

Cheeses of the Galilee

An ancient land is home to modern delights

BY LISÉ STERN

ALL PHOTOS BY LISÉ STERN



I want to live on a goat farm in the hills of the Galilee. And eat the local cheese for the rest of my days. The Galilee is in northern Israel. It's a favorite tourist destination because of its beautiful lakes, streams, mountains, vistas and, of course, its history. The area is home to the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, the Mount of Beatitudes, the ancient cities of Safed — pronounced tsfat in Hebrew — Tiberias and Nazareth, the Golan Heights and the magnificent Hulah Valley, which is both breadbasket and stopover for huge flocks of migrating birds. The Galilee is so breathtaking that it's been nicknamed both the Israeli Tuscany and the Israeli Provence.



The first time I had Israeli goat cheese was back in 1986 when I was traveling through the Galilee. Some friends recommended I go to "the goat cheese restaurant" — no formal name, just the goat cheese restaurant. It was nighttime and I was supposed to look for a sign that said *ezzim* — Hebrew for goats. Amazingly, since the handmade sign



consisted of brown paint on a brown background, I found it. The “restaurant” was small — tiny actually — with a cement floor and just a few tables and chairs. A server brought me a gnarled olivewood board laden with about a dozen goat cheeses of different ages and textures. Back then, I had no idea you could make Brie and Cheddar from goat’s milk — the meal was an epiphany. It included a small bowl of whole vegetables and a paring knife — make your own salad — plus a soft, spreadable yogurt cheese called Labaneh, homemade rolls, and a carafe of wine. I was enchanted.

Fast forward to autumn 2012. The restaurant now has a name, Ein Camonim. The sign is only moderately better — large, discernible letters painted on the side of a tractor. The restaurant has expanded a bit but is still quite rustic. There are tables inside and out and a pair of peacocks struts through the yard at lunchtime. Instead of a bowl of veggies and a knife, my meal includes a smorgasbord of prepared salads: roasted peppers, hummus, multicolored cabbage, carrots with honey. I’m glad to see I

still get a small bowl of Labaneh, but now it’s drizzled with homemade olive oil pressed from fruit of the trees that dot the property. The cheeseboard is made up of cheeses made from the milk of the 600 goats that call the farm home. In addition to Camembert, Muenster, Tomme and Kashkaval, it includes lightly aged Chevriel wrapped in grape leave; dry textured Emmentaler with nutty Swiss notes; dry, mild Italian-style that gets a kick from added black pepper; and an extremely strong and very gamey aged Gouda that I can’t stop nibbling in between sips of red wine. The meal ends with fresh fruit and a bowl of goat’s milk ice cream. Even though I’m full to bursting, I visit the retail shop where all of the nearly 30 varieties of the farm’s cheeses are available.

Not far from Ein Camonim, just outside the small picturesque town of Rosh Pina, is Mizpe Hayamim — an unusual combination of hotel, spa and organic farm. To reach the four-story building nestled into the hillside, I drive along a road lined with carob and pomegranate trees that make the place feel magical. Mizpe Hayamim is

a luxury resort, complete with indoor swimming pool, hot tub and elaborate spa, yet the atmosphere is laid back and unpretentious. It’s not a place you’d expect to be making incredible cheeses from its own organic goat, sheep, and cow milk, but your expectations would be wrong.

The rooms, which range from standards with cozy balconies to expansive suites with verandas and sweeping views, come with breakfast and dinner — which is when I get to try those cheeses. These meals are essentially vegetarian buffets but some fish is available. Much of the food is grown on site, and I can choose from more than two dozen salads, soups, hot entrées, homemade breads, and desserts. The hotel also has an à la carte restaurant with meat and poultry dishes.

After breakfast, I go on a tour of the property, which started life in 1968 with just 12 rooms. It was bought in 1983 by current owner Sammy Chazan, who turned it into a luxurious destination and added the organic farm.

The milk from the property’s cows, goats and sheep is used to make some 30 different dairy products served at breakfast and dinner. The cheeses

and other site-made products are available for sale in the



retail shop. The Labaneh for sale in the shop is formed into round balls and covered with rich green olive oil. One of the surprises is the cottage cheese — rich, creamy and far more decadent than most cottage cheese found in the US.

