

MAKERS AND MONGERS

Inside the minds (and rinds) of the cheese world's brightest



Ari Weinzwieg shapes American artisan cheese culture through Zingerman's Delicatessen

By Christina Paschen

MADISON, Wis. — Ari Weinzwieg never intended to become one of the defining voices in American artisan cheese culture or the co-creator of an \$80 million community of food-focused businesses.

Yet for decades, through the counter of Zingerman's Delicatessen, through books, storytelling and an unwavering commitment to craftsmanship, Weinzwieg helped teach American consumers that cheese could be more than a commodity. It could carry history, place, personality and meaning.

Today, many in the specialty food world regard him as one of the country's original modern cheesemongers.

Long before artisan cheese became a mainstream culinary conversation, Zingerman's Deli, located in Ann Arbor, Michigan, was introducing customers to traditional and farmstead cheeses alongside detailed tasting notes, producer stories and a philosophy that treated food with unusual reverence and curiosity. At Zingerman's, cheese was never simply sold; it was interpreted, celebrated and shared.

"Cheese was a key part of what we were doing from the beginning," Weinzwieg says. "I've always loved cheese, and we were driven to find the best we could."

Zach Sievers, specialty foods buyer at Zingerman's Delicatessen, says that philosophy still shapes the cheese counter today.

"What made Zingerman's approach different in the 1980s and '90s still sets us apart," Sievers says. "The priority is on traditionally made and full-flavored cheeses, while making as few compromises to convenience as possible."

Sievers, who began working as a cheesemonger at Zingerman's Creamery in 2015 before later overseeing import cheeses at the deli, says Weinzwieg's influence remains deeply embedded in how cheese is evaluated and presented.

"Ari values the story and tradition of cheese in a way few other people do," Sievers says. "Even with the depth he goes into about the history of the cheese and the people who make it, he never loses sight that the cheese has to be delicious."

Weinzwieg says truly knowing a cheese requires far more than understanding flavor alone.

"Knowing it means in-depth study, he says. "Where did it come from? Why was it made? How is it eaten in its home region? What are the rituals and traditions around it?"

Sievers says Weinzwieg recognized early that consumers would connect not only to flavor, but to narrative.



Photo courtesy of Zingerman's

CHEESE CULTURE — Ari Weinzwieg speaks about artisan cheese during a presentation, reflecting the storytelling and education that helped shaped Zingerman's approach to food and cheesemongering.

"I think Ari understood there was a market for incredible cheese in Ann Arbor and in the U.S. generally," Sievers says. "The best way to capture guests' attention was through the story of the maker and the cheese — until they tasted their first clothbound Cheddar or Comté and were hooked for life."

That approach grows naturally out of Weinzwieg's worldview.

When he arrived at the University of Michigan at age 17 to study Russian history, a future in food was nowhere in sight. After graduation, he took a job washing dishes at a local restaurant in Ann Arbor, where he met future business partner Paul Saginaw, then the restaurant's manager. The two eventually shared a vision for something Ann Arbor lacked at the time: a true delicatessen rooted in exceptional ingredients, thoughtful service and connection to community.

"I didn't go into business to make money," Weinzwieg says. "I went into business to make magic."

On March 15, 1982, Weinzwieg and Saginaw opened Zingerman's Delicatessen in a modest 1,300-square-foot space on the corner of Kingsley and Detroit Streets with two employees

and a commitment to quality that became legendary.

The original vision was humble but ambitious: a unique delicatessen, an exceptional corned beef sandwich, exceptional service and a great place to work. The owners also wanted it to be "down to earth" and consist of "only one store."

"When we first opened Zingerman's," Weinzwieg writes in his booklet *The Story of Visioning at Zingerman's*, "we set our sights on establishing a one-of-a-kind delicatessen connected to its community that cared deeply about customers, staff, suppliers and neighbors while serving great-tasting food with caring, considerate and enjoyable service."

From the beginning, the focus was on quality and intention.

"Through the years we've worked to find more flavorful, traditional versions of cheese," Weinzwieg says. "It's much easier to do now than it was 44 years ago."

"From the get-go, there was no internet, email or websites," Weinzwieg says. "To find traditional artisan cheese, I had to make phone calls, read books

