

The New York Times

Dining Out

WEDNESDAY, MAY 9, 2001

It's New York, It's Cheese-Cart Gridlock

By RICK MARIN

WALK into Artisanal, Terrence Brennan's new restaurant, and the first thing that hits you is the smell.

In a good way. As if you'd died and gone to the big cheese cart in the sky. It's "Assertive, Nutty and Complex" to borrow some of the menu's lingo. "Soft, Smelly and Rich." An olfactory assault that, a few years ago, might have made you flee for any nearby rival. But not today. This is, after all, a cheese-themed restaurant. And after a few minutes, you don't even notice it anymore. You're part of it. The cult of cheese!

Artisanal is only the latest, and most over the top, example of New York's sudden mania for anything aged and moldy. As recently as five years ago, most restaurants — even traditional French ones — didn't have cheese courses at all. Real estate was too precious, the need to turn tables too great, to allow diners to sit another 45 minutes savoring their savory.

Now, it's hard to find a place that doesn't. From the mahogany and silver cart that rolls up at Alain Ducasse to the thick white plate crowded with hunks of Manchego and erhaki at small Upper West Side spots like Cooke's Corner, restaurants across the city are making a fuss over fine cheese. Diners are happy to drop another \$10 to \$20 to sample a pecorino or drunken goat. Calorie counters who skipped the cheese out of fatphobia or because they'd rather sin on dessert are suddenly willing to partake.

And restaurateurs, with their newly minted "fromagers," "cheese sommeliers" and "cave masters" (the vaguely kinky title for the curator of Artisanal's 188 varieties) are happy to oblige, outdoing each other with exotic finds and theatrical presentations.

"People are definitely getting more sophisticated about cheese," said Sabrina Jordan, who teaches "Cooking with Cheese" at the Peter Kump cooking school and previously ran the "cheese program" at Gramercy Tavern. People are better-traveled than they used to be, she said, and more sophisticated about food in general. "It's also an affordable luxury," she said, "something that's perceived as a decadent indulgence but is still not beyond most people's reach."

Peter Kump's New York Cooking School has 15 cheese classes on the roster this year, up from three last year. In a description of a

Continued on Page 6