Andrea Cudin

Lira Rossa Creamery - Moulton, TX

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Evan Stern: So, today is Tuesday, April 29th, it is 1:36 p.m. and we are recording at the Lira Rossa Creamery in Moulton, Texas. Now, for the record, could you please tell us your name and occupation?

Andrea Cudin: Andrea Cudin, and I'm the owner and cheese maker of Lira Rossa.

Evan Stern: Well, thank you so much for speaking with us today. Now, no matter whom I'm speaking with, I always like to begin by asking if you could describe for us your childhood home and tell us about where you grew up.

Andrea Cudin: Well, I grew up in the very northeastern corner of Italy, in a town called Pordenone. If I need to look at it retrospectively, we grew up in a very peaceful, protected environment compared to what the world has become now.

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It was really a-- there was, I mean, it was a town the size of around 50,000 people. The economy was good, and we were all around-- we grew up around the parish, and the school was next to the parish, so we were going to school, then we were going to church. I was in the Boy Scouts, so my life, really, until I was a teenager, revolved around the church. There was this group of people, everybody knew each other. We don't necessarily like each other, but still we understood us as a community.

Evan Stern: I know that Italy boasts one of the proudest culinary traditions in the world, and there's also just incredible regional diversity when you look at the landscape of Italy. The food

that you get in Tuscany is very different than what you might find in Liguria or Puglia. So, what can you tell us about the food of Friuli, where you're from?

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Andrea Cudin: Well, Friuli is not necessarily the first food destination in Italy [laughter]. Then, even though it's a cheese powerhouse, that's something I discovered relatively late in life. But think about the diversity you just mentioned, I mean, my father that was born and grew up in Friuli, the first time he had pizza, he was 19 and he was at the university in Padova. There was no pizza in the '60s in Italy, in northeastern Italy, of course. So, I mean, what we understand here is Italian cuisine is very much a product of this new society, the industrial, television society. In fact, like you said, there are very many regional diversity. Even 50 years ago, those diversities were very much remarkable, like, not as much as now.

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I mean, now, it's like pizza everywhere, pizza from Naples, and everything gets standardized. They want the carbonara, and they want the carbonara made with guanciale, all these new rules, how things have to be, but probably without realizing that this is-- they think it's authentic, but instead it's the product of an industrial society that tends to standardize.

Evan Stern: But you said that Friuli is a cheese powerhouse. What can you tell us-- and cheese is a famous staple of the Italian table, I mean, what can you tell us about that?

Andrea Cudin: Well, Friuli was known for having like every-- even the smallest town in Friuli, the one with 1,000 people, had at least one creamery, if not two. There were, until, I mean, the first decades after World War II, there were hundreds of creameries in a region that has a population of Austin, even smaller.

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I mean, it's around a million people right now. Before that, every family also used to make cheese at home. Everybody had a cow or two to tend to the fields, and those cows also produced milk, and the milk was used, the milk in excess, to make cheese. I mean, every family-- we all grew up eating cheese in Friuli. The per capita production of cheese is one of the highest in Italy. I think it used to be the highest. Now, I think it's the second-highest after the area of Parmigiano Reggiano.

Evan Stern: I know that Italians have a very different relationship with food than Americans. What can you tell us about that?

Andrea Cudin: Well, I'm married to an American woman [laughter], and so we ended up finding out those diversities in detail.

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I see that Americans tend to see the food like you put gasoline in the car. That's something you need to keep going. Then, if you wanna keep going in a fancy way, then you go to the fancy restaurant. But it's hard to tell where it comes from, this tradition in Italy 'cause, in fact, there are these countries, especially in the Mediterranean area, where the culture of food had developed so much, and people even-- even the people that we associate with a lack of culture, taste, and style, when it's about food in Italy, are extremely evolved. I remember very well, I took once a class of bread making. There was next to me a guy that, with my very snob attitude, I would have defined with, like, disrespectful words.

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Our task was to make a small pizza, and I remember the pizza he made was like art, like, food art. It was incredibly beautiful. I was staring at this man that looked like a caveman, and what he did was something that is really hard to find here in the best bakery of Houston. So, that was something, the first time I really realized there is something in Italy that is hard to pinpoint, though, where it comes from. I mean, like, I don't know. I can see what you say, but where it comes from, it's hard to tell.

