

## 50th and France says 'cheese'

By Mike Schoemer - Sun Newspapers

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Ken Liss was not driving one day when the idea popped into his head that he should open a cheese shop. In fact, he said he never thought his passion for cheese would lead anywhere.

Yet, here he is, working the counter at his own Premier Cheese Market, 5013 France Ave. S., in the 50th and France area of Edina.

"I guess that's just not the way it worked for me," Liss said. "Some people, that's how it goes. This was something that took a while to develop."

Liss' story goes much deeper than an idea that sprung into his head or was written down on a paper napkin.

A former Navy reservist, he studied anthropology and archeology after discovering he wasn't cut out to be an engineer. He wound up studying and working at the University of Minnesota, which brought him to the current leg of his journey.

"I always thought I would be a scholar," he said.

It was while serving his wife's friends one evening that the idea of culinary school pushed Liss' love of food into something beyond a hobby.

"I served dinner for about five or six of her friends, and they were ecstatic," he recalled. "That was Nov. 2, 2004, my wife's birthday. By Nov. 10, I was enrolled in culinary school."

Liss, who thought he could be a teacher or a cook after his time in the Navy, was on his way to fulfilling that dream, he said.

Well, sort of.

Studying at the Artisan School in New York City, he discovered two things.

One, his strengths were "in the front of the house, not the back." And two, he was "too old to work the line."

"It's a younger man's game now," he said of working as a restaurant chef. "Speed is everything."

However, he did latch onto something while at Artisan. His passion for cheese led him to the Artisanal Cheese Counter at the school's restaurant.

"I got to mingle with food critics and instructors," he said. "I learned so much working that counter. More than they would ever teach in a class."

He graduated, and returned to the Twin Cities still not sure what would happen next, though his head was full of ideas. He enjoyed the mixture of whiskey and cheese, something not really pushed by many food aficionados, but not totally an original idea. He thought of starting a bed and breakfast, but it wasn't an idea that bowled him over either.

He took a job working at Surdyks in Minneapolis, enhancing his retail experience. His time as a Navy recruiter also helped with sales.

It was there that he realized, "maybe I can do this on my own." In 2005, he left, and in April 2006, he found the site for his new Premier Cheese Market on France. He renovated an old plumbing store and the doors to the market opened this past fall.

"It's everything we could have hoped for," Liss said. "The neighborhood has been great, and it's really nice community. I kind of wish my dad could have been here to see it. He would have gotten such a kick out of it."

Now that he's arrived to what he hopes is his final destination, the lifetime scholar is using his new business to



Ken Liss and Rob Christensen work the counter at the Premier Cheese Market, 5013 France Ave. S., Edina. (Mike Schoemer  
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continue learning.

Through his suppliers he's found items such as all-natural olive oil processed by hand in California, grape juices created by grape growers in wine countries across the globe, and much more. He doesn't have a wine license.

"It's much easier to get a license to sell cheese," he said.

His shop features cheese from all over the world. Some, such as the cheddar, comes from nearby Wisconsin. Others are imported from as far away as Australia, Switzerland and New Zealand.

The store is creating a niche of its own.

"It's not as big as Surdyk's or France 44," he said. "We don't have the staff or the space for that kind of selection. But we have tastes that are unique to the Twin Cities. And we have a staff that is as knowledgeable as anybody's."

That includes assistant cheesemonger Rob Christensen, who was the cheese department manager at Kowalski's Market in south Minneapolis.

"I give my co-workers a lot of responsibility," Liss said. "And a lot of the credit. They've worked very hard, and they took a risk trying this out with me."

Christensen said the idea of a standalone cheese shop appealed to him because of the time he could spend with customers.

"This is kind of the way it should be," he said. "A neighborhood store that can deliver the service people want."

Liss is busy teaming up with local businesses such as Cooks of Crocus Hill and wine shops to provide learning experiences for fellow cheese-lovers. So far, interest is high.

"There are a lot of 'ex-pats' here who are pretty well-versed in what role cheese plays," he said.

Cheese is to food like fine wine or whiskey is to drink, Liss said. It's a living, breathing thing. And it has to be enjoyed responsibly.

"You can get a combination [of cheese and wine, beer or whiskey] that you never want to taste again," he said. "Then you can get something that's so good you can't get enough of it. But, like everything, it's best in moderation."

In the end, he is still a student. The former officer is now a shop owner, as evidenced by the time he had to report to the store when the security alarm went off. Fortunately, someone had just entered a wrong code.

"It's all new," he said. "I'm still learning."

The Premier Cheese Market is online at [www.premiercheesemarket.com](http://www.premiercheesemarket.com). For more information, call 612-436-5590.