

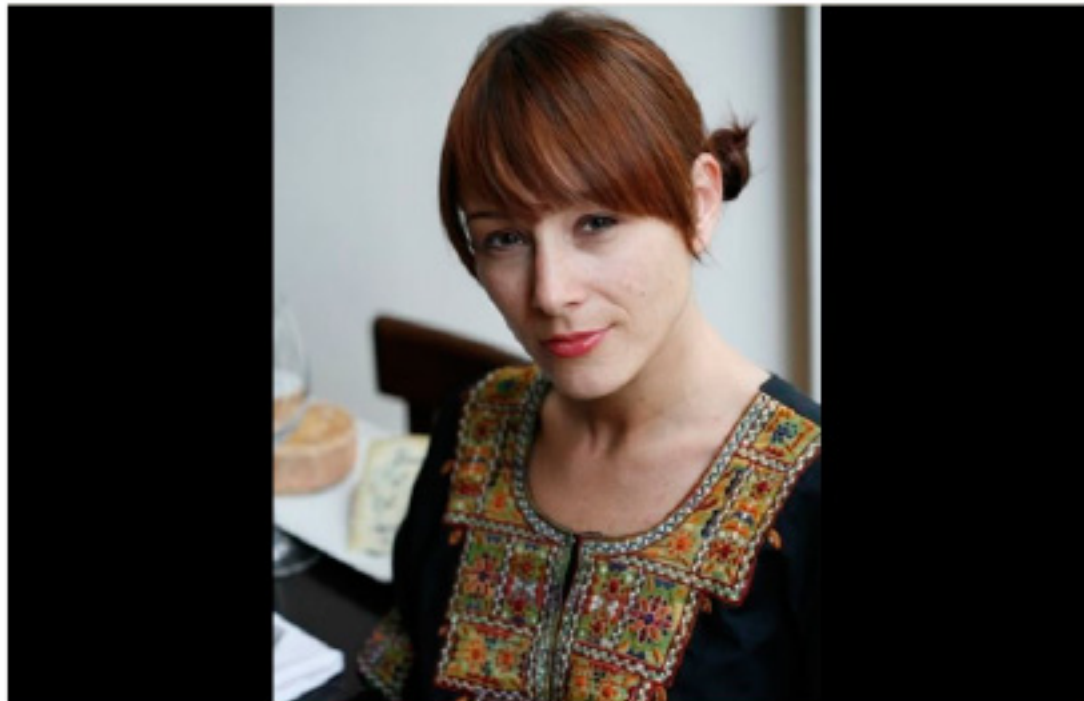
CHEESE RANK



Your go-to guide for all things cheese.

Q&A with Tia Keenan: Rock Star of the Cheese World

She's a one-woman cheese show who really can do it all



At first, Tia Keenan was the waiter who actually knew the cheese selection. With her ready knowledge, she soon became the waiter the chef would ask to take care of the cheese selection. Then, as a front-of-house manager, she was responsible for selecting, buying and maintaining the cheese selection. Next she was the Chef Fromager with something to say through her cheese selection, before naturally evolving into the cheese-focused Chef. Most recently, she's known as the cheese lady who knows about all kinds of food. She's also been called a cheese rock star which I think is more fitting – though given her skill set, she could pretty much be the whole band. Read on to find out how her obsession started, what she sees for the future of specialty cheeses and the cheese that's always in her refrigerator.

How did you come to appreciate cheese? Have you always loved cheese?

In my baby book, my mother reported that at one year old my favorite food was cheese. So yes, I've always loved it. As a kid my most requested meal was grilled cheese. My grandfather's version was my favorite: he'd cook [Monterey Jack](#) on Home Pride wheat bread open-faced in our toaster oven. Then he'd smush the bread together and cut it into fours horizontally. Never vertically – heaven forbid! I've created so many grilled cheeses in my career – some have won "best of" awards and that type of thing. They've been written about in *Food & Wine* and covered on the Food Network. But no grilled cheese I make could ever give me the pleasure of my grandfather's.

You've been able to make a career out of cheese – can you talk about the different types of roles you have/projects you're involved with?

