



BREAKING THE MOULD



The ancient art of cheesemaking is alive and well in the Swan Valley says

**Kami Ramini.** *Images by Crib Creative.*

It seems that it's not just the eating of delicious cheese that's a little moreish, but the making of it can get pretty addictive as well.

Tanya Baretto, founder of The Cheese Maker in Perth's Swan Valley, found exactly that in 2009 when one of her friend's brought a homemade camembert to a dinner party.

"It was so delicious and I just couldn't believe she'd made it at home," says Tanya. "So a few champagnes and a lot of cheese later,

we were planning to set up home cheese-making courses together."

And that was that.

Tanya and her then-business partner Pamela Sutton set up shop in Pamela's house, running cheese-making courses for friends. The entirely self-taught pair of cheese aficionados soon built a name for themselves and spent three years running courses in various venues around Perth, teaching the art of home-style cheese-making, including



that life-changing camembert, as well as a range of yoghurt products, fetta, mozzarella, farmhouse cheese and even halloumi.

In 2012, when Pamela decided to return to her job as a marine biologist, Tanya moved the school to newly-opened The Cheese Barrel, nestled amongst the vineyards of Olive Farm Wines in the Swan Valley; and she hasn't looked back since.

"It's a perfect place to run the courses because it makes for a really great day out," says Tanya.

"With home cheese making, there is often a bit of downtime while you're waiting for the cheese to do its thing, and what better place to

**CURDS AND WHEY**  
Left, Tanya Baretto, founder of The Cheese Maker, teaches all-comers how to make cheese at her HQ in Swan Valley.



stop for breaks than this beautiful terrace, with a board of exceptional international cheeses to nibble on, or popping over to the cellar door for a wine tasting. It's pretty special."

I didn't take much convincing. So two weeks after my first meeting with Tanya, I was off to the Swan Valley to try my hand at the full-day Classic Delights course, which promised to teach me how to make fetta, ricotta, yoghurt, yoghurt cheese (labneh), and sour cream. All in one day? It was intimidating and tempting in equal measures at this stage.

"It's home cheese making and that's a big difference from the commercial practice," says Tanya.

"There's some theory and a few rules, but really it's practice makes perfect so it's something anyone can master."

Our instructor for the day, Joanne Costelli (actually Doctor Joanne Costelli – her background is in microbiology and biochemistry), started her cheese-making life at one of the Cheese Maker classes back in 2011, and quickly caught the cheese-making bug thanks to Tanya's ongoing support of her "graduates".

Joanne confirms anyone can make cheese at home, following a few simple steps and with the right equipment.

"After your course, you're not just left on your own," she explains to our class of 11, admittedly all looking a little flustered by the syringes and thermometers on the bench tops.

"On the back of your handouts you'll find Tanya's mobile number, we call it the 'Cheese Rescue Service'."

she smiles. “You can call any time to ask any questions you may have and Tanya will talk you through it – I know I did, and she always had the answers.”

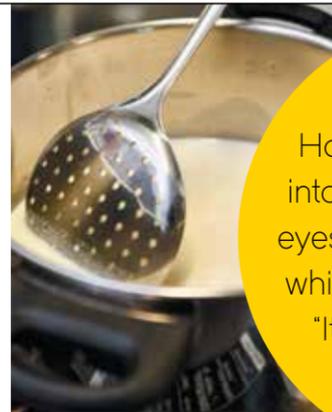
Our handout also includes the five recipes we will be making, as well as details of the process of cheese-making and what words like ‘pasteurisation’, ‘homogenised’, and ‘starter culture’ refer to, and what differences they will make to our cheese.

Simply put? To make cheese we will be separating curds (solids) from whey (liquids) in the milk and then draining those curds to make cheese. How much liquid we remove and how long we drain it for will dictate the essential characteristics of the different products. The starter cultures are good bacteria which bring body and flavour to the cheese and assist in the solidifying (or coagulation) process.

So it’s time to get started and fetta is first on the list, as it takes the most time. We divide up into three groups, each with our own station complete with everything we need to make our cheese – and it’s quite a list. A gas burner, large saucepan, slotted spoon, a few sterilised syringes and measuring cups, cooled boiled water, a thermometer, timer and a couple of bottles and sachets containing enzymes necessary to coagulate and flavour the milk. There’s also our incubated culture starter, already creamy and set, which Joanne made up for us two nights ago.

“Remember, we’re home cheese-makers,” says Joanne as we turn to our benches with a little trepidation, “it doesn’t need to be an exact science, so just follow the steps and you’ll make delicious cheese.”

