

DINING: A Foodie Paradise

Sample exotic treats at Valley Cheese & Wine

By Max Jacobson

Valley Cheese & Wine 1770 W. HORIZON RIDGE PARKWAY,
HENDERSON, 341-8191. Hours: 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Monday-Friday,
11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday.

Photo by Iris Dumuk

Bob Howald and his wife, Kristin Sande, want to sell you wild-boar cacciotorini and ash-topped cheese made from goat's milk. Question is, will you buy any?



The answer is a resounding yes if you are a) a foodie, or b) a food columnist for this publication, and the place where you will perform this feat is at the new Valley Cheese & Wine, a gourmet food shop located in the wilds of Henderson.

When I asked Howald why he opened in this rather remote mall, he was direct: It was, he said, "twice as expensive to rent a space in Summerlin." The way I figure it, anyone with a yen for mountain Parmesan from Modena, Italy, or Michel Cluizel chocolate pebbles from France won't carp about driving across the Valley.

Add a terrific selection of wines, somewhere in the vicinity of 350 boutique labels, and a growing inventory of olive oils, chocolates, pastas and specialty dry goods—such as salt from the volcanic sand on a Hawaiian beach—and what you have is arguably the first true gourmet food store in Las Vegas.

Because yes, while Whole Foods Market offers many boutique products and Village Meat and Wine continues to be a top-notch upscale butcher shop, Howald and Sande are really the first people in town to offer such a sophisticated selection of cured meat, cheese and exotic foods. When I asked Howald why he opened such a shop in a town that didn't have one, he replied, "You just answered your own question."

The couple moved here from Minneapolis, where both were in the fancy-food business. Howald, a former chef and wine importer originally from St. Louis, worked for a company called Great Ciao, while his wife was with Whole Foods for many years.

The action on a recent morning is at the cheese and cured meat counter, where I spy on a pair of Frenchmen discussing their cheese preferences. Ninety-five percent of the cheeses you will find here are artisanal farmhouse cheeses, and all seem as if they are perfectly ripe, as if an affineur—an in-house cheese ripener—has been present.

Even more surprising is that most of them are pasteurized. "It's become harder, in the past few years, to 'get raw-milk cheeses,'" says Howald, "unless they are aged for certain periods of time. Nothing I have is illegal." Given those parameters, the quality of what I taste is amazing.

I try a Camembert, the texture perfectly ripe, which Howald explains has been "thermally pasteurized," a pricey method by which the cheese is slowly brought up to 145 degrees, and maintained there for half an hour, which results in an amazingly creamy texture. That ash-topped cheese is a Cathare from France, and I'm also impressed with Berkswell, a full-flavored cheese from Neal's Yard Dairy in England.

The meats are equally mind-blowing. I try salami from the current darling of the boutique American salami scene, Fra'Mani, a product made by Paul Bertolli, chef of Oakland's Oliveto and a disciple of Alice Waters,

founder of Chez Panisse in Berkeley. Named Gentile, this salami uses both back fat and belly fat, each causing a different sensation when it melts in the mouth. It is perhaps the greatest American salami I have ever tasted.

The selection here is varied, and the store has a rather liberal tasting policy, meaning that they will gladly cut you a wedge of cheese or a slice of meat in order to sell you some. I also try prosciutto di Parma, a full-flavored Italian ham aged 600 days; a Tuscan super ham, a pink-fleshed, herb-roasted product magnificent with scrambled eggs or on a grilled sandwich; and a Fra'Mani soppressata, a spicy cold cut, before the cheese.

Also at this counter are semi-sun-dried tomatoes from Italy packed in sunflower oil—not as pungent as the ones you get in a jar—grilled artichokes, Valencia almonds crusted with salt, Oregon pistachios and hazelnuts and tiny, intense pecans from Kansas. Everything I taste here, in fact, seems to be magnified in intensity. Yes, you pay more for the products, but the over-the-top flavors make it all worthwhile. You won't go thirsty here, either. The store has its wines divided into areas, such as Italy, New Zealand, Austria, Oregon and others. And while you won't find many wines under \$10, as you would at Trader Joe's, there are many bargains, such as a 2005 wine from Portugal, the 2005 Quinta do Alqueves, and a number of flinty Gruner Veltliners, at under \$20 a bottle, from Austria.

Remember, this is a new store, and the inventory is in a state of flux. Howald is planning to bring in a boutique smoked salmon, for instance, and other high-end products so far locally unavailable. "I'm listening to my customers," he says.

The couple will host wine tastings and gourmet food classes in the future, and have some other surprises on the agenda, too. Until then, pass the wild-boar salami.