

The Life of Cheese

Peter Lovis stands in the middle of his shop, illuminated by the rays of long overdue morning sun, hands tucked into the deep pockets of his tan trousers. His graying hair has retreated from the top of his head, and the bald spot that remains now reflects the light above his head. Wearing a blue sweater that hides a white and blue-checkered shirt, Peter is mingling with one of the many visitors of the Concord Cheese shop. The customer, coffee in hand, has forgotten the need to hurry back to work and discusses the results of the latest primaries; spilling out his frustration, surprise, excitement, and predictions for the next elections. Peter's head nods enthusiastically, face relaxed, eyes looking encouragingly at the customer. When the speaker has said something that intrigues Peter, the eyebrows climb up his forehead, his brown, filled with alacrity, eyes seem to bulge out just a little more, and his right hand, which has all the while been juggling change in his pocket, rushes out, and eagerly enters the conversation. The arm circles around Peter, making larger loops during particularly vehement phrases, and more timid gestures during the less impassioned portion of the comment. At the end of his statement, the hand returns to its original position, as Peter leans back slightly and chuckles. The customer looks at his watch, suddenly realizing how much time has actually passed. Raising his eyebrows apologetically, the customer tries to find a way to end the conversation, but Peter has already realized exactly what the customer means. Raising his right hand in an 'I totally understand' manner, Peter gives the customer a brown paper bag. "Thanks Tom," Peter calls out to the leaving customer, "Sorry for talking your ear off!" Tom turns his head and waves goodbye, and both end the conversation with a smile.

After a light-hearted sigh, Peter takes a white apron off a hook, and leisurely puts it on, leaning his head to one side and letting his eyes wonder around his cheerfully humming store. His knowing fingers quickly tie the apron in a bow on the back. He stands in front of a refrigerator with glass doors, the centerpiece of the store behind which lie neatly wrapped circular, rectangular, or triangular pieces of cheese, separated according to their nationality. Some wrapped, and some still in small cartons from shipment, the pieces proudly sit next to their neat yellow labels (which conveniently display a flag based on the cheese's origin). On the wall to the left (covered by wooden

planks that give the store a cabin-in-the-woods type feeling), line up glass jars of French jam, of all different flavors, colors, and wrapping. Above him, on strings, hang miniature flags of England, France, Sweden, and Switzerland, along with little signs reading ‘The Cheese Shop.’ Shelves made up of wooden crates that perhaps once contained wine create rows and cozy corners that hide neat (looking almost home-made) packages of ‘La Perruche: Pure Cane Rough Cut Cubes’ and ‘Boston Harbor Tea’, packaged in tin cans that feel as though they really did arrive on a 17th century British ship. The whole place is surrounded by a mild smell of aging cheese and dry wood, only adding to its overall European feel. On the side of one particular shelf, that houses the ‘Grand Noir’ chocolates along with the ‘Tea Forte’ proudly hangs a laminated news paper article, titled: ‘Carving Out a Life in Cheese.’

Lovis himself started working with cheese at a young age. In high school, after deciding that football was no longer for him, Lovis began searching for an after-school job, and found one at the downtown cheese shop. ‘‘It was my first pay check job and I loved it,’’ Peter says grinning, as his eyes look into the distance, as though they are trying to see something too far in the past. Lovis went on to major in comparative communist studies, but always kept coming back to the cheese shop during vacation to help out. ‘‘I think it’s the thrill off selling that brought me back,’’ Lovis explains. ‘‘You know, if you can get people to try great cheese, and maybe buy a baguette, some olives, and some chocolate bars along the way, I think it’s a job well done.’’ His hands excitedly slide from one side of the table to another. Lovis continued working with cheese and other gourmet foods after college, when he moved to Washington DC, and took a job at a large gourmet supermarket. From there he drifted to the importing business, starting his own company with three other people, and importing and selling gourmet foods from Europe all across the country. When *that* company was sold, Lovis decided to work for a regional cheese distributor. ‘‘I kind of missed it,’’ says Peter, referring to the cheese industry, shrugging his shoulders. It was during the time Lovis spent working for the cheese distributor that he first stumbled across the Concord Cheese Shop, and started working there part-time, helping out whenever he could. When Peter heard that the owner of the Concord Cheese Shop was putting the shop up for sale, he decided he wanted take over the store. ‘‘So I rushed home to fill out the forms as quickly as I could, getting *two* speeding tickets along