And we did. Milk, cream, calcium chloride, OK. Heat then transfer. Now add the starter, dash of lipase powder (there is a spoon for measuring a dash!), then the rennet and stir. Yes, we are making cheese and our little group of four is starting to look quite happy with itself. After a minute of carefully stirring in



Hot milk literally turned into ricotta in front of our eyes as Joanne poured in white vinegar and stirred. “It’s magic,” she says.



the rennet, it’s time to wrap up our cheese and leave it to set for 60-90 minutes.

“Nighty-night,” says one of the guys in my group as he closes the Styrofoam container, and we head out to the sunlit terrace for homemade yoghurt and orange cake (courtesy of Joanne) and a barista-made coffee.

Back in the classroom, our fetta curds setting in their boxes, it’s time to learn about yoghurt. First thing is to taste the difference. There’s natural yoghurt, probiotic yoghurt, a blend of the two, sour cream, and then the yoghurt cheese (labneh), served plain, rolled in dukkah, and in a chilli oil marinade. It’s fresh, tangy, creamy, beautifully set, and what’s better than anything? It’s pure. No added naughties. Just milk, plus starter culture, incubated overnight, equals yoghurt. Amazing, really.

Next, we’re back to our fetta and it’s time to “check for a clean break”. Which means making a tiny incision in the curds to check if the whey is ‘clean’. If it’s cloudy, the proteins haven’t fully separated yet and it needs to rest a little longer. If it’s clean, like ours, it’s time to cut 1cm cubes into the curd and then start turning.

“There are moments when being exact is important and this is one of them,” says Joanne. “The size of the cubes will determine the texture of your fetta, so I’ve brought rulers. You wouldn’t believe the variety of 1cm we see.”

And that’s the hard part done.

ANCIENT ART  
The joy of making cheese means that Tanya’s students continue to make it at home, once they’ve learned the basic skills.

After a five-minute rest, we turn the curds carefully the first time, using a slotted spoon to break up the cubes, and then repeat the process twice over the course of two hours, a little more vigorously each time.

The break in between was a perfect opportunity for lunch; an extensive and delicious international cheese board, fresh meats, and a glass of chilled Olive Farm Wines Verdelho.

“Unlike yoghurt or ricotta, fetta making does take time,” says Tanya over lunch, “but you don’t have to stand over it or anything so it can definitely fit into your day.”

We all toast to that.

By the last part of the afternoon, everyone in the class is visibly confident in their cheese-making skills. We’re marvelling in the simplicity of doing very little as our curds and whey get on with the job for us, separating and setting, the curds getting firmer with each turn.

Sour cream and ricotta are next on the list and are yet more examples of incredibly simple recipes with truly delicious results. Hot milk literally turned into ricotta in front of our

eyes as Joanne poured in white vinegar and stirred. “It’s magic,” she says. And tasting it minutes later, it really was.

Back to the fetta and it’s time to spoon the curds into our hoops (containers to drain the curds). Then we’re nearly on the home straight, so it’s time to decide on flavours. More tastings – chilli, garlic and herb, pepper, or plain – mix in those dried aromatics if we want to and we’re pretty much done.

Our homework will be to finish off the fetta, you see, as it takes days to complete.

“We’ll give you all your block of fetta to take home. You’ll need to turn it a few more times in its hoop today, then leave it to drain overnight, tomorrow you leave it to air dry and then finally soak it in brine for 24 hours. That’s what makes it ‘fetta’. After that, it’ll be ready to eat.”

As I write, my perfect little block of creamy white fetta is air-drying on my kitchen bench. Tonight I’ll soak it in brine and then marinade it in thyme, lemon zest, peppercorns and extra virgin olive oil, with just a little macadamia oil so it won’t set solid in the fridge.

I also brought the whey home with me and have already made ricotta from it, which we sprinkled over pasta (also boiled in the whey) with pesto for dinner last night.

I’m amazed at how simple and wholesome home cheese-making is, how nothing need go to waste, and how little effort it takes to make truly delicious cheese.

Yes, I’ll be making more of it. With my newly purchased Classic Delights Ultimate Kit in tow, I feel like the home cheese-making bug may have bitten me too. **MQ**



## THE CHEESE MAKER

Courses held at **The Cheese Barrel**, 920 Great Northern Highway, Millendon WA 6056.

Home cheese-making courses start from \$197 per person. Cheese-making kits and equipment are available on sale after the course or can be ordered through the website.

**For class times and bookings:**  
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