Evan Stern: But you were speaking about the different countries that maybe border Italy, you know, France, Germany, Switzerland, even you go further north in Europe, Denmark.

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There are many incredible cheese traditions all over the world, but what would you say are the defining characteristics of Italian cheese making?

Andrea Cudin: Well, Italian cheese making compared to the regions you just mentioned is defined by the fact that it's a warmer climate [laughter]. So, there is, like, it's a little different the way it's made. But, also, Italy is stretched very long between north and south. So, in the north, you have those Alpine-style cheeses, like we are. We are like a creamery that makes cheese typical from a northern part of Italy, so it's also very different from what you can find in Switzerland, in Germany, in Austria. But then, the further down you go, it changes, the type of animals, 'cause starting like in Tuscany, you have a lot of sheep and goat.

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Until you get to the area around Naples, where they have the stretched curd cheese, which is the mozzarella is something that it's a world apart for, I mean, I don't know anything that compares to that kind of cheese. While you can compare the cheese we make, there are very strong

similarities with cheeses from the regions we mentioned. You can find in France also cheeses that are Alpine-style cheeses that are not really radically different than what we make. But then when you go to the mozzarella area, that product there is like something that doesn't compare to anything I know. Even though we make mozzarella here too, the mozzarella we make does not compare in any way with the mozzarella you find in those regions. There is a tradition, a way to make it, and knowledge that is passed through generations that just does not repeat, like, mechanically. You see people trying, even in the United States, trying to make mozzarella. You can find this in mozzarella, but I've never found the real mozzarella, including ours.

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Evan Stern: Speaking of the United States, you must tell us, how did you meet your wife, and end up marrying an American, and ending up here?

Andrea Cudin: Well, we met in Venice. I was living in Venice back then. I had this beautiful apartment that I couldn't afford with a beautiful view on the Basilica of San Marco. Then we were two friends, we decided to rent the third room, and that's a story that has been going on. So, I went to this language school, and I said, "I wanna rent a room, but I don't want Americans and I don't want girls." 'Cause Americans were well known for being animals and behave really-- and so they said, "Okay, don't worry, we'll do whatever you want." Boom, one week later, they showed up with these beautiful blue eyes, blonde hair, American girl. Then 10 years later, we got married.

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But, I must say, I had no idea about the United States. I grew up playing-- I had my Fort Alamo, and I was playing with cowboys and Indians, but that's pretty much, I mean, I read a lot about the

Old West, the passage, northwest passage. But I had no idea about the United, the contemporary United States.

Evan Stern: So, you get here to Texas. What are your first impressions? What did you think when you first got here? Did you go through culture shock?

Andrea Cudin: Yeah, it was a huge cultural shock. You need to think, I mean, I have a background in philosophy, in German philosophy. I was like, I always thought, I always was between Northeast Italy and Germany. I spent a lot of time in Germany. I worked and studied in Germany. So, I mean, my world was pretty small, I mean, between this Central Europe area, within these boundaries.

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I mean, even Southern Italy or Rome have never been an area for me, like, of interest. Then I ended up in this part of the world, and it's been really difficult. The first years have been really difficult. Even now, I can say that I don't really feel I fit in here. I have created my ways, my tiny ways that, I mean, I have my family; I have the work; I don't have much of a social life. But I moved here when I was 40. At 40, your personality is already fully developed, and it's really hard to tweak it further. I mean, people are different, and there are a lot of things I really like about the people here. But, on a very strictly personal level, it's really hard to overcome the differences.

Evan Stern: I'm sure. What year did you move here? When did you move here?

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Andrea Cudin: June 4th, 2012.

Evan Stern: June 4th, 2012, so it's been 13 years. Obviously, there's a lot of shock when you get here. I will ask, what frustrates you most about American food and the practices we have surrounding it in this country?

Andrea Cudin: Well, I live in Victoria, that's the number one thing that, I mean, that makes a big difference 'cause food in Victoria is bad. So, in the town where I live, it's impossible to go out and have good food. Then you think, okay, then you have home cooking. But then when you have family reunions, everybody brings food that they bought that was prepared. They go to Sam's Club and buy a casserole of macaroni and cheese. Those are things that I tried, but really I cannot think so.