the way!” Lovis hands, now completely back to their usual vivacious state, help him illustrate the story: imitating the motion of gripping the steering wheel. “I still can’t believe it, two in one night!” Lovis complains, clenching his fists, gritting his teeth a bit, and scrunching his nose in disappointment, but never for a second letting the smile disappear from his face. Now, nine years later, Peter stands behind the counter of the store he ended up buying, lined with wholesome chunks of cheese that you usually see drawn in an alphabet book illustration under C (or M for mouse). A bit below the counter stands an army of wheat crackers, packaged and ready to accommodate a soft slice of Brie, or the a piece of the crowd favorite: Crucollo.

With a few chatting breaks and a couple of visits from the regulars, the morning lethargically drifts into the afternoon. At three o’clock Peter once again stands ready at his workplace: knives clean, hands washed, wiped, and leaning on the counter. The Cheese Shop, like almost any other shop in Concord, comes most alive in the afternoon. Shoppers and curious travelers meandering through the center of town soon turn onto Walden St., and most of the time, somehow wind up in front of the Cheese Shop counter. One couple who had been wandering near the French Lessons store enters the shop with curiosity and eagerly approaches the refrigerator doors, excited to find a tasty treat. A bit intimidated by the amount of options, they glance hopefully at Peter, and slowly inch towards him. Peter, looking a bit tired, greets the newcomers with a welcoming nod before beginning:

“Hi, what can I get for you today?”

Peter already knows that the couple won’t have an answer, as he observes their lost look. His expression transforms into a serious one, with deep wrinkles no longer cheerfully fanning out from the corners of his laughing eyes. Business is no laughing matter, and thus his eyes are fixed on his work: pulling out some of the appetizing chunks next to him before he continues:

“Would you like something mild? strong? A younger or more aged cheese?”

As the couple answers the questions, Peter’s fingers get to work. A bit dry from excessive washing, they maneuver quickly over the saran wrap that covers the cheese—removing the plastic coating and carefully placing the piece of yellowy goodness on the counter.

“This one’s from the south of France,” Peter informs the customers, lovingly putting a piece of pale cheese on a cracker and pausing for a split second to marvel at his creation, like a painter looks at his masterpiece before reluctantly handing it into the hands of the buyer. The couple each takes a piece of cracker and cheese, and cautiously start chewing. Now comes the brief moment of silence, when the customers are chewing and carefully analyze the taste. For that split instant, the mingling stops, allowing the soothing yet until now muted sounds of a cheery sonata’s arpeggios to accompany the tasting process. Peter stands alert and tense, with hopeful eyes glancing at the expression of the chewers. Slowly, the two heads start uncertainly swaying to and fro until both realize that they’ve come to the same conclusion, and then, the motion shapes into a definite nod.

Peter slouches with relief, and his lips are once again in the usual smiling position. “It’s giving people a taste of something that they like that makes it so exciting. I love my job because of the people—watching each person find the cheese they like, trying something new, you know?”

With the approving nods of the couple, Peter’s tenseness melts away. The couple isn’t about to leave, and the thrill of doing business takes over. His arms move less matter-of-factly, no longer worried of making a mistake. “Could we try some of the spicy cheddar over there?” asks the woman of the duo, in a high pitched tone of voice. Peter agilely slices thin pieces of a more orange cheese, and with a big smile hand a piece to the couple, and well as politely asking the waiting customers if they would like a piece. When the type of cheese that will be bought has been decided, Peter carefully wraps the pieces of cheese with plastic wrap, making sure that all of the cheese is covered, before gently placing the purchases into the brown paper bag, and with an air of satisfaction presents it to the couple. As the couple confidently strides out of the store, brown bag safely tucked away in the woman’s purse, Peter’s eyes follow them out, and down the street, until they disappear from view. “This is about developing a culture of mutual respect,” he says. “About working and being with people you like and respect. And that’s the way it should be.”