

the GYST of it

By Kelli Billstein

Photos by
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L to R: Ky Guse, Jim Bovino, Mel Guse, Jill Mott

“Food is the greatest community builder there is. It invites people to sit and stay awhile... It welcomes new neighbors and weary travelers and beloved old friends.”

—Sandor Katz, *The Art of Fermentation*

The woman behind the bar stands on a chair and pours a long, thin stream of rosé from a porrón, a communal drinking vessel native to Spain. From several feet up, the wine reaches its target, spattering translucent pink into a patron’s wine glass. Everyone perched on stools at the bar turns to watch the theatric pour. The consensus is, “I’ll have what she’s having.”

Glasses are raised to the shout of “Salute!” and guests return to what they’ve been noshing: fresh cheeses, sauerkraut crackers, cured meats, and fermented veggies. Stacks of grilled cheese sandwiches, tiny bowls of crinkle-cut potato chips, glasses of beer, house-brewed kombucha, and wine cover every available surface. Through the din of conversation and laughter thumps the beat of Lauryn Hill’s “Doo Wop.”

This bacchanal scene is a glimpse of an evening at GYST, a fermentation bar that opened last December one block off Eat Street in Minneapolis. If “fermentation bar” sounds like the most esoteric name for any food establishment you’ve ever heard, let us back up and say, fermentation is the culinary science experiment behind all of your favorite foods.

You probably knew that beer, wine, and sauerkraut were fermented products, but maybe you didn’t realize that cheese is made through fermentation, as are artisan bread, cured meats, coffee, chocolate, yogurt, and kombucha. In short, fermentation is the yeast-fueled process that binds food geeks’ favorite edibles. So, let’s meet the food geeks responsible for opening GYST.

Creating a Culture

“The word ‘gyst’ is an old English term for yeast,” said Mel Guse, one of the two sisters who own GYST. “We liked the look and sound of the word, and it ties into everything we’re doing here.”

Kylene (Ky) Guse chimes in with her younger sister, “GYST is not a wine bar or a cheese bar, and we don’t consider ourselves a restaurant. We’re a small business with a mission to teach people about food and food systems. We want to connect our customers to the producer of this cheese or that wine.”

The abridged story of how the Guse sisters came to open not a restaurant, not a wine bar or cheese shop—but a fermentation bar with a mission—involves travel, food, and wine.





After stints at restaurants such as The Bachelor Farmer and Terzo Vino Bar in Minneapolis, the sisters met sommelier and now business partner, Jill Mott. Mott noticed that fermentation was the unifying characteristic of the foods the three women geeked out about, the magical process that yielded fabulous cheeses, opulent wines, and robust beers.

As it turns out, fermentation is also the perfect metaphor to describe what GYST is out to do in the Minneapolis community: Start a culture and feed it. Sandor Katz, author of the book *The Art of Fermentation*, wrote the following passage, which resonates with the mission of GYST:

“One word that repeatedly comes to the fore in my exploration and thinking about fermentation is culture...We call the starters that we add to milk to make yogurt, or to initiate any fermentation, cultures. Simultaneously, culture constitutes the totality of all that humans seek to pass from generation to generation, including language, music, art, literature, scientific knowledge, and belief systems, as well as agriculture and culinary techniques (in both of which fermentation occupies a central role).”

At GYST, creating a culture means brewing kombucha and fermenting vegetables in the kitchen, but it also means creating an environment where the food-loving culture of Minneapolis can meet. Through working with local farmers and producers, hosting events, teaching classes, and doing pop-up dinners, GYST hopes to nurture a culture of people who care about food systems and have conversations about them.

Welcome to GYST

After a successful Kickstarter that raised \$40,000 to renovate what used to be Blacklist Vintage, the lady trio added a fourth to the GYST team. Jim Bovino, who owns and operates California Street Farm in Northeast Minneapolis, has a knack for fermenting the organic vegetables he grows, and is co-owner of the up-and-coming Keepsake Cidery in Dundas, Minnesota.

GYST has become a space that people describe as feeling very “unlike Minneapolis.” That’s a compliment.

“I get it all the time,” Jill said. “People come in and say this place reminds me of my favorite bar in Brooklyn. Or it reminds them of the West Coast. Or France. I’ve even gotten Denmark.”

Ky is happy that patrons respond this way. “Actually, one of our working slogans is ‘A getaway from the everyday,’” she said.

This segues well into the kind of establishment that GYST strives to be; that is, homey and casual, yet knowledgeable and refined. GYST wants you to walk in and feel like you’re in someone’s cozy, contemporary kitchen, which includes a terrarium on the counter and beloved cookbooks on shelves. GYST wants you to sit at the bar, which is lower to facilitate an untimidating flow of conversation, and learn about the Georgian red wine, Saperavi Pheasant’s Tears, that you are about to drink. This is a place you



The Guse sisters grew up near Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where every Friday night was pizza night with the fam, no matter what. Well, that was until the itch came to flee the Midwest. It happens to the best of us Minnesotans, too, and when it happened to Ky and Mel, they wound up