "I love commodity cheddars. There's something about like a 10-year aged cheddar, it goes back to when I was a kid."

-- Raw-milk brie: It's not legal in the U.S. because it's made from unpasteurized milk and aged for less than 60 days, but Ayers raves

James Ayers was cheesemonger at Sunshine Foods for 18 years, but when Jean-Charles Boisset calls you on the phone with an offer, it's impossible to say no.

Ayers, now master fromager at Atelier Fine Foods in Yountville, recalled the day in 2015 when a friend passed him a cell phone with Boisset's chipper, French-accented voice on the other end.

"I was blown away, thinking 'this guy's got energy,'" Ayers said.

Ayers started out as a chef in the late '80s and got into cheese when he was working in the deli at the St. Helena Grocery Company, where Dean & DeLuca is now. He'd worked at Sunshine since 1997 and appreciated the family-owned store's emphasis on quality and variety instead of just the bottom line. But by last year he was ready to move on and try something new.

about some he tasted in Tokyo. Mt. Alice is a legal brie made in Vermont that's almost as great.

-- Tomme de Savoie: "Earthy, rich, creamy with a little sharpness. Makes a divine grilled cheese sandwich, the best on Earth."

Atelier Fine Foods, owned by Boisset Collection, opened in February 2016 after months of planning by Ayers and the rest of the team. Ayers, who's keen on presentation, suggested various changes to Boisset's original design.

"I'm all about how things look and how they're displayed," he said. "That's the hardest part of the business, keeping things up and making them look beautiful."

Ayers enjoys "taking a chance" on new or obscure cheeses that reflect the renaissance that's occurring in American cheese-making.

"They're doing everything that the Europeans are," said Ayers, who stocks anywhere from 125 to 150 cheeses at a time. "They're doing bloomy rinds like a Brie, wash rinds ... They're doing mountain cheeses like Gruyeres, they're doing it all."

Great cheese all starts with great milk, which starts with fresh green grass, Ayers said.

"In the mountains in summer you have flowers, grass, bugs, mushrooms, wild herbs – that all contributes to the flavor," Ayers said. "Vermont produces great cheeses because of the flora they have out there. It's the same with Andante Dairy (in Marin County). The Normandy of California is up in west Marin. It's greener longer because of the proximity to the ocean."

Ayers loves working at Atelier, but the downside of leaving Sunshine is that he deals with fewer local customers.

"Being at Sunshine so long, I saw families with kids who grew up, graduated and had kids of their own," he said. "With a tourist you don't really know what they like, so it's your job to help them. I like that challenge. But I miss my customers ... I'd love to get more locals in here."

Ayers said he had "no ambition" as a young person, but he "fell into" the food business and now he's in it for good.

"Being here, I'm in food paradise," he said. "This is what I'll be doing for the rest of my life, slicin' meat and cuttin' cheese."