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TASTINGS

# BLESSEDLY GOOD GOUDA

BY CHARITY BETH LONG



ILLUSTRATION: COURTESY OF OUR LADY OF THE ANGELS

Driving through the countryside of Virginia my wheels crunch on packed dirt. The narrow road curves, leading to a wooden bridge and, not long after, a brick monastery. I'm in the town of Crozet, about 15 miles outside of Charlottesville, Virginia, where a small group of nuns make fabulous Gouda cheese.

I park amidst a construction site and two dogs greet me; first a playful Terrier mix, and then a slightly wary Golden Retriever, announce my arrival with a bark. At the mahogany door of Our Lady of the Angels, a sign reads, "Door is open. You are welcome."

TASTINGS



PHOTOGRAPHY: CHARITY BETH LONG



Inside, I find a simple, tile-floored chapel and ask for Sister Barbara Smickel. A friendly nun ushers me to a modest, almost grandmotherly sitting room where I learn about how this order of nuns became cheesemakers.

It all started back in 1987, when six nuns moved from Massachusetts to Albemarle County, Va., to start a new Cistercian Monastery. In the hills of Virginia, these nuns would pray up to six hours per day and follow the tradition of supporting themselves through manual labor.

Sister Barbara explained that when they bought the property, it already had a small cheese-making facility and their plan was to make and sell cheese. With a grin, she said, “we were a little naïve.” The equipment was old and the sisters knew nothing about the craft they had undertaken. Undaunted, they met with advisors and now make 20,000 pounds of Gouda per year.

Currently, 13 sisters call Our Lady of the Angels home. It’s a diverse group of women. Sister Maria hails from Spain, Sister Myriam from Haiti and Sister Sophy is originally from India but recently became a U.S. citizen. Here on 507 secluded acres in the Blue Ridge Mountains days are largely occupied by prayer and work, much of which is done in silence, according to Trappistine custom.

At first glance this may seem like a difficult, solitary life but the smiles say otherwise. In the open space of country life, these women live in close quarters, praying and working together, with unified purpose.

Even with the regimented schedule of monastic life, the sisters make time for simple pleasures such as reading, making music and gardening.

They also spend time exploring the woods on the property and with their pets, which includes the aforementioned Golden, Amber; Jesse James, the spirited Terrier mix; and a grey and white kitty named Juniper, all of which are rescues.

Although the sisters do not leave the monastery for entertainment, they do go out to run errands and to vote. On these outings, it is not unusual for strangers to approach the nuns with prayer requests. Community members also come to the monastery for Mass, which is open to the public. The service is delivered by a resident priest and often the 20-seat chapel is standing room only. It’s easy to see why guests flock to Our Lady of the Angels; the sense of tranquility is palpable.

Growth in both the monastery’s numbers and church attendance led to the construction of a new church, a project that has been under way since 2014. The expansion includes a much larger chapel, library, meeting room and a welcome center. Donations have been helpful in raising the funds for construction, but Our Lady of the Angels also earns income through cheese sales and by leasing farmland surrounding the priory.

If you visit, you are likely to see fields of corn and roaming Holstein, but they belong to the tenant farmer. The Monastery Farm Cheese is made from grass-fed, hormone-free milk purchased from the Dairy Farmers of America Co-op. Sister Barbara says that most of the milk comes from “local Mennonite farmers who are stewards of the land.”

A single batch of cheese starts with 700 gallons of milk that eventually becomes 800 pounds of cheese. It’s handmade, a process that begins with pasteurized milk. It’s all done by the cloistered

nuns, who add cultures to a large stainless steel vat of milk and stir with large paddles until curds form. The curds are then hand cut, some of the whey removed, more water is added and the mixture is heated again.

The curds are then ready to be hand weighed and placed into molds which get pressed, giving the cheese its characteristic wheel shape. The finished wheels are then soaked in salt brine for 14 hours, preserving the cheese and developing its flavor. The nuns wrap the final product in cloth, dip it in wax and then age it at least six weeks during which time the Gouda hardens and the flavor matures.

The result is a mild, buttery cheese. Sister Barbara says the secret is “love and prayer.” And the sisters have a lot to pray about. About one-third of the cheese orders come with a prayer request, a task that the sisters take seriously. So if you’re wondering if the cheese is blessed, it is, in a manner of speaking. Sister Barbara says they “pray over it” while they work.

If you’re interested in trying this holy cheese, you can travel to Charlottesville, where it’s sold in two retail locations: Feast and Foods of All Nations. Or go directly to Crozet for a view of the lush landscape. Visitors are welcome, but it’s best to contact the monastery in advance.

You can also purchase by mail. To download the order form or to see a virtual tour of the cheese-making process, visit [olamonastery.org](http://olamonastery.org).

Once you get your cheese, melt it on some toast. That’s the way the vegetarian Sisters of Our Lady of the Angels prefer to eat it. I’m an omnivore, so I piled my buttered toast with thick cut bacon, fresh arugula and of course, Monastery Country Cheese!