Israeli cottage cheese is characterized by small curds suspended in thick whey, making it spreadable and appropriate for everything from salads to sandwiches. It may just be the national comfort food. So popular is cottage cheese in Israel that a price hike in 2011 sparked a national boycott often referred to as the cottage cheese rebellion.

into the city

With its importance to the West's three great monotheistic religions, Jerusalem is the most famous holy city in Israel. But in the northern Galilee sits a second city holy to Jews — the ancient city of Tsfat or, in English, Safed. The birthplace of Kabbalah — Jewish mysticism — Tsfat has become more widely known in recent years because of celebrity interest in the ancient mystical teachings. Set high in the hills, the Old City is characterized by blue doors — Kabbalah says blue is the color of heaven — and pale gold stone buildings seemingly piled one on the other. Two of Israel's oldest

cheesemaking families are located here.

Visitors to Hameiri Dairy get more than a taste of cheese when they take the 45-minute tour — they get the history of a family that can trace its roots in Israel back more than 170 years. In fact the dairy's six-generations-old facility is a tourist destination. The sign carved into the stone wall outside the dairy declares it the first cheesemaking dairy in Israel, founded by Meir Hameiri, who came here from Persia in 1840. Each successive generation added on to the original structure, carving rooms into the hillside. The dairy even has its own cistern, a room of wall-to-wall water fed by an underground spring and used to cool its pasteurized sheep's milk.

Hameiri has long made two kinds of sheep's milk cheeses. Brinza is a white cheese, brined for a year. It looks similar to a block of Feta. Brinza is almost spreadable while being slightly crumbly and has a wonderful tangy flavor that's mildly salty. I purchased some for friends but ended up eating most of it myself.

Tsfatit, which the family claims to have originated, is Hameiri's other cheese. Although Tsfatit is now made all over Israel, their version is unique. It's a semi-hard fresh sheep's milk cheese; the curds are packed into a straw basket to drain, giving the surface a distinctive basket-weave pattern and resulting in a drier texture than other Tsfatits. The company recently introduced Havarti and Gouda to its lineup.

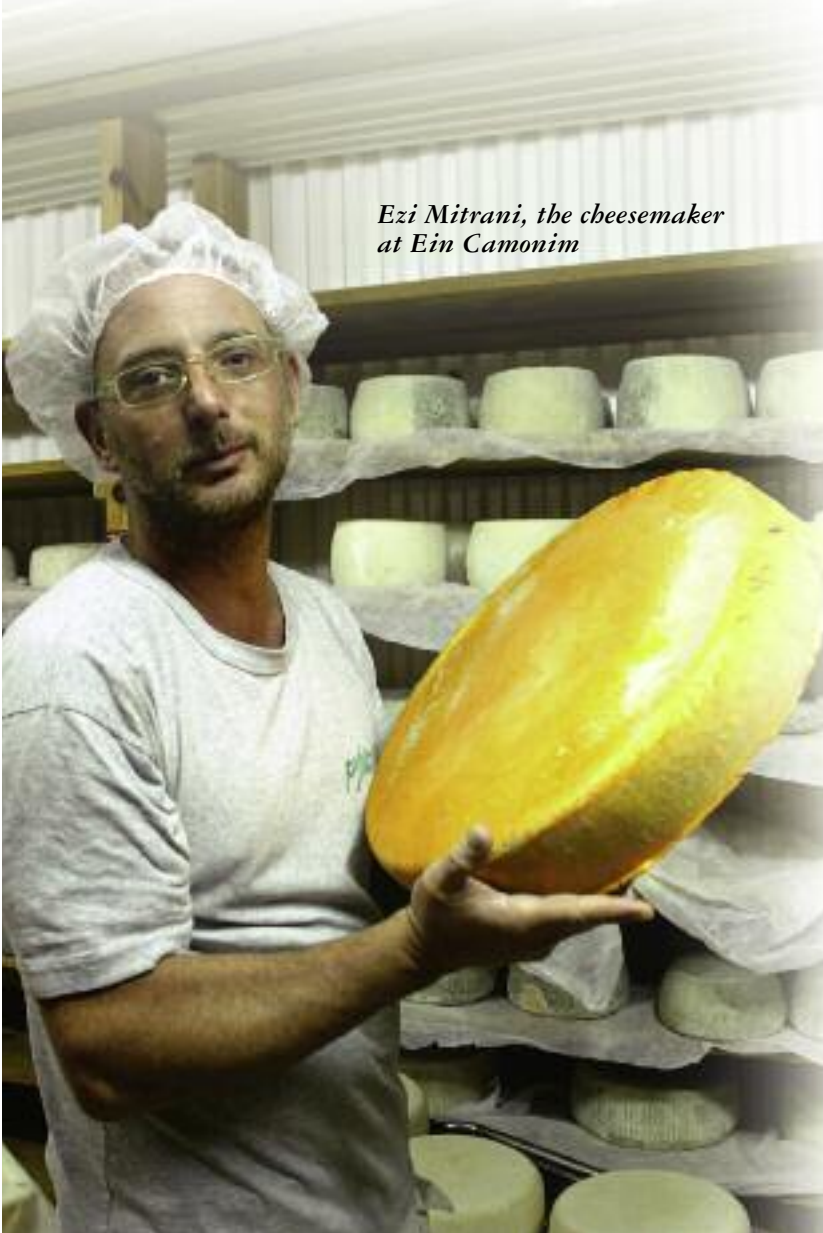
The other cheesemaking facility in Safed is Kadosh Cheese Tsfat. To get there, I have to follow the winding, narrow pedestrian streets of the synagogue neighborhood of the Old City. About a dozen cheeses are on display on a wide countertop at one end of the room, along with trays holding large blocks of halvah, a sweet, fudge-like candy made from tahini sesame paste. People wander in and out, eager to purchase cheese before dark.

