



Chicago Cheese Retailer To 'Take Pastoral Live' With New 'Cheese Theater' Bistro

Chicago—In just a few months, Pastoral Artisan Cheese, Bread & Wine will open the doors to its new neighborhood bistro here created to celebrate producers of small-production cheese and fine food from around the world.

Since the first Pastoral retail shop was launched in 2004, customers have encouraged owners to create a dine-in area to enjoy the shop's culinary gems.

Opening a bistro is the logical extension of what Pastoral has been doing for the past eight years, said co-owner Greg O'Neill.

The bistro, with seating for roughly 40 guests, is on track for a fall opening. It will feature table service in the evenings and on weekends, with counter service on weekdays until late afternoon.

"It will almost be like cheese theater, if you will, because people can sit at the L-shaped bar and watch the cheesemonger put plates together."

—Greg O'Neill,

Pastoral Artisan Cheese,
Bread & Wine

The new space is attached to Pastoral's original store on North Broadway in Chicago's East Lakeview neighborhood. Pastoral also has locations on East Lake St. in the Loop and at the Chicago French Market on North Clinton St.

"We didn't even have to break through the walls," O'Neill said.

The bistro is designed to complement the company's retail space, with muted colors, exposed brick walls and antiques.

The ambiance will reflect our products' special roots, O'Neill said.

We're all about the context of the products we sell. When we first opened Pastoral, there was some aspect of selfishness because we were solving a personal problem — we needed a place to find small-production, high quality cheeses, charcuterie, and all the things that go with them from around the world, O'Neill said.

"We wanted a place where we could get them, enjoy them, and entertain with them," he said.

However, limited space at Pastoral's three retail locations kept the company from establishing a dine-in

area, or as co-owner Ken Miller says, "Take Pastoral live."

Bar Pastoral will feature a highly-edited wine, craft beer and specialty cocktail bar, along with an artisan cheese and charcuterie bar with outside seating available.

"It will almost be like cheese theater, if you will, because people can sit at the L-shaped bar and watch the cheesemonger put plates together," O'Neill said.

It's not a stuffy type of place, he said. It's meant to be a refuge where we can celebrate the producers and products we represent.

"Our concept is grazing as dinner, so it's not the kind of place you'd go for a porterhouse steak," O'Neill said. "It's light fare — both cold and hot, and cheese is the center of our universe."

Logistically speaking, Bar Pastoral is considered a restaurant and thereby required "to go through all the regulatory hoops restaurants go through in the city of Chicago, and there's no shortage of regulations," O'Neill said.

Fortunately, Pastoral is equipped with a talented staff, many of whom have culinary degrees, O'Neill said.

The bar will feature house-made fare; now that Pastoral has a commissary facility, which opened earlier this year at the Chicago French Market, the company has access to a commercial kitchen.

Bar Pastoral's full menu is still in development, but a chef has already been selected. Right now, Pastoral has roughly 55 employees. By the time Bar Pastoral opens its doors, that number could jump to close to 70.

"We're finding that the interest and engagement of the general public has not waned throughout the whole economic downturn," O'Neill said. "In fact, we've seen people as committed to these types of products as ever, if not more."

People are going to give themselves little treats, he said. They may not take a trip to France this summer, but a trip to a wine and cheese bar equals a quality evening without spending a ton of money.

"People would also rather spend their money with independent operators," O'Neill said. "We're the retail equivalent of a lot of the small producers we represent."

Starting Bar Seen As 'Super Sexy'

Idea

The biggest challenge for most small businesses is funding the project, according to O'Neill. Luckily,

prospective lenders saw the opening of Bar Pastoral to be, well, provocative.

"We tend to raise our money privately through friends and family lenders, and we found out this idea was super-sexy to everyone," he said. "It's a lot harder to get people to give you money to open up a warehouse than open up a cheese bar."

A bigger challenge is when retailers try to create an innovative concept unfamiliar to their location. Getting local authorities — city government, regulatory authorities — to understand what it is you're trying to do can be difficult, O'Neill said.

"I hear this from my compatriots all over the country, whether they're from Rhode Island, Portland or San Francisco," O'Neill said.

"We have an obligation to team up with health inspectors and local regulators to get them up to speed," he said. "We need to be collaborative, otherwise things will get combative if they don't understand."

There was confusion over what exactly a "cheese bar" was during the initial application phase of the project. Regulators saw a "liquor dispensing bar" and changed their entire view of the project, O'Neill said.

"We just need to not get angry and be as proactive and collaborative as possible," he said. "We need to be rowing in the same direction."

Dine-In Options Can Help Grow Business

There are some things that help pay the bills, grow your business and bring new people in — one strategy is offering sandwiches, cheese plates and other dine-in options, O'Neill said.

"It allows some people at a price point to access your business and your concept — customers who might not be comfortable with their knowledge of artisan cheese," he said.

"We end up putting these sandwiches and cheese plates together with the same quality products that we're selling behind our counter, but we're getting them in the mouths of people that might not have come up to the counter and purchased them, because we've taken those flavors and put them together, contextualizing them," O'Neill continued.

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My advice to small or medium-sized independent operators is stay true to your concept and customers, O'Neill said. There's always going to be competition — don't keep changing and morphing to keep up with competition, because you'll always lose.

"To me, it's about having courage for your convictions and your own process, especially if it's been working," he said. "There's a danger of becoming Flavor of the Month."

For information on Bar Pastoral or the company's retail locations, visit www.pastoralartisan.com. **FR**

