

MAKERS AND MONGERS

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



Felice Thorpe shares insights on the care, storytelling and craft behind successful cheese

By Christina Paschen

SAN FRANCISCO, Calif. — For Felice Thorpe, great cheese has never existed in a vacuum.

Raised on a family farm in West Marin, California, Thorpe grew up with a firsthand understanding of agriculture as a living system — one where care, timing and stewardship matter just as much as the final product. That mindset has followed her throughout a career spanning more than a decade in cheese and specialty foods, and it continues to shape how she thinks about what makes cheese truly successful once it leaves the creamery.

“Cheese succeeds when it’s treated like the living product it is,” Thorpe says. “Proper handling, rotation and storage are non-negotiable, but beyond that, success comes from deeply knowing the product — its origin, the people behind it and why it matters.”

Today, Thorpe serves as cheese and charcuterie specialist for Northern California at The Chefs’ Warehouse based in Ridgefield, Connecticut. She works closely with chefs, retailers and hospitality professionals to expand their knowledge of — and access to — exceptional cheese and charcuterie. In the role, she draws on a background that blends sales leadership, brand building and industry advocacy.

Thorpe began her food career with an organic grains company in Fresno, California, in 2010 where she served as director of business development and helped secure national distribution into Sprouts Markets, schools and health care campuses. She became director of sales and marketing for O Olive Oil in 2013, launching the first organic olive oil into Target and Walmart.

Her path into cheese followed soon after, when she joined Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Co. from 2014-2018 as national sales director. There, she scaled a growing sales team, supported the opening of a new creamery, presented at the Disney Food & Wine Festival and became a board member of the California Artisan Cheese Guild in 2016.

Because of her growing expertise in cheese and foodservice sales, Thorpe became a go-to cheese specialist for The Chefs’ Warehouse from 2018-2021, selling global cheese and charcuterie into key accounts while educating food and beverage teams at organizations including Twitter, Chase Center, the San Francisco Zoo, Sterling Vineyards and Post Ranch Inn. Around that same time, she was elected president of the California Artisan Cheese Guild.

During 2020 and 2021, Thorpe served as West Coast sales director for



Photo courtesy of Felice Thorpe

WHERE CONNECTION BEGINS — Felice Thorpe samples cheese at the California Artisan Cheese Festival, using sensory engagement and storytelling to connect consumers with the people behind the product.

Laura Chenel, Marin French Cheese Co. and St. Benoit Creamery. Thorpe helped export U.S. cheese to Asia and established a cheese partnership with the Culinary Institute of America. She also was invited to chair the cheese category for the Good Food Awards in 2020 — an honor she views as both recognition and responsibility.

“It’s not just about selling cheese,” Thorpe says. “It’s about sustaining farmers, makers and communities. Leadership helped me define my ‘why,’ and that sense of commitment drives me to share knowledge and advocate for practices that keep our industry strong.”

At the heart of Thorpe’s philosophy is the belief that cheese success is built — or lost — after production. Rotation and handling, she says, are critical not only to quality, but to profitability.

“Cheese is perishable and dynamic — it changes every day,” she explains.

“If you’re not paying attention, you’re not just risking flavor and texture; you’re risking shrink and lost revenue. Good care protects the integrity of your product and your margin, but most importantly, it creates trust.”

That trust is reinforced through thoughtful merchandising and storytelling at the point of sale. For Thorpe, brand voice shouldn’t live solely in marketing materials — It needs to show up where buying decisions are made.

“That means signage and packaging that feels authentic, menu descriptions that go beyond ‘goat cheese,’ and staff who can share a quick, meaningful detail,” she says. “It’s about creating a moment of connection.”

She often describes signage, product placement and staff confidence as the three legs of an effective marketing stool.

Turn to THORPE, next page



Photo courtesy of Felice Thorpe

BUILDING TRUST AT THE SOURCE — Felice meets with a plant manager during a visit to Ruby Jewel Ice Cream in Portland, Oregon, reflecting her belief that strong relationships start on the production floor.

MAKERS AND MONGERS

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



THORPE

Continued from previous page

“Signage draws attention, placement makes the product easy to grab and staff confidence closes the sale,” Thorpe says. “If one leg is missing, the stool is broken.”

She also recommends investing in education so employees and customers understand why a cheese is special and deserves attention.

Education, she adds, doesn't need to be complex or expensive to make a difference. Encouraging staff to taste cheese and talk about it in ways that resonate personally — such as through history, art or music — can elevate the customer experience and drive loyalty.

“When staff feel authentically equipped to share a story or suggest a pairing, customers leave feeling special,” she says.

“Cheese is perishable and dynamic — it changes every day ... Good care protects the integrity of your product and your margin, but most importantly, it creates trust.”

Felice Thorpe

That focus on connection also shapes Thorpe's views on marketing. Activations that engage the senses — sampling, storytelling and experiences that feel personal — create connection and move the needle, she says.

“Cheese is sensory and emotional,” Thorpe says, noting that the more senses you can activate, the more memorable the experience. “Try to find moments that interact with all the senses.”

Despite her deep experience, Thorpe's enthusiasm for cheese remains grounded and inclusive. She enjoys a range of cheeses, describing her tastes as “from Velveeta Shells and Cheese to Appenzeller Swiss Cheese — I'm not an elitist.”

That curiosity and accessibility, paired with a sharp understanding of numbers, also is the advice she offers to emerging brands.

“A great product is essential,” Thorpe says, “but clarity on pricing, positioning and distribution is what can make or break you.”

For Thorpe, great cheese will always be about more than what's on the plate. It's about care, context and the people who help it succeed long after it leaves the creamery — a perspective that continues to shape her work and her lasting influence on the specialty dairy industry. **CMN**



Photo courtesy of Felice Thorpe

CARE BEYOND THE CREAMERY — Felice tours the creamery at Great Barn in Massachusetts while holding Prufrock, a Good Food Awards-winning cheese that reflects the attention and stewardship she champions.

Know a standout cheesemaker or cheesemonger?

Email Christina at cpaschen@cheesemarketnews.com

Perfectly Cubed. Expertly Sliced.
Winona's Got Your Cheese Covered.

winona foods CELEBRATING 30 YEARS Imagine the Possibilities™

CHEESE CRAFTERS • HANDCRAFTED CHEESES •

Bella Peonia **SOCRATES** AUTHENTIC GREEK STYLE **della terra** **PROUDLY CHEESE WISCONSIN**

For more information please visit www.winonafoods.com

MAKERS AND MONGERS