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This country is also, I mean, one of the cultural shocks is these huge differences there are, like, I mean, there are people here eating food that is unthinkable for me, and other people that are doing extraordinary things. Then you go to Houston, you go to Urban Harvest, and you see these people that are really trying to do things in a different way, and they do it in incredible ways. So, there are like, I mean, how low and how high America can go is, like, that's the real cultural shock for me.

Evan Stern: What did you think when you first went to an American supermarket, and saw and tried the cheese that they had there?

Andrea Cudin: Well, that's why I'm making cheese 'cause, before that, I wasn't making cheese [laughter]. I mean, there was the cheese that you can find in a supermarket here is, like, is the product of an industry, like, a dairy industry. The word "industry" in this case means that the product needs to be standardized.

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When you try to standardize the process, of course, you need to leave a lot of nuances behind. That goes also, I mean, a lot of quality gets lost in the process.

Evan Stern: So, you didn't come from-- you hadn't studied cheese making before. But you start studying it as a hobby. Can you tell me about that process and evolution?

Andrea Cudin: Well, given my background, I started the way I knew first. When I decided I wanted to make cheese, I started reading, reading, reading about cheese. So, I spent at least a year just reading everything I could about homemaking, making cheese at home. Then I found the milk from this dairy. So, they were delivering in Victoria raw milk, and I started buying buckets of milk, and play at home with some cheese making, trial and error, a lot of error.

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Then, at a certain point, I went back to Italy, and I went-- I took a month off from work, and I went to work in a creamery in Friuli. All of a sudden, all the knowledge started to make sense. Finally, all the knowledge I had accumulated started, I mean, I started seeing the actual process of making and, with the knowledge I had in the background, things started to come together.

Evan Stern: But at what point do you decide, "Okay, I am going to start a creamery, and I am going to make a career of this"? Can you tell us about that process?

Andrea Cudin: Well, I was working for my father-in-law back then, who has a construction business, and I was very unhappy. Then my wife was the office manager of that business.

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She fired me, and said, "Now you're starting a cheese business." [Laughter] So, that's how it happened. 'Cause, I mean, I'm European; I'm not American. I don't jump into things. We Europeans, we don't, like, we think ten times and then one time more before doing things. So, we decided to try it, and it's been-- it took about a year, a year and a half to get all the things. We've been incredibly lucky to meet the people of this dairy, 'cause they were looking to someone who wanted to rent a space and use their milk. So, also, we were lucky enough to start this in the right moment.

Evan Stern: I'd love it if you could tell me a little bit about the farm where we are, these people, and the history of this place where we are right now.

Andrea Cudin: So, actually, I hope there's gonna be Chad coming by, the guy of the farm, and maybe talk to you about it. But, anyway, this is a four-generation farm.

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They have Czech heritage. They got to a point in which they were really struggling to stay in business, and they did not know what to do. They decided to try to radically change the business model, and get into the raw milk business. We showed up at that time, so when they were trying to offer-- instead of selling their entire production of milk to a co-op, with a price that for them wasn't covering the cost, they decided to sell milk at a different price, offering a different quality. So, they sell raw milk to private people, and they sell milk to small cheese companies. Then, on top of it, they built a small space to rent to someone willing to make cheese and use just their milk.

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So, they took a risk, these people, 'cause they met me, they did not know me, and they trusted me. We didn't sign any contract. They took a loan to build. I'm sure it was a stretch back then for them, the loan they took to build this extra space for us. We took a risk trusting them too, 'cause we bought all the equipment, put it in here, trusting the fact that they were gonna stick to the agreement we had, a handshake agreement. It's not always been easy, but we've been here now nine years. We can say it's a success story for both of us. Success means we get along well, and the business is working well. Their business has developed quite substantially now. We are at a good point right now.

Evan Stern: Well, that's wonderful to hear. I'm wondering, too, if you can tell me about the cows that are raised here, the milk that you get from these cows, and how that's maybe similar or different from Italy.