Turn to WEINZWIEG, next page

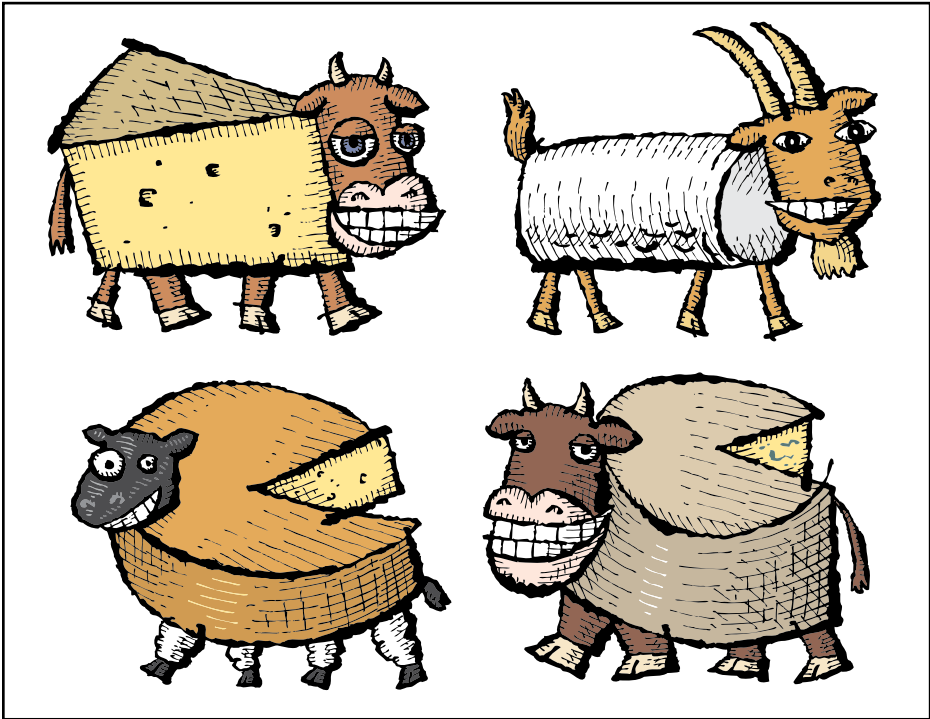


Illustration courtesy of Zingerman's

PLAYFUL DESIGN — Hand-drawn illustrations and playful storytelling have long been part of Zingerman's design philosophy, helping make artisan cheese and specialty foods feel approachable, personal and connected to the people behind them.

MAKERS AND MONGERS

Inside the minds (and rinds) of the cheese world's brightest

WEINZWEIG

Continued from previous page

and magazines, travel and talk with people.

"It's always about teaching," Weinzwieg adds. "Letting people taste. Explaining why things taste different and cost more. How they compare to mainstream items with the same name."

As American artisan cheese began gaining momentum in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Weinzwieg became deeply involved with the American Cheese Society (ACS), helping support the organization during a formative period for the industry. He served as ACS president in the early 1990s and later served on the organization's board, advocating for artisan cheesemakers, traditional methods and a broader appreciation of American-made specialty cheese. In 2014, he received the ACS Lifetime Achievement Award recognizing his impact on American cheese culture and specialty foods.

For many artisan cheesemakers, Zingerman's became a model for how specialty cheese can be presented, discussed and valued in America.

Mateo Kehler, co-founder of Jasper Hill Farm, Greensboro, Vermont, says the influence of Weinzwieg and Zingerman's on his work began through visits to Neal's Yard Dairy in London in the late 1990s. When he began building Jasper Hill Farm, a Neal's Yard colleague handed him a napkin with five names and phone numbers of influential buyers.

At the top of the list was Weinzwieg. "The market for artisan cheese was built by Neal's Yard Dairy, and Zingerman's was their first U.S. customer," Kehler says. "Ari recognized early that handmade cheese and authentic cheeses from a place mattered. He helped spread the artisan cheese movement."

For Kehler, Zingerman's also reflects a broader philosophy about how food businesses relate to place, people and capital.

"Businesses can create a lot of problems in the world," he says, "but they can also be structured in ways that return value to communities instead of extracting it."

He points to Jasper Hill's own structure — developed in part through long-standing industry dialogue influenced by Zingerman's — as a family of businesses built with shared services

and long-term investment in local economic ecosystems rather than centralized expansion.

By the early 1990s, Zingerman's Deli became a nationally known food destination. Conventional business wisdom pointed toward franchising and expansion. Instead, one pivotal conversation changed the direction of the company entirely — and it happened outside the deli on a black wooden bench.

"If benches could talk, ours could tell a lot of tales," Weinzwieg writes.

It is there, roughly 11 1/2 years after opening the deli, that Saginaw asked Weinzwieg what he wanted the business to look like in another 10 or 15 years.

"We knew what we didn't want," Weinzwieg writes. "The soul of a business can't be copied."

Weinzwieg says scaling specialty food businesses often risks losing "authenticity, essence, connection to the ecosystem and community."

Instead, they built something far more unique: the Zingerman's Community of Businesses (ZCoB), a collection of independently operated businesses built around shared values, exceptional food and human connection.

Today the community includes a deli, café, Zingerman's Roadhouse restaurant, Asian-cuisine restaurants, a food tour company, bakery, coffee roaster, candy maker, event spaces, training programs, mail order and publishing operations, all centered in Ann Arbor rather than scattered through franchises across the country.

The Zingerman's system also included a former in-house creamery that, in fall 2025, began operating independently as Sanilac Creamery, continuing to produce many of the cheeses and dairy products developed within the ZCoB while remaining a supplier to Zingerman's.

