

# MAKERS AND MONGERS

Inside the minds (and rinds) of the cheese world's brightest



## Tenaya Darlington, aka Madame Fromage, helps people discover, taste and celebrate cheese

By Christina Paschen

**MADISON, Wis.** — For Tenaya Darlington, cheese started not as a career move, but as a cure for homesickness.

In 2005, the Wisconsin native left Madison — where she had spent nearly a decade writing for *Isthmus* — to take a teaching job in Philadelphia. Within her first week, she found herself at the cheese counter at Di Bruno Bros. in the Italian Market, searching for a taste of home: Pleasant Ridge Reserve.

What she found instead was a turning point.

“So blown away by the selection,” Darlington decided to eat her way through the entire case — more than 350 cheeses in all. The cheesemongers, intrigued by her specific request for a Wisconsin original, responded with samples and conversation. She kept coming back.

“Di Bruno Bros. became my ‘Cheers’ bar, my happy place,” she says.

That weekly ritual evolved into a five-year project. Darlington chronicled her journey on a blog called Madame Fromage, hosting cheese parties and documenting each discovery. The blog eventually became her first book, published in 2013, *Di Bruno Bros. House of Cheese: A Guide to Wedges, Recipes and Pairings*. This book laid the foundation for a multi-faceted career that now spans writing, including a recent article for *Food and Wine*

magazine entitled, “The 25 Essential American Cheeses To Try Right Now.” Darlington also serves as a writing professor at St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia, gives cheese tours and hosts cheese tastings.

At the start, she had no such ambitions.

“When I started, it never ever occurred to me that I would write books about cheese,” she says. “I just loved tasting it and writing about it.”

What she did notice early on was how quickly cheese sparks conversation.

“Mention that you’re a cheese lover at a party, and the conversation will instantly shift,” she says. “People have strong feelings about cheese. They want to emote. They want to trade recommendations.”

That sense of connection became central to her work. Alongside Philadelphia cheese painter Mike Geno, she co-founded a club called the Rennet Rough Riders in 2016 gathering whenever a “dairy dignitary” came to town, such as Allison Hooper, founder of Vermont Creamery, or cheese writer Trevor Warmedahl. Those connections led to new opportunities, including co-hosting European cheese tours with Cheese Journeys and serving as cheese director for Tria, a group of wine bars in Philadelphia.

“It’s been an incredibly joyful and fulfilling ride,” she says. “The passion of the people in this industry — the



Photo courtesy of Tenaya Darlington

**AROMATIC DISCOVERY** — Tenaya Darlington leans in to smell a wheel of cheese, embracing the sensory experience at the heart of cheese discovery.

cheesemakers and cheesemongers — really moves me.”

Darlington’s approach to cheese education is rooted in accessibility. Early on, she realized that technical language could be a barrier.

“At a tasting, it was hard to get people interested in talking about a ‘washed rind,’” she says. “But if I asked, ‘Who likes stinky cheese?’ then all the hands went up.”

As a writer and educator, she leans into sensory, playful language — describing cheeses as “plush stink bombs” or “so luxurious that they spread like night cream.” The goal is to spark curiosity and lower intimidation.

Her storytelling-first philosophy carries through to her book *Adventures in Cheese*, published in 2023, where pairings and profiles are framed through narrative.

“Cheese stories have to engage the senses and the imagination,” she says. “If a story feels too technical, you lose your listener.”

That mindset is especially important when working with newcomers.

“I love beginners,” she says.

**“Mention that you’re a cheese lover at a party, and the conversation will instantly shift. People have strong feelings about cheese. They want to emote. They want to make recommendations.”**

Tenaya Darlington

“They’ll tell you up front, ‘I don’t like blues’ or ‘I’m not so sure about goat cheese.’ So you start with their comfort level.”

From there, she nudges them gently — guiding a Brie lover toward Robiola, or introducing a bold-cheese fan to a bandaged Cheddar — helping them expand their palate through play rather than pressure.

Turn to FROMAGE, next page



Photo courtesy of Winter Caplanson

**SHARING KNOWLEDGE** — Darlington engages the crowd at a “Meet the Cheesemaker” gala in England during Cheese Journeys’ British Cheese Odyssey in 2021.

# MAKERS AND MONGERS

Inside the minds (and rinds) of the cheese world's brightest



## FROMAGE

Continued from previous page

Pairing is another entry point. For first-timers, Darlington often builds a board around a favorite beverage, like an IPA paired with Cheddars of varying ages. The experience can be surprising.

“For many people, it’s counterintuitive to put two bitter things together,” she says. “But bitter things soften each other. It’s a revelatory experience.”

These days, Darlington is deepening her perspective from abroad, currently spending a year based in Sète, France, researching cheese culture. There, she has been struck by how seamlessly cheese is woven into daily life.

“You’ll even find that rest stops and gas stations carry fabulous regional cheese,” she says. “The French are really the best covert marketers of cheese. They don’t push it. It’s simply part of the fabric of everyday life.”

That philosophy extends to presentation. While American cheese boards often feature elaborate accompaniments, the French tend to keep things simple: quality cheeses, a baguette, wine.

“No one fusses over cheese here,” she says. “They eat it with relish and treat it with a deep sense of dignity.”

Still, she sees energy and evolution across the global cheese scene, from expansive festivals in Europe to growing conversations around non-dairy alternatives. While some younger consumers are moving away from dairy, Darlington believes curiosity can bridge the gap.

“Human connection drives curiosity,” she says, recalling a recent moment when a non-dairy-seeking friend tried Comté after hearing its story. “We need spaces where people can explore their cheese curiosity.”

For those working in the industry, her advice is simple: make it personal.

“Work hunk by hunk,” she says. “Help people find the hunk of their dreams.”

Rather than overwhelming customers with options, she encourages cheesemongers to share something they love — something they took home, cooked with or gifted. That storytelling creates a starting point for discovery.

It’s a lesson she learned firsthand from mongers like Zeke Ferguson at Di Bruno Bros., who once paired Cowgirl Creamery’s Red Hawk cheese with a chocolate stout, describing it as “an

adult Snickers bar.”

“If you want to sell cheese, talk with people,” Darlington says. “Be an ambassador for the cheeses you love.”

Even after 15 years in the industry, her approach remains grounded in curiosity, connection and a sense of play — values that first took shape at a cheese counter far from home.

And, as she might say, it all starts with a single bite. **CMN**

**Know a  
standout  
cheesemaker or  
cheesemonger?**

Email Christina at  
[cpaschen@cheesemarketnews.com](mailto:cpaschen@cheesemarketnews.com)



Photo courtesy of Tenaya Darlington

**CHEESE CELEBRATION** — Raising a glass and her book in celebration, Tenaya, also known as Madame Fromage, blends cheese, wine and curiosity in equal measure.

**All the flavor you crave.**

Our fresh mozzarella varieties are perfect for everyday dishes and special occasions.

**NEW PACKAGING!**

Proud producers of award-winning cheeses and green energy.  
**CraveCheese.com**

For more information please visit [www.cravecheese.com](http://www.cravecheese.com)

# MAKERS AND MONGERS