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Andrea Cudin: Well, they have Jersey cows, and they're always on a pasture. So, it's very different to the milk we have in my region in Italy. So, the Jersey cows have a higher fat content. The fact that they're always outside, I mean, I wouldn't say it's like those cows that are brought up in the mountains in summer in the Alps but, for sure, it's an extremely high-quality milk that we have here. So, when I bring back cheese to my region, and my friend cheese makers try it, there's always this, "Wow," because the milk we have here is great. You can see it out here, I mean, they have happy cows, they don't have very many, they have about 400, and they're treated very well. So, you have happy cows living free, eating well, and Jerseys, you get great milk.

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If you have great milk, most probably you're gonna get good cheese.

Evan Stern: I think you spoke earlier about the climate in Italy is warmer than the climate of France or Germany or some of the other countries that I mentioned. But Texas is substantially hotter than Friuli, and you've told me that you're making Alpine-style cheese. Can you tell me about the challenges that you face in working in this climate?

Andrea Cudin: Well, yes, that's really the point, the one you're mentioning here, because it feels like a little bit of a stretch. I mean, what we are doing, it does not reflect directly the environment in which we are. 'Cause in such a hot environment, if you think of Mexican cheese, I mean, are just cheese that is meant to be consumed pretty quickly because of the hot weather. Yes, we have had technical challenges, a lot of them.

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The first years, it's like, if you think in our cheese room, we need to-- where the cheese ages, we need to recreate the environment of a temperate mountain climate. So, it's something artificial, we can say that. Of course, also, on the scale we are operating, so without the ability to make big investments, there is also constantly the challenge of keeping everything working well, fixing. It's been the challenge number one, I would say, yes, the biggest problem we have faced throughout these years. We are beginning to feel comfortable about it, but that's the one thing we always need to keep an eye on. Something can always happen. With this weather, if something bad happens that you lose electricity, within a day, you have lost everything around here.

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Evan Stern: Reflecting on your time here, obviously, starting a business from scratch, there are going to be difficulties, challenges, mistakes. What's the greatest challenge that you can remember, looking back on all of the time you've had here?

Andrea Cudin: Well, frankly, the greatest is to learn how to interact with American customers. It's been really, for me, really getting in tune with the way people think, what they accept, and what is considered unacceptable here. I would say that if I have to look back and see what are the situations where I have felt the most that there were setbacks, that they have been really on a personal level.

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I mean, I wouldn't go any further on that [laughter].

Evan Stern: Well, I wouldn't ask you to, either. We were talking about the challenges of making Alpine-style cheese. What cheeses are you making here and producing right now?

Andrea Cudin: Well, we started as a creamery from Friuli, so the cheese we make is like a Montasio style. It's called Latteria. So, in Friuli, there are these two main cheeses, Latteria and Montasio. They are very similar, the typical big wheels of an Alpine-style cheese. Besides that, there is a Caciotta. Caciotta is a cheese that is made everywhere in Italy, but in every place it's made in a different way. So, we started out-- Caciotta is a younger cheese. So, while the Latteria is an Alpine-style cheese that can age even years, we usually age it between three and six months.

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The Caciotta is something younger and fresh that can be sold after three weeks. You can see here it's already good to be sold. It's an easier cheese, like, it's a snack cheese, and it can be mixed with herbs. Of course, after nine years here, I can tell you that it does not resemble anymore the Caciotta that is made in Friuli, I mean, this is the Caciotta from Moulton, Texas.

Evan Stern: [Laughter]

Andrea Cudin: I mean, we slowly developed, and it's still in development, this cheese.

Evan Stern: But I think that's the beauty of food is that food should be authentic and organic to the region in which it was born. Towards that matter, I know you do offer smoked cheeses, and you smoke some of them with Texas pecans, if I'm not mistaken. Could you tell me about how you arrived at choosing to produce cheese in that manner?

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Andrea Cudin: This comes from a tradition in Friuli. In the mountains, when they used to have the cows up in the mountains, and make cheese, and then with the way the ricotta needs to be eaten very quickly, so the way to preserve it, they used to smoke it. We decided to smoke ricotta too here, but then we did it our own way. It is completely different. It does not resemble in any way the way it's made in Friuli. So, we make a drier ricotta, and then the decision to make it with-- to smoke it with pecan, originally in Italy it's smoked with beechwood. I remember, it was a conversation we had here with the farmers here at this farm that I was thinking, I was trying to get an idea on how to smoke it, and what to use. One of the guys said, "We just had to take down a pecan tree," and so I could get some chips and try it out.

