



TRADITIONAL CRAFTS REACH NEW HEIGHTS IN THE SMOKIES

Say Cheese! As the brilliant orange sun slowly sinks below the tree-covered ridge, Bruce DeGroot herds five Jersey cows toward his milking barn. For the past 22 years, Bruce has milked twice a day in this picturesque valley of the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. The fruits of his labor are a line of original-recipe, handcrafted cheeses with a delectable taste that you simply won't find in your supermarket dairy case. "The distinctive flavor results from the high quality of the milk and the variety of grasses and herbs growing in the pastures," says Bruce. While you can find Bruce's Yellow Branch Cheese in a few stores and restaurants, the best place to buy it is right there on the farm—at Karen Mickler's Yellow Branch Pottery shop.

Inspired by the Past. "I find inspiration from the folk potter of the past whose pottery making was one of many tasks in a day's activities," says Karen, who sells her beautiful but functional stoneware right along side Bruce's cheeses. When not throwing pots, you'll likely find Karen at work in her garden or taking a midday walk with Bruce. Visitors are welcome to tour the work areas and watch Karen and her fellow potters as they create tableware, ovenware, planters, lamps and luminaries. And for a change of pace they can always mosey on up to the farm for a self-guided tour of the gardens and barns. (For a cheese making tour, call ahead for an appointment.)

Looking for a Handcrafted Bouzouki? Twenty miles from Bruce and Karen's shop, another pair of mountain artisans practices two distinct, age-old crafts. In the upstairs studio, Allyson Gernandt creates dazzling jewelry out of silver and gemstones, while downstairs her husband Bob produces handcrafted stringed instruments, including an Irish version of the Greek bouzouki. "I started with traditional mountain dulcimers in 1977," says Bob, "and before long it was guitars, mandolins, citterns and Irish bouzoukis." For Allyson it's all about energy. "The payoff is when a person connects with the energy of the stone in my jewelry," she says. Both Bob and Allyson are happy to demonstrate their crafts to visitors who make appointments.

Sustainability is Important to Swain County Artisans. With 87% of Swain County composed of national forests and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, it's not surprising that the artists who are drawn here are "green minded." "The dairy is pasture-based," says Bruce DeGroot, "and the pastures and hay fields are managed using sustainable, organic practices." "Our gardens provide food and habitat, especially for butterflies and hummingbirds," adds Karen Mickler. Bob Gernandt is particularly conscious of the origin of his materials. "As a responsible stringed instrument maker, I try to use sustainable, plantation-grown wood."

Mountain Crafts, Mountain Fun. It may seem coincidental that Swain County is a magnet for craft lovers as well as outdoor adventure seekers (the county offers hiking, fishing, mountain biking, trail riding and some of the best whitewater rafting in the country). The truth is, love of the outdoors often goes hand-in-hand with an appreciation for fine craftsmanship. "It was the feeling of being alive in the natural setting of the mountains that brought Bob and me to Swain County," says Allyson. "We can only work in the studio so long," she says, "then we've got to get outside."

For more information on touring the Smokies, contact the Swain County Chamber of Commerce, 210 Main Street, P.O. Box 509, Bryson City, NC 28713; chamber@greatsmokies.com; or 800-867-9246.