I was always a restaurant-based fromager (and later, chef). Then I started to work on strategy – creating concepts, building brands. Sometimes involving cheese, sometimes more broadly food-based. I made a unique niche for myself because I could “be a creative”: brainstorm, blue-sky create, think in concepts and design, and then execute. I’m able to work from conception to fruition. It’s a rare skill set, apparently.

I often feel uncomfortable describing my skill set – I think sometimes it makes me sound like I don’t have a focus. I’m often skeptical of people who wear too many hats – I find myself thinking “yeah, but can you do *any* of these well?” But for better or worse, I can do a lot of things. So sometimes I’m a consulting chef. Sometimes I’m a brand strategist. Sometimes I’m a food-business development and growth consultant. Sometimes I’m a writer. Sometimes I’m a project manager. I’ve worked with brands like Disney and Coca Cola and I’ve worked with 25-seat shoestring budget restaurants.

You're also the voice of [Goat Cheeses of France](#), or more formally, the ambassador. How did you get that gig?

It’s funny, because there are only so many cheese gigs around and everyone in the business knows each other. One of my best friends is usually in competition with me for the same gigs. So I get interviewed for the ambassadorship and don’t get it. I tell myself, “oh, so and so probably got it”. So of course it turns out she got the ambassadorship, which was great because she’s amazing and so talented. Anyhow, when she moved out of town Goat Cheeses of France needed a new ambassador and I was lucky enough to score it the second time around. French goat cheese is so iconic, and really played a role in inspiring my generation of cheese professionals.

Sounds like a pretty impressive – not to mention coveted – job! What does it entail?

Part of my work has always been about cheese consciousness-raising, or shifting people’s perceptions about a cheese, or a way of eating cheese. I was excited to join the Goat Cheeses of France campaign because I thought I could bring a light-heartedness, a sort of American joie de vivre to a canon of food that is sometimes thought of (incorrectly) as so sophisticated it’s beyond reach of the average American.

[Goat cheese](#) events are always fun because you can really blow people’s minds with how many styles of goat cheese there are. So many Americans still think there’s just fresh goat cheese ([chèvre](#)). I love showing people something that’s new to them, and changing their perceptions about something they thought they already knew.”

What do you think the future holds for specialty cheese? Will it continue to grow?

I think specialty cheese and the specialty cheese market are two different things. I see the specialty cheese market growing but I see specialty cheese under attack. The U.S. is not a friendly place for small and medium-scale agricultural production, which isn’t good for specialty cheese. The government agencies that regulate our food supply are pretty much incapable of understanding food production outside of a large-scale industrial context. The EU has adjusted to the hostile environment in the U.S. by exporting cheeses that are sometimes modified versions of their European selves. Have a French [Camembert](#) in Paris and a French Camembert in America and the difference is obvious. The U.S. simply won’t allow these amazing, historic cheeses in the U.S. unscathed. It’s a complicated, fraught landscape.

What might that mean for consumers who previously wouldn't have been exposed to specialty cheeses?

My hope is always that as Americans eat more artisan cheese, they will be inspired to learn about and support agricultural producers – not the agribusiness jingoism that's passed for farming support in the past – I mean find a true connection to agriculture, to the people making and growing food. Listening to the growers and makers, instead of just following "cool" trends or the advertorial tropes of Big Food.

Are there any cool projects you're working on now?

My first book is coming out in 2016. It's a book about cheese plates published by Rizzoli. I have a degree in journalism and English; I always knew I'd be a writer. It'll be really nice to use my formal education after fifteen years of restaurant hustles in foul-mouthed Spanglish.

What are the cheeses in your fridge right now?

Since I'm writing my book my refrigerator is filled with all kinds of cheeses for my research. I probably have about ten artisan cheeses in my refrigerator at any given time because I'm in the middle of studying and writing about them. I also always have a good [Parmigiano Reggiano](#) (I prefer [Cravero](#)) for cooking and finishing dishes.



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By Layla Khoury-Hanold

Layla writes about food, beverages and cooking and has contributed to Saveur, CityEats New York, Drinks International and Clean Eating. She first fell in love with cheese at age 4 in a Parisian cheese shop, and the obsession continues today. Follow her on her blog [Glass of Rosé](#), Twitter [@glassofrose](#) and Instagram [@theglassofrose](#).