

# Graduate Association for **Food Studies**

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*Wine and Culture* delivers an exceptional overview of the anthropology of winemaking. As a student of anthropology and alcohol studies, I can only hope that Black and Ulin's work opens a door through which others may follow. By not just reaffirming what wine studies is, but by also showing what it can be, they create a space that beckons for further research and the development of an exciting, unique, and invaluable field. ■

**BOOK REVIEW | BRAD JONES**

## The Life of Cheese, *Heather Paxson*

*Berkeley: University of California Press.*  
2013. 303 pp.

Bringing together insights drawn from nearly a decade of ethnographic research, Heather Paxson's *The Life of Cheese* offers much to populate the theoretical landscape of artisanal cheese production in America. Noting a "renaissance" of artisanal cheese and initially inspired by a simple interest in where these peculiar cheeses were coming from, who was making them, and why, Paxson's research shows that cheese and cheesemaking in America in fact implicates political, cultural, social, psychological, economic, health, and other concerns into a complex layered bundle produced and packaged in the form of artisanal wheels and wedges. While contemporary research increasingly identifies the consumption of artisanal food as a powerful lens into interesting socio-cultural questions, Paxson suggests that the production of these artisanal foods is equally as evocative. Employing ethnographic data accrued from participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and sample surveys, Paxson proves that in crafting edible objects food producers are at the same time crafting communities, crafting moral meaning, and crafting selves. What makes an artisanal cheese good to eat, she finds, also makes it good to make (5).

In chapters 3 and 4, Paxson teases out the myriad influences motivating the production of artisanal cheese. A clear split emerges between those

becoming farmer-artisans, who are often times well educated and leaving professional careers, and those who have been long time fluid-milk producing farmers now hoping to capitalize on the possibility of adding value through the act of transubstantiation. The former are embedded in an American ideological trope she calls a "tradition of invention"—a pioneering narrative that recognizes artisans as discursively differentiating themselves not only from their European counterparts, but also from the continuously operating artisanal factories in America (99)—the latter often hoping to save family farms and continue the rural, manually-engaged, family-centered lifestyle they afford. While each brings with them varying amounts of economic and cultural capital, both are participating in "economies of sentiment." Economic activity after all is also social activity, and artisans are motivated by ethical, political, cultural and emotional factors as much as by the rationalized market. When these opposing sides of the same coin come into conflict, producers are forced to reconcile the often dissonant economic and moral pursuits of working towards a good living and working towards a good life.

Having established some of the context in which the socio-cultural economy of artisanal cheese is situated, Paxson proceeds to ask, what's so "artisanal" about artisanal cheese anyway? In an era when craft beer is commonplace and artisanal bread from Subway an obvious abomination, and given the fact that craft and artisanal are terms historically applied to utilitarian objects of domestic intent but rarely, if ever, to food, the question becomes especially salient. Chapter 5 attempts a working definition of artisanal cheese and tests its boundaries against disciplinary definitions derived from craft theory and Paxson's own ethnographic insights. She proceeds to show that art and science come together and sometimes compete to inscribe the concept of craft in practical (relationship with raw materials and technology, embodied skill, synesthetic and tacit knowledge) and also rhetorical ways (health, pleasure, connoisseurship, taste).

The relationship between nature and culture comes front and center in Chapters 2 and 6. Cheese is after all cultured nature, representing the influence of both microbial and human cultures, and it proves metonymically an insightful vehicle

for carrying implicit socio-cultural paradigms. Paxson explores what she calls the “ecologies of production” surrounding artisanal cheese showing that cheese is born from complex interactions between humans, animals, microbes, and the environment. She suggests that within this complex ecology cheese materializes from “an assemblage of organic, social, and symbolic forces put into productive play in the service of a post-pastoral form of life” (31). The “post-pastoral” represents a revised way of conceptualizing our relationship with nature, viewing it not through the romantic imagery associated with the purely pastoral, nor the conquering frame predicated by modernity. She argues that artisanal cheesemakers collaborate with animal and environmental “others” in the pursuit of better cheese and better cheesemaking. Moreover, she shows that a form of “microbiopolitics” is implicated in public health concerns over how to regulate and monitor raw milk cheese. Healthy cheese is shown to be a divisive question depending on which lens frames its quality. For producers and many consumers alike, what makes an artisanal cheese good to make also makes it good (healthy) to eat. But “good” cheese is never intrinsically so.

Although Paxson teases out myriad disciplinary themes, her research is nevertheless buttressed by anthropological training and respectively her primary questions focus on “discerning and interpreting the cultural meanings that both motivate and are conveyed by the quotidian aspects of peoples life” (x) and “how social change manifests not only materially but in how people think and feel about what they do” (12). Paxson shows that cheese offers a particularly insightful lens and the depth to which she conducted her research leaves one to wonder if there is indeed anything left to be said on the subject at all. Nevertheless, questions remain. Does the artisanal mode of production have any real chance of persistence in an increasingly globalized, industrialized, modernized world economy? How might we continue to triangulate the definition of culinary craftsmanship within evolving matrices of production and the market? How will the revival of interest in fermented foods more generally clash with regulatory standards designed for an industrial rather than artisanal

scale? What will these debates tell us about the socio-political framing of the microbial “other?” *The Life of Cheese* answers many questions and proposes as many more. ■