



» All blues: molds and yeasts inside sandstone caves give Faribault cheeses their pungent flavors.

making blue cheese, but the cold made my teeth chatter minutes after entering the bright, sterile-smelling, Gothic-arched halls lined with pallets of cheese wheels.

The caves have sheltered more than cheese over the years. In the 1850s, they hosted a brewery. After Prohibition, they were home to various businesses, including a furniture maker. In 1936, a Kraft food scientist observed the ability of St. Peter sandstone to absorb ammonia—the cheese smells fresher and tastes cleaner—and opened Treasure Cave, the first blue-cheese plant in the United States.

Treasure Cave closed in 1993, and a few years later Jirik and Randy Ochs, former employees, bought the site and formed the Faribault Dairy Company. Jirik and Ochs were later joined by Mike Gilbertson and introduced the first Amablu cheese in 2002.

Today, the company's 18 ½ employees—the half is 82-year-old part-timer Dorothy, a former Treasure Cave supervisor—produce nearly 1 million pounds of cheese a year. The Amablu (aged 75 days), Amablu Gorgonzola (aged 90 days), and St. Pete's Select (aged five-plus months) wheels, wedges, and crumbles have been awarded a Minnesota State Fair blue ribbon, plus honors from both U.S. and world cheese championships.

The Faribault cheeses have been catching on fast, with sales doubling each year. Lunds and Byerly's, Kowalski's, Cub Foods, SuperTarget, and Whole Foods, among others, carry them, and they're also available for purchase at www.faribaultdairy.com. They're served at the Depot in Faribault and a number of Twin Cities restaurants, including Muffuletta, the Oceanaire Seafood Room, and the Sample Room. Michael MacKay, the Sample Room's chef, says he uses Amablu and St. Pete's Select "because of its versatility and quality—I get compliments all the time."

As we ended our tour of the chilly grotto, Jirik offered me a sample of Amablu. I savored a bit and recalled poet Robert Southey's words: "Blue, darkly, deeply, beautifully blue." **MM**

Deep Blue

Spelunking in Faribault's cheese caves

BY LISA M. BOLT SIMONS

IN FARIBAULT, St. Pete's Select and Amablu cheeses—blue-veined beauties—are treated like treasure. Buried treasure, that is. They're cured and ripened some 100 feet underground, in a labyrinth of caves that lies partially under a campus of Shattuck-St. Mary's preparatory school.

Leaving behind my Batgirl mask and spelunking gear, I donned a white lab coat and followed Jeff Jirik, the president and cheese-maker of Faribault Dairy Company, into the belly of the bluff. First, though, we stepped onto a mat sodden with a liquid disinfectant to sterilize our shoes.

Jirik explained that blue cheese is a mold-treated cheese. The molds and yeasts in the cave are the product of decades of nurturing, and outsider bacteria would upset the microflora. "There's more to it than just a recipe," he says, of the cheese-making process. "It's working with the environment as well."

We strolled and turned...and turned... in the whitewashed maze the size of a football stadium. If Jirik hadn't turned on lights, I would've been hopelessly lost. Terrified, even. The 99 percent humidity and 53 degree temperature are ideal for

Photographs by **DAVID J. TURNER**