Ragya -- Tibetan Plateau's First Yak Cheese Export

On Friday, 19 May 2006, from 10:00-11:00 a.m. at 132 Perry Street (Suite 2B), New York, NY 10014 (tel: 212 367-8490), the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity and the Trace Foundation will host a press briefing to announce the advent of Ragya Yak Cheese, a unique and aromatic creation from the high-altitude land of Tibet.

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Jigme Gyaltsen, a senior monk from Ragya Monastery in Qinghai on the Tibetan Plateau, is the founder of a private school and the extraordinary individual behind the development of this cheese. He will be present at the press briefing to answer questions.

Following the press briefing, there will be an official opening for “Thogang: From the Tibetan Plateau,” an exhibition of photographs by Lois Conner.

The story of Ragya Yak Cheese began with the vision of Jigme Gyaltsen, who ten years ago searched for a way to support the children at the primary school of which he is the principal. With the help of a grant from Trace Foundation which, around that same time, was interested in exploring cheese-making as a means to promote culturally appropriate economic development in the region, Jigme Gyaltsen established a cheese factory for the processing of dri milk (the female of the yak) on the rich grasslands of Qinghai near the remote prefecture of Golok. The product of the factory will generate income to help sustain both his school and the local Tibetan nomad community.

In 2004, Jigme Gyaltsen and the Trace Foundation joined Slow Food, forming the ‘Tibetan Plateau Yak Cheese Presidium’, an economic development project designed to improve and promote the quality of Ragya Yak Cheese.

Over the past two summers, with the involvement of master cheese makers from Italy, the Ragya Yak Cheese Factory has produced a hard mountain cheese with an aroma reminiscent of an aged pecorino and a clean flavor that finishes with mild herbal and grassy notes. Although unusual, the making of this hard cheese fell in line with the many ways the nomads have developed to preserve the rich nutritive value of yak milk in such harsh environment.

The Presidium now works with over 30 yak herders and a dozen cheese makers on the Tibetan Plateau to identify ways in which their local agricultural products can become sustainable sources of income. Now the question is: Is it possible for Ragya Yak Cheese to compete with Vermont or Wisconsin’s best efforts? We believe that at twice the fat of cow’s milk cheese, its chances are excellent.

Chefs from New York City’s I Trulli, Rose Water, and Aurora restaurants have also created recipes using the cheese. These recipes and further suggestions on how to serve the cheese will be available on the following websites: www.tibetcheese.org and www.slowfoodusa.org
On the evening of May 19th from 6-8 p.m. there will be a further opportunity to sample Ragya Yak Cheese at a wine and cheese reception at Latse Library. Jigme Gyaltsen, Trace Foundation, and Slow Food representatives will talk about the project. A short documentary, shot on location, by Italian filmmaker Andrea Cavazzuti will also be shown.

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