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That's what we did, and it worked out fine.

Evan Stern: How do you like that, I mean, how would you describe the flavor that you get by doing it that way?

Andrea Cudin: Well, you have the sweetness inside of the ricotta, and outside you have this smoky pecan flavor. So, the result has been really surprisingly good.

Evan Stern: Have you brought that back to the people in Friuli, to share with them?

Andrea Cudin: Yeah, but what they say is, "This is not Ricotta Affumicata," because, again, it's not what they know. That's the problem in this. In Europe, everybody knows exactly how things are supposed to be. Here, you have a freedom that is not available. Even a few times, they published my story in the newspaper in Friuli twice, at least twice, and more-- anyway.

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When you see the posts on Facebook, they are always commenting, "This is not the way it's done. We do it differently." I mean, again, this is one of the good things about America, the fact that here you can really take your chances.

Evan Stern: You were talking about Latteria cheese earlier, and I believe that that's cheese that requires aging. I'd love it if you could just talk us through the process of everything that goes into making a wheel of Latteria cheese.

Andrea Cudin: So, Emilio that you just met, also, he helps us making cheese, and he also milks the cows at night. So, at night, around 2 a.m., if-- 'cause the milk parlor is next to our cheese making room, so it's really five feet away. There is a pipe coming straight into the creamery.

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So, at night, he comes in, he opens the pipe, puts the extension into the vat, and milks straight into the vat, the milk. So, the milk sits about four to five hours in the vat. Then, when I come in the morning, I start warming up the milk. We get to the degree-- they say the temperature of the

milk should be the temperature the milk comes out of the cows, which is about around 94, 95 degrees Fahrenheit. At that temperature then we have the cultures. 'Cause, originally, the milk was started-- they just let it sit, and it started fermenting by itself, with the natural bacteria present in the milk and in the air. Now we, of course, have to have a more controlled environment, so we had starter cultures or we develop, sometimes, we develop ourselves the starter cultures by fermenting our own milk here, in a more controlled way.

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So, that's called natural cheese making. So, we do both ways. So, we had the cultures, and let it sit for a while so those bacteria develop in the milk. Then we had the rennet. The rennet is this enzyme that coagulates the milk, coagulates one protein of the milk, and so makes the milk look like a pudding. Then we cut it. I mean, the Latteria is cut pretty small, like, we would say between a grain of corn up to a grain of rice. It depends how much you wanna heat it. The reason why you cut it is you wanna expel away, you wanna reduce the amount of moisture that is present in the curd.

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So, Alpine-style cheeses are defined by the fact that they tend to have a small amount of moisture left, and that allows the preservation development for a longer period of time. So, we cut it and then we cook it, so we warm up again the curd in the whey, 'cause when you cut it, the curd separates from the whey, which is this greenish liquid that is still very rich in proteins and minerals. So, we cook it or technically semi-cook it. We get up to 109 degrees Fahrenheit, more or less. It depends by the day. Sometimes I wanna do more; sometimes I wanna do less. It depends how I want the cheese in the end to turn out.

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After cooking the cheese, we remove the curd, and put it in the press, so in cheese cloth, in those round molds that we brought from Italy, and start pressing the cheese. The pressing part is necessary for removing whey, shape, give shape to the cheese and, in the meanwhile, let still the fermentation process continue and develop. While that happens, we make ricotta. So, ricotta is an Italian word that means recooked, and that means that we recook the whey. So, we bring it up to, the way we warm it up, up to 180 degrees Fahrenheit, almost boiling temperature, and then acidify it very quickly. Then you can do it in many different ways. You can use lactic acid, you can use citric acid or combination of salts, I mean, there are many different ways to do it.

