

Catholic TRANSCRIPT

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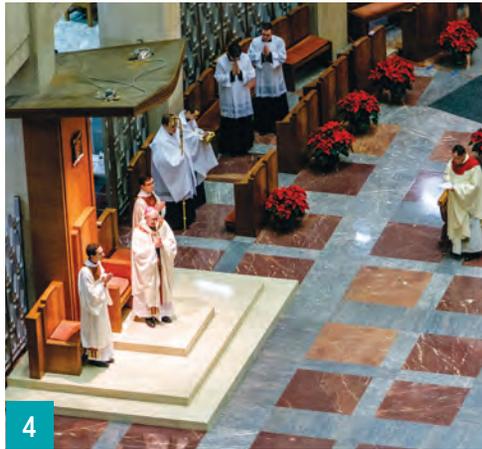
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COVER PHOTO BY
ROBERT FALCETTI





Mother Noëlla plies her talents from Bethlehem cheese cellar to monastery's internet presence

Meet

'The Cheese Nun'

Story by
MARY CHALUPSKY

Photography by
ROBERT FALCETTI

Mother Noëlla Marcellino is a scientist, a world-famous cheese maker and a Fulbright Scholar who also happens to be a cloistered Benedictine nun.

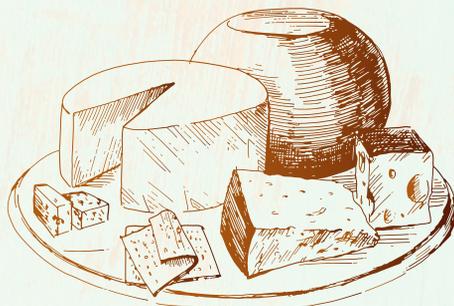
For her expertise and knowledge, she has been featured on “CBS Sunday Morning,” has had her journey unveiled on the PBS documentary “The Cheese Nun,” has championed sustainability on the Netflix series “Cooked” with foodie Michael Pollan and has been written about in *The New Yorker*.

None of this would have happened, she insists in a telephone interview from the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, without guidance by the hand of God from her early years of making cheese for her community of nuns in fulfillment of her vow of obedience. Divine providence also was present, she says, while she studied the biodiversity of cheese-ripening fungi for three years in France as a Fulbright Scholar, then as she became a regarded advocate of preserving the tradition and biodiversity of cheese. God still guides her now, she says, as she serves her community away from the cheese, as webmaster for the abbey.

“I was always a sort of geek, anyway,” she explains simply.

“I think what interests people is that I am a cheese maker and a Benedictine cheese maker; and then I became a scientist,” she says. The abbey is located on a working farm of 450 acres in Litchfield County, where the sisters manage pastures; harvest 6,000 to 8,000 hay bales a year to feed flocks and herds; process wood; and harvest and preserve fruits, vegetables and honey.

“I would not have become a cheese nun if I wasn’t part of the Benedictine community that gave me a chance to do things,” she says. “I like to cook, but I never dreamed of milking cows and making cheese.”





Mother Noëlla entered the abbey during the turbulent '70s at age 22 after dropping out of Sarah Lawrence College and spending a year at Boston University “at a time when many young people were lost,” she said. “I started becoming more involved with the abbey and disillusioned with college, and eventually entered.

“My life here was so much more meaningful than a degree, at that point,” she recalls.

“Basically from the time I entered, I worked with food in the kitchen. When we got our first cow, Sheba (in 1976), I fell in love with her, began milking and became a cheese maker.

“I was praying for someone to come and teach me how to make cheese,” she laughs, “and two days later, a woman from France showed up and gave me a recipe handed down for centuries in her family. It was for a fungal-ripened cheese made in the Auvergne region called Saint-Nectaire.”

Mother Noëlla says she slowly learned the technique of making the semisoft, washed-rind cheese; after two years of trial and error, she developed what became known as Bethlehem cheese, using a wooden paddle and barrel in the abbey’s cheese cellar. She made it primarily for the 37 nuns in her community and as many as 25 guests. If there was any extra, she was able to sell “every morsel” in the abbey cheese shop.

“It’s very labor intensive ... very hard on the body,” she said of the cheese-making process. She now supervises the younger nuns and interns in the cheese cellar.

She said the community decided in 1987 to send some of the nuns to college for the future of the farm.

Some studied animal reproductive physiology, or agronomy or plant science. Mother Noëlla decided to study nutrition; but switched to UConn’s Department of Molecular and Cell Biology to begin studying the microbiology of cheese ripening.

After earning her master’s of science degree, she spent four years in France, first on the Fulbright Scholarship and then on a three-year fellowship from the *Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique*, traveling to six regions of France to study the genetic and biochemical biodiversity of fungi on cheeses ripened in traditional caves where humidity, temperature, salinity, type of milk,

Mother Noëlla, originally Martha A. Marcellino, says her religious name is rooted in the words *diem natal*, which is ancient French Latin meaning day of birth. That became Noëlla in French, which is why the French call Christmas Noël, she says.

soil and other materials in the cave give cheese its flavor and consistency.

When she began making cheese in the '70s, Mother Noëlla notes, there were two cheese producers in Connecticut: Calabro and the abbey. Wayne Kasacek, a state Agriculture Department official who monitors this state’s cheese industry, told the *Hartford Courant* in 2014 that Connecticut’s artisanal cheese makers produce about 250,000 pounds per year. Companies like Calabro Cheese in East Haven and Luizzi Cheese in North Haven turn out approximately 2 million pounds of Italian-style cheese each year, according to Kasacek.

