The Big Cheese

Jason Sobocinski (MET’07) stars in Cooking Channel show

Americans consume an average of 33 pounds of cheese a year, triple the amount in 1970. At the same time, the United States has become the world’s biggest cheese producer, turning out world-class rounds with poetic names like Humboldt Fog and Constant Bliss. Stacks of Brie, Gruyère, and Stilton tumble from dairy sections at our grocery stores.

So it was inevitable that we now have a TV show devoted to all things cheese. The Big Cheese, which debuted last fall on the Cooking Channel, is hosted by Jason Sobocinski (MET’07), a curly-haired cheese evangelist with a gee-whiz love of coagulated dairy.

“I believe in cheese,” says Sobocinski, seated in the bar of Caseus Fromagerie Bistro, the restaurant and cheese shop he owns in New Haven, Conn.

He can certainly talk about cheese. Ask him about Point Blue, for example, and his green eyes gaze off for a moment before he launches into a tale of Pacific breezes, coastal pastures, and a herd of Holsteins, all of which come together to create a blue cheese with a delicious saltiness. “Isn’t that amazing,” he says.

That unbridled enthusiasm for cheese made him a natural to host The Big Cheese. Producer and director Stephen Crisman says he picked Sobocinski because of his expertise and his down-to-earth personality. He’s also game to do anything, including shooting an episode on an upstate New York dairy farm in below-zero weather—in a T-shirt.

“He’s the real deal,” Crisman says. “He’s not a prima donna.”

During the first season, Sobocinski led viewers on a tour of some of the country’s best cheese makers in Vermont, New York, and California, gaining 10 pounds along the way. He milked goats and scoured the country for twists on the almighty grilled cheese sandwich. Like any cheesemonger, Sobocinski prefers artisan cheeses, but says he found himself enjoying even a visit to a cheese factory in Wisconsin. Turns out, he says, it uses milk from local dairies.

“The whole show was a high point,” he says. “The point was to try to be myself, and that wasn’t hard because I was talking about cheese.”

When the show’s not shooting, Sobocinski has plenty to keep him busy. In addition to his restaurant and cheese shop, he runs Caseus Cheese Truck, a New Haven food truck that serves tomato soup, salads, and, of course, grilled cheese sandwiches. And he has just published a cookbook, Caseus Fromagerie Bistro Cookbook (Lyons Press, 2011).

Despite all of this responsibility, there’s still something of the college student about the 33-year-old. It’s not because he favors ball caps, baggy clothes, and an ever-present 5 o’clock shadow. Rather it’s his boundless energy, which he doesn’t reserve just for cheese. He gushes about his seven-month-old son, his Great Dane, his hometown of New Haven, even the aging food truck that needs constant repairing.

Sobocinski ate his fair share of cheese growing up in a vegetarian family of Italian heritage. Long since an omnivore, Sobocinski cracked the world of cheese while taking graduate classes in gastronomy at Metropolitan College. For two years, he spent his evenings studying subjects like food ethnography and his days working at Formaggio Kitchen, one of the country’s top cheese purveyors.

His mentor at Formaggio Kitchen, Robert Aguilera, says Sobocinski may not have arrived with the most refined palate, but he was committed to learning about hundreds of cheeses, no easy task. Aguilera had Sobocinski draw the cheese so that he would be able to identify by sight the many discs, squares, and rolls. Sobocinski kept a notebook of his “cheese doodles” and spent hours on his own time studying the pedigree of each cheese. He learned how to tell a customer about a cheese without coming across as pompous, an occupational hazard of the business. That, Aguilera says, came naturally for Sobocinski.

“He’s got a love of food but he doesn’t have a snobbish attitude about it,” Aguilera says. “He likes to make it fun.”

Sobocinski says he agreed to host The Big Cheese because he wants to make cheese more accessible to people. That’s also why he wrote the cookbook and launched his food truck two years ago. The truck sells the same gourmet grilled cheese sandwiches, made from an ever-changing blend of artisan cheeses and served with cornichons and a dollop of grain mustard, that he serves in his restaurant. His goal is to elevate the American standard, while making high-end cheese less intimidating.

All of this doesn’t leave much time for sleep, but Sobocinski says he needs only five hours a night. If he gets home early, say 11 p.m., he might play soccer online until about 2 a.m., and, before he hits the hay, have a snack: two fried eggs with what else, melted cheese. Amy Sutherland