"We have sought out a path to the future that will enhance the quality of our food, create new opportunities for staff and new offerings to customers," Weinzwieg writes. "We believe that the path we have chosen allows us to go after that growth in a way that is compatible with who we are, staying true to our principles and our passions."

Weinzwieg notes the work of the ZCoB is rooted in care and connection.

"We view everyone through the lens of a compassionate heart, choosing patience and positive beliefs," he writes. "Working in this way allows us to demonstrate care, and genuine care for others creates real connections."

That philosophy continues to shape

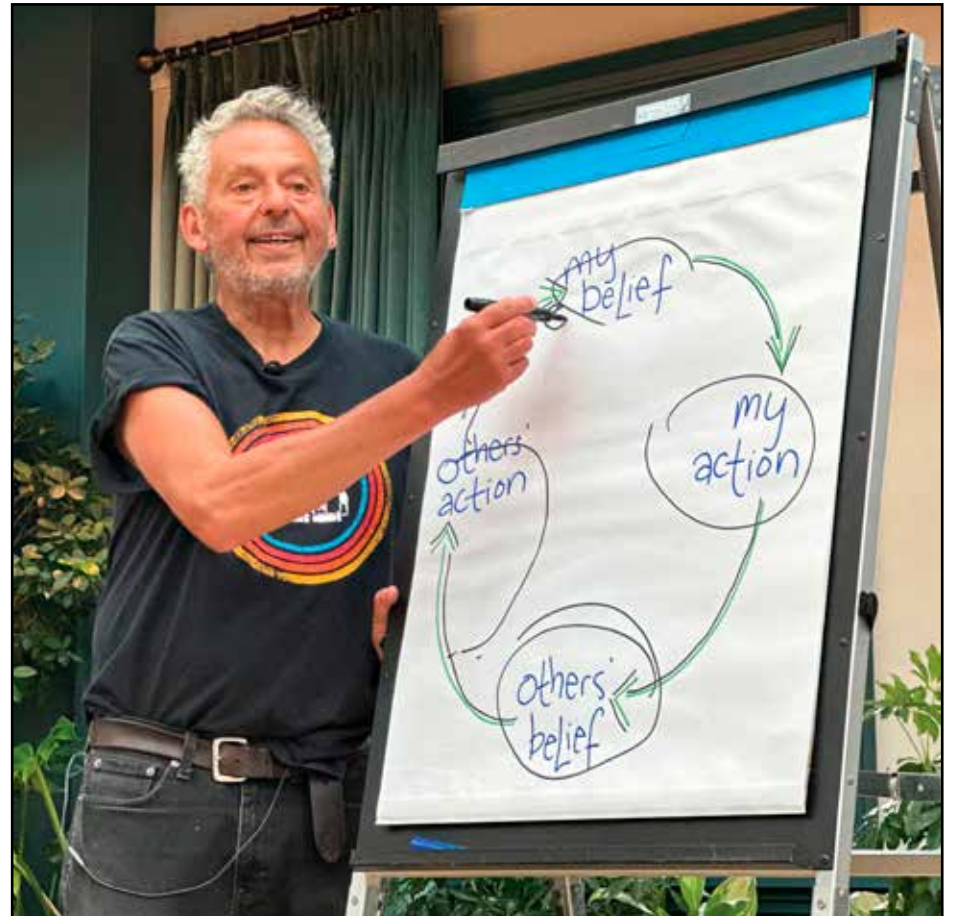


Photo courtesy of Zingerman's

VISIONING PHILOSOPHY — Ari Weinzwieg stands beside an illustration of his "belief cycle," one of the many leadership and visioning concepts that helped shape Zingerman's culture and business philosophy.

the people around him.

Zach Milner, a staff partner and manager in the dining room at Zingerman's Roadhouse, says Weinzwieg's influence is most visible in how he elevates others and embeds those values into daily operations.

"Ari's influence shows up in how he consistently gives credit to the people around him," Milner says. "He really embodies that idea that we need our customers more than they need us."

"Ari's always encouraging us to enrich as many lives as we possibly can," Milner adds. "He tells us our goal here isn't to be the best employee ever — it's to be the best version of ourselves."

Weinzwieg's influence extends beyond Zingerman's itself and into the broader artisan cheese community. Kehler says Zingerman's helped vali-

date and expand the market for domestic artisan cheese at a time when most specialty cheese conversations still centered on Europe.

"We find and promote great food with passion, a mission to educate and a down-to-earth attitude," Weinzwieg writes. "We know radically better food can come from simple, local ingredients."

At its core, Zingerman's has long argued that food and humanity are inseparable — that service matters, that craftsmanship matters and that people can feel the difference when care is genuine.

"It's an honor to be able to do it," Weinzwieg says of working with artisan cheese. "So many amazing centuries of tradition and skill. It's endlessly fascinating. I'm humbled and honored to be able to work with it." **CMN**

Know a standout maker or monger?



Email Christina at cpaschen@cheesemarketnews.com.

MAKERS AND MONGERS