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We use citric acid. At that point, you see those small flakes coming up. While we're doing this, this produces steam and heat, and this steam and heat are what is necessary for the cheese that is in the press to keep developing, 'cause the cheese, the development is made by bacteria that works by temperature. So, at that temperature, they keep making the curd develop, till you reach a target pH that for us is about 5.2, 5.1. At that point, again, since those bacteria work with temperature, in order to make them stop, we lower the temperature. So, we take, we move the cheese in the cooler till it cools down. Then, the day after, we remove it from the mold, to which we have added also the stamp of the date we made the cheese, and then it goes in the brine.

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The brine is a solution of water and salt that we had here for, I guess, our brine is like now eight years old. So, we just keep adding salt and, every now and then, we just take it out, boil it, and so clean it up and sanitize and put it back in, but we don't discard it. Then the brine is also one of

the things that every creamery has, their own brine. The brine develops its own environment. Also, I mean, that's something that is just ours here; we have the brine from Moulton. After that, the cheese starts the aging process.

Evan Stern: How long is the aging process? How long do you age the cheese?

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Andrea Cudin: Well, by law, raw milk cheese needs to sit at least 60 days. We prefer to wait at least three months before cutting into the cheese. During this time, we keep flipping the molds, the cheese, the wheels of cheese, 'cause, by gravity, the moisture would move. I mean, the cheese wouldn't develop in a uniform way if you didn't do that. So, the more moisture there is in the cheese, so the younger the cheese is, the more often we flip the cheese. So, the first, the Latteria, we flip it every day. Then the very old cheese, we flip it once a month. But, let's say, so we offer it at three months, and then at six months, and then we wait a year. So, we have three different versions, the Latteria Fresco, three months, Mezzano, which means the medium one, around six months, and the Vecchio, the old one, after a year.

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Evan Stern: So, given the aging process, how challenging is it for you to keep up with the inventory so you're able to keep it moving and on the shelves?

Andrea Cudin: Well, that's what we Italians are great at, improvising [laughter], 'cause I tried several times to come up with a plan, but I always failed. So, until now, every time we needed a wheel of a specific age, we found it in the aging room.

Evan Stern: [Laughter]

Andrea Cudin: But, like, Italians, Americans also, in the recipe, Americans need to follow exactly what's said, like, one tablespoon of salt; take the tablespoon; fill it with salt. Italians, boom, they just throw a pinch of salt, and that's it. So, somehow, the same model, the same modus operandi, it all works for the way we deal with the aging room. Until now, it worked; I cannot promise for the future.

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Evan Stern: Speaking of sales, obviously, you do sell at Urban Harvest, but where all do you sell around here? Where can people find your goods?

Andrea Cudin: Well, our business is mostly right now in Austin. So, we invest a lot of time in Houston, but Houston, beside these small groups of people that are really trying, like we were saying, to do things differently, that city is pretty resistant [laughter] to the local. While in Austin, we have found a much more open customer base, wider and more open to our product.

Evan Stern: When did you begin your relationship with Urban Harvest? How did that get started, and how has it been for you?

Andrea Cudin: It's been a strange story because, again, with my background in philosophy, then I contacted back then a professor of philosophy at Rice University that was working on the things I used to work on.

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He was extremely kind and friendly, and invited me to visit him. We were drinking coffee, we chatted, and he told me that his wife's brother was like the president of Urban Harvest, and I wanted to meet him and have a chat. That's how I've heard about Urban Harvest. The guy gave

me the tour, they showed me that they had a public garden, it was very-- everything. That's how I discovered what was happening in Houston, I had no idea about. Then, when we tried to enter the farmers market, then this guy told me, helped me figure out the process. So, then I met Tyler, and I had to go there and present our products, and describe what we were doing.

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They came here. I mean, it was a pretty thorough process that I really, really enjoyed. We were brand new back then. I remember it was like September, October of 2016. For us, it's been-- for Urban Harvest, it's been the way we really discovered that this world was receptive for what we were doing. So, we owe a whole lot to Urban Harvest. Urban Harvest is what allowed us to really to stay in business and to grow.

Evan Stern: I know it happens every Saturday. How is the cheese transported from here to there, and how does it get to Austin from here? How does all of that work?

Andrea Cudin: For a very long time, every Friday, I packed my stuff in the car. I went to Houston, delivered to a couple of restaurants. Slept in the hotel. Wake up at 5 a.m. and then go to the market.