The Kadosh brothers, who own the facility, dispute the Hameiri claim to be the oldest cheesemaker in Tsfat, saying their family has been making cheese from goat and sheep milk for seven generations. They claim their ancestor, Shlomo Kadosh, came to Tsfat from Morocco in 1800 at the age of 12, but they admit there was a brief period when the family stopped making cheeses, so they haven't been making cheese continuously since the early 1800s.

Kadosh makes about ten kinds of cheese, both fresh and aged. There are large wheels of pale yellow Kashkaval; salty, white Bulgarit (Bulgarian in English, although this is a cheese of Israeli creation); a firm, white goat cheese with a Merlot rubbed rind; and Camembert. And salty, firm Tsfatit with the characteristic basket weave — a shelf in the room is lined with draining baskets. Kadosh makes both a soft and a hard Tsfatit cheese

leaving the city

In the middle of the rocky hills near the town of Yodfat, south of Tiberias, sits a farm/restaurant operation called Goats with the Wind. Its Hebrew name is Chalav Im Haruach, a play on the Hebrew for Gone with the Wind. *Chalaf* means gone and *chalav* means milk. Since the pun doesn't translate very well, the English name is Goats with the Wind.

A photograph of Ezi Mitrani, a cheesemaker, in a white t-shirt and hairnet, holding a large, round, yellow cheese wheel. He is standing in a cheese-making facility with shelves of other cheese wheels in the background.

*Ezi Mitrani, the cheesemaker
at Ein Camonim*

The reservation-only restaurant offers a set price for an all-you-can-eat meal based on its cheeses. Since it's located on a nameless dirt road inside a gate you must open by hand, it doesn't lend itself to walk-ins.

The kitchen is literally an open kitchen — there's no wall separating it from the dining areas, and what walls there are are made of small stacked stones; it's an indoor/outdoor space. The dining "rooms" are scattered about the property. A volunteer leads me to a wooden platform with a view of Nazareth in the distance. A light iron fence creates the defined space, and shade comes from a bamboo thatched roof. The wooden floor is lined with woven rugs, and the low, square table is covered with embroidered swatches of cloth. My seat is a pair of cushions. The table is set for one with a wooden plate and a fork and knife wrapped in a paper napkin and tied with raffia and a sprig of rosemary. A waiter brings an aqua glass pitcher filled with water and lemon slices.

The cheese arrives in courses. There's locally made walnut bread with a small terracotta bowl of Labaneh garnished with bright green olive oil and a scattering of thyme. A thin rectangle of firm, sweet, light and creamy Ricotta comes on a slab. It's served within 24 hours of being made and is accompanied by red wine made by the owners' son. Another course is Ricotta smoked with carob leaves to preserve it

One of the signature cheeses is Isabella, a log served through various stages of aging. The first slice of Isabella comes warm, fried in a cast-iron pan. Later, a board comes out with three versions — young, which is slightly firm and mild; medium, where the outside edges become Brie-like; and aged, which is firm and crumbly.

All the cheeses are made from the milk of the goats that roam the hills during the day and gather in a shed at the end of the day to rest. Owners Daliah and Amnon (who prefer not to share their last name) split the milk with the kids. In large commercial operations, kids are taken away from the mother after a few

days, but they're weaned naturally here. "We decided we want to share the milk with the kids," Daliah says. "We take half, and they take half. They make more milk when they're nursing. The kids are so different when they're taken away from their mothers right away. Ours are heartier, more independent."

Most of the cheese is sold at the farm. "At the beginning we tried to go to markets," says Amnon. "Then we recognized that people need to be at the source of the cheese, to get to know it. We are a small country — it's hard to be anonymous. To keep the atmosphere of the place, we cannot get here millions of people — we are not McDonald's. We try not to have a sign. We want people to come. We try to raise goats in their way, to have a connection with the area." CC



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