

## Making New Yorkers Say Cheese, Smile or No

By ALEX WITCHEL JULY 26, 2011



Anne Saxelby of Saxelby Cheesemongers in the Essex Street Market. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

ANNE SAXELBY was having quite a day on the day I met with her this month. She was headed to Gracie Mansion for the city's Neighborhood Achievement Awards, where [Saxelby Cheesemongers](#), her five-year-old shop in the Essex Street Market, was named Manhattan's Small Business of the Year.

But first things first.

"I feel really bad," said a young woman, returning a large container of yogurt. "Never feel bad," Ms. Saxelby said easily, dipping her spoon into it. "Their stuff is not always consistent." She agreed the taste was off and swapped it for a new one. Then she turned to a customer eager for a ploughman's sandwich. "I've been thinking about it since I had one two weeks ago," she told Ms. Saxelby, who cut open a Sullivan Street ciabatta, slathered it with chutney and lined it with squares of [Shelburne Farms](#) Cheddar from Vermont. This is based on the British ploughman's lunch — [cheese](#), bread and chutney — served on a board. "It's more New York-friendly to have everything on a sandwich," Ms. Saxelby said.

For a native of Libertyville, Ill., Ms. Saxelby knows a lot about making New Yorkers happy. After graduating from New York University as a studio art major, she worked at Murray's Cheese and apprenticed on American and French farms as a cheesemaker. Since opening her business, she has become increasingly celebrated for her unusual and eclectic selection of American farmhouse cheeses; this year she expanded her inventory to include French cheeses. From a recently acquired cave in Brooklyn, she supplies her own tiny retail operation, along with 173 New York area restaurants, including Gramercy Tavern, Blue Hill at Stone Barns, Minetta Tavern and the Dutch.



In May, when Daniel Boulud opened Épicerie Boulud, his exquisitely curated grab-and-go across from Lincoln Center, he chose Ms. Saxelby to stock the fromagerie with a selection of 12 American and 12 French cheeses; they will change seasonally, four times a year.

“We could have done it ourselves, but I wanted the most beautiful, unique cheeses,” Mr. Boulud said. “Anne has a connection to rare farms, and most stores don’t take the pain to watch carefully to see the prime time for the cheese to be sold. I also wanted French cheeses, and she studied cheesemaking in France and knows it well.” He laughed, adding, “She’s very Frenchy.”

Perhaps she is when it comes to cheese, but Ms. Saxelby, 30, seems quintessentially Midwestern. She is 5-foot-10, taller in her clogs, with the lanky build of a lifelong runner. She has a bright, engaging manner, and when she smiles at customers who don’t smile back, she’s not in the least offended.

We sat at the far end of the market and split a ploughman’s sandwich for lunch. The cheddar was the perfect foil for the sweet, tart, spicy apple-raisin chutney, which she also sells.



A British ploughman's sandwich: cheese, bread and apple-chili chutney. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Although Ms. Saxelby’s first job was at 14, at an [ice cream](#) drive-in called, aptly enough, Dairy Dream, her fixation on cheese took hold years later while visiting a friend in Florence. “It was an open-air marketplace and the cheese and salami tasted a million times better than anything I’d had before,” she said.

Back in New York, she was working at a bakery on Chambers Street near a farmers’ market when a woman from the [Cato Corner Farm](#) stand came in. “She wanted a scone to go with her cheese for breakfast,” Ms. Saxelby recalled. “I thought that was weird. On my lunch break I went over and tried their cheeses. More than any other I’d had, they reminded me of Italy: rustic and homemade, with real depth. I became a regular customer and was dorky about it, keeping a notebook, writing down names. I did the same at [Murray’s](#) and DiPalo’s, trying to learn as much as I could.”

By the time she was a senior, she decided the art world wasn’t for her. “I had had internships at different galleries and museums and they were cold, hierarchical, pretentious places,” she said. “I didn’t fit in there.”

She spent six months at Cato Corner Farm in Connecticut learning to make cheese. “I was fascinated to start with milk in the morning and have a finished thing in the afternoon,” she said. “That clicked with the art part of my brain.”



She returned to Murray's for another year, where she said she ate her weight in cheese, tasting 20 to 40 each day. That is where she met Hervé Mons, a master affineur, the person who ripens the cheese once it is made. (He supplies her French cheeses now.) He arranged for her to work at the caves he owns outside of Lyon and with three families in the Loire Valley who make cheeses that he ages and sells. Her goal was to open her own store.

A friend suggested the Essex Street Market. "I shopped here in college," Ms. Saxelby said. "I loved the atmosphere, a collection of small businesses, all family owned." (She has been outspoken in her opposition to [the tentative plan by the city to move the market.](#))

Ms. Saxelby was 25 when she opened, with a loan from her parents, Pam, a preschool teacher, and Bill, president of a radiation detection company. "I felt like I was having a garage sale that first day," she recalled. "I pulled up the gate and hoped people would come." Nine months later Benoit Breal became her partner, and as her business prospered, so did her personal life; in February she is to marry Patrick Martins, the owner of [Heritage Foods, USA](#), a purveyor of meats and other products. He also owns [Heritage Radio Network](#), an Internet radio station in the backyard of Roberta's, the Italian restaurant in Brooklyn where Ms. Saxelby hosts a weekly show called Cutting the Curd.

When I told her that I had always been drawn to her name, which sounds like something out of Chaucer, she nodded. "There's actually a town in England called Saxelby that I visited with my family," she said. "It was literally one street with six houses — and a Stilton factory! When I saw that, I felt so vindicated. I knew I had chosen the right profession."

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