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But, again, the market is pretty much the only place where I developed a social life. So, now I don't do the market anymore, and so my social life has retreated again. But some of my good friends in the United States, most of my good friends are the social connection I created, even with the Italian community, it's happened through the farmers market to Urban Harvest. Again, I owe a whole lot to Urban Harvest, not just for the business, now that you make me think about it, but also for my social life. So, for a long time, I did that market, and then the business grew too

much for me to be able to do it. Now we have a guy doing it. In Austin, I don't go very often, almost never, we have distributors taking care of it.

Evan Stern: Say someone goes to your stall at Urban Harvest, I mean, we've talked about the ricotta, we've talked about the Latteria, say someone purchases some mozzarella at the stall at Urban Harvest, when was that mozzarella made?

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Andrea Cudin: Well, originally, we were making it on Friday afternoon, and sell it on Saturday morning. Then we have to move it to Thursday for logistical reasons. But, anyway, I guess, it's the freshest mozzarella you can find around here, anyway. Two days, for me, is already a stretch, but it's still very fresh.

Evan Stern: That's very different than what you'll find at Sam's Club, which is what we were just discussing. But are there any stories you can tell about lengths that people have gone to to get your cheese? Are there any interesting stories you can share about customers?

Andrea Cudin: Oh, well, yeah [laughter], there are a lot of interesting stories.

0:40:59

But, you know, something I never seen before that I saw at Urban Harvest, there was a young woman writing poetry on demand. I think it's not so uncommon around here, but I had never seen it before. I remember I really, really liked that. There are people sometimes that they show up where they have come, like, they've been driving for an hour to come to the market to get the cheese. That's something unheard of in Italy. That's something you don't do. We have customers, like, we have developed a customer relationship with people that really have lasted throughout

almost a decade. Now, I remember the first day we met these people that just moved in from New York that, at that point, had two kids. Now they have four kids. They never missed a week for the mozzarella, I mean, the weeks they missed is because they were traveling.

0:42:00

Otherwise, they always, always, always came to our booth and get the mozzarella. Yeah, I mean, that create connections.

Evan Stern: Are there any stories you can share maybe about how your cheese has changed the palates and perspectives of the people around here?

Andrea Cudin: [Laughter] Well, first, there has been also for them a cultural shock because they never heard before about Latteria or Caciotta. So, at first, people were really kinda suspicious, 'cause there was another cheese maker back then at the market selling cheddar. So, between cheddar and Latteria, at first, "Okay, let me have a try." Then they tried the Latteria once and twice, and people were mostly-- they knew mozzarella, so they see mozzarella, "Oh, I like mozzarella. Let me buy mozzarella."

0:43:00

So, it's been a slow process that people learn how to enjoy other cheeses. In fact, now it's funny that there is a group of people that are just addicted to the Latteria cheese, and then they get curious, and they do their own research, and they find out what is the tradition behind it, and it creates expectations then. Then, "Yeah, you have the Latteria, but you have only the three months. I want the six months," and then they get picky [laughter]. So, first, you think you're educating people, and then you realize you're creating monsters [laughter] 'cause then it needs to be exactly what they want.

Evan Stern: [Laughter] I should ask you now, just moving in a different direction, you told me that you have studied philosophy. How does philosophy and cheese making intersect?

0:44:00

Andrea Cudin: Well, the tradition I was studying, the continental tradition, there was always this distrust of technology and, like, this idea that the direction that the world is going to is, like, means also losing a lot of our roots and the concept of what human beings really come from and therefore what they are. I mean, let's say, for example, this idea that is really a few miles from here that people can just move to another planet and start doing other things, like, I mean, this idea that there is not a connection between humans and the world around us.

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So, this distrust has an effect, so the ancient traditions, artisan traditions are a way to keep people alert to where we come from, to our history, to our tradition, I mean, tradition is what has been taken with on your journey. So, somehow, you're, like, instead of with your words, with your facts, with your example, you're showing people the fact that human life is not just necessarily only rushing towards the future, disregarding everything that is behind you, it's like, I mean, it sounds something really like, I mean, I wouldn't take it too seriously.