“Consumer tastes have changed dramatically,” she notes, citing increased travel, education, a desire to help the small farms, attention to local foods and the increase in farmers markets where many artisanal cheeses are sold.

Mother Noëlla “has almost single-handedly brought the world of science to artisanal cheeses,” says Dr. David Benson, her doctoral advisor at the University of Connecticut, who applauds her for her involvement in the dramatic growth in the U.S. artisanal cheese market — from 75 makers of the cheese produced by hand in small batches 20 years ago to hundreds today.

“She is invited to many cheese conferences,” he says, “and I think she has brought a scientific way of looking at cheese to those who want to make it but don’t understand the science of cheese microbiology.”

Mother Noëlla is typically unassuming about her contributions to cheese making. “It’s not because I’m some brilliant scientist,” she states. “I’m the grandmother of this

artisanal movement in America, blessed with an amazing advisor at UConn who thought outside of the box.”

For her work, Mother Noëlla was inducted into the *Grande Ordre Des Gourmandins and Gourmandines des Fromages d’Auvergne* in 2002; was honored in 2003 by the French food industry with its first French Food Spirit award for helping to promote an understanding of French cheeses and helping to preserve traditional ways of making them; and received the *Grand Prix de la Science de l’Alimentation* from the International Academy of Gastronomy in 2005.

She advises the U.S. cheese industry and is a speaker and judge at competitions.

Mother Noëlla points out that Benedictines learn to discover God in all areas of creation.

“For us, we find God through a very specific area that we call an elemental,” she notes. “For me, it happens to be cheese. For others it’s honey, candles, bees or music where you really see God in creation.”

She recalls the story of St. Benedict, who “saw the whole world in a ray of light before he died.”

“For us, it’s kind of ironic, but you can see the whole through a very specific entry point ... which is part of being a contemplative. When I look through a microscope, the world I see is incredible.” Even today, she marvels, “Each cheese is an ecosystem in itself.”

Today, in addition to its traditional Bethlehem cheese, the abbey also produces butter, cream, raw milk, a type of cheddar cheese, cottage cheese and yogurt for its community; while novices are experimenting with a Gouda and a Welsh Caerphilly-type cheese, and postulants are trying a camembert.

“We milk four cows from the Dutch Belts and Milking Shorthorn breeds, which are very good for cheese,” says Mother Noëlla. “Our milk is very clean, which is essential in cheese making for food safety,” she explains.



Over the years, the abbey has sold about two wheels/rounds of Bethlehem cheese a week when available “and it usually sells out in an hour,” says Mother Noëlla. “That’s why we say it’s available seasonally, in limited quantities, and tell people to call in advance. (It is sold in wedges at \$20 a pound.)



On Board!

HBF



James M. Loree

Welcoming James M. Loree

Archbishop Leonard P. Blair is pleased to announce the appointment of James M. Loree, Director and Regional Chair, The Hartford Bishops’ Foundation, Inc.

Mr. Loree serves as President and CEO at Stanley Black & Decker, Inc. He joined the company in 1999 as VP and CFO after 19 years with General Electric Company. He served for over five years as a director of Harsco Corporation, including four as Audit Committee Chair. He also serves as a Trustee of Union College, a director of Hartford Hospital and a director of the Jim and Rebecca Loree Foundation.

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PHOTO BY ROBERT FENTON HOUSER



“In our life, being so close to the earth as we are, we learn from creation and we learn about ourselves.”

— MOTHER NOËLLA MARCELLINO

“We’re not selling across the country; just in our shop,” she says. “But we continue to make just enough for our community. If we can produce two rounds a week, that’s all we do.”

“Cheese making is not easy; anything can go wrong because it’s alive,” she warns. “You can try to control the process, but you have to be patient; and you can’t be too proud.”

Mother Noëlla was born outside of Boston. Her brother Jocko is a founding member and drummer with the rock group “Sha Na Na.” She teaches singing and directs the oblate choir.

She is philosophical about the correlation between vocation and avocation.

“In our life, being so close to the earth as we are, we learn from creation and we learn about ourselves,” she says. “As a cheese maker and being someone who has spent so long in the cellar, I’ve pondered that cheese is a very smelly, musty-tasting decomposition, yet it’s delicious — not unlike the promise of tasting the resurrection.”

Mother Noëlla says people today are hungry for a connection between the meals they eat and the earth, organic foods, community and support for small farms.

“There’s a hunger for communion,” she says, the sort of communion she says she found for herself upon entering the abbey. †

This year, Mother Noëlla said cheddar and Bethlehem cheese will be available in the Jubilee Barn during the Christmas Sale that runs on Saturdays and Sundays beginning Nov. 25. Upcoming sale dates are Dec. 9-10 and Dec. 16-17.



On Board!



Joseph J. Savage

Welcoming Joseph J. Savage

Archbishop Leonard P. Blair is pleased to announce the appointment of Joseph J. Savage, Director, The Hartford Bishops’ Foundation, Inc.

Mr. Savage is retired executive Vice Chairman and head of Webster Private Bank of Webster Financial Corporation and Webster Bank. He joined Webster in April 2002 as executive vice president, commercial banking and was promoted to president of Webster Bank and elected to the board of directors of Webster Bank in January of 2014. He serves as a Director of Horizon Technology Finance Corporation, the Metro-Hartford Alliance and the Connecticut Business & Industry Association. He graduated with a BA from Manhattan College and an MBA at Seton Hall University.

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