0:45:56

I mean, I don't wanna carry the responsibility of that, but I must say that, somehow, we are old school, and old school in this case means like, look guys, just sometimes look also in the rearview mirror, not just staring full speed at what you have in front of you.

Evan Stern: I guess, some of that does touch on region, and I would ask, how would you describe this region and corner of Texas to someone who's never been here before?

Andrea Cudin: Very hot and very humid [laughter], and if you suffer allergies, stay away from here.

Evan Stern: [Laughter]

Andrea Cudin: But, on the other end, it's an incredibly rich area of history. Of course, saying it from a European perspective, it's a big stretch. But, anyway, here you had a population living since really ancient times, very different Indigenous tribes. Then, after that, you had this--

0:47:00

[Unrelated conversation]

Andrea Cudin: Sorry, like I was telling you, the temperature stops the process.

Evan Stern: Wow.

Andrea Cudin: So, this cheese needs to get cold as soon as possible.

Evan Stern: Okay, so you're moving it in there.

[Unrelated conversation]

0:48:00

[Unrelated conversation]

0:49:00

[Unrelated conversation]

0:50:00

[Unrelated conversation]

Evan Stern: I was asking about Texas and everything. If I were to travel back in time, decades ago, and tell you that, at this stage in your life, you would be working as a cheese maker but in a small town in Texas, what would you have thought? How would you have reacted?

0:51:00

Andrea Cudin: I would have not believed it, I mean, that this is so completely, I mean, this is the proof that you never know where life is gonna take you, because this is so completely different to everything I've done in my life before, to everything I have imagined in my life before. So, there was no way this could've happened if I had that control over my life, let's say, yeah, it's interesting.

Evan Stern: Reflecting on this journey, what is your proudest accomplishment?

Andrea Cudin: Besides quitting smoking [laughter], which is number one by far, I mean, this is it, I mean, it's like being able to-- what we have created here, I mean, and I say "we" because there's no way the accomplishment of one person. It's really astonishing.

0:51:58

If you look at it from a business point of view, this is nothing, I mean, it's not like-- but for where we come from, for the means we had available, this has been quite an accomplishment.

Evan Stern: What is home to you?

Andrea Cudin: This is a very good question, I mean, that's the question that is keeping me awake at night. If we didn't have [inaudible 0:52:30] in Texas [laughter] for a short time. Last week, last

weekend, we were at a wedding in the Hill Country. In the evening, when everybody was celebrating, I went for a walk in the woods. It was dark, it was beautiful, and I was looking at it, and I was thinking, I love it but this is not my place.

0:53:02

This is, like, I mean, being, walking at night in the woods is something I do where I grew up. I realized that as beautiful as it can be here, it's not by the fact that it's beautiful, then you belong. It's just so-- but it's hard to tell. I mean, really, after 13 years here, having a family, having a professional life that I very much enjoy, it's really, really hard to say. I have many friends that have moved from Italy to here, so it's an interesting process what happens in people. We get kinda displaced.

Evan Stern: But, I suppose, looking decades ahead into the future, after you've left this Earth, say someone hears about this man Andrea, and they want to go somewhere where they can feel and commune with your spirit. Where should they go? Where should they look for you?

0:54:01

Andrea Cudin: I think that people, the older they get, the more they realize that they are what they were when they were young. There was a certain point during their youth when your dreams, when your personality developed that is the imprint of what you are. So, after that, you can build a lot on top of that, but that young person with-- like Leonard Cohen said once, with a suitcase full of dreams, that's the one that if you want to understand the old person, you have to go back to the child. The child, I mean, it can be a person between, I mean, even a child can be also a person in their 20s, let's say. But, in my case, I would say, you have to go back there.

0:55:00

Most probably, most of the people or old people is like that.

Evan Stern: Do you have anything else that you would like to share?

Andrea Cudin: I don't know, I mean, I like your questions.

Evan Stern: Well, thank you so much, Andrea. It's been a great pleasure meeting and speaking with you, and thank you for all that you do.

Andrea Cudin: Yeah. Thank you for taking the time and the interest.

Evan Stern: *Prego*.

Andrea Cudin: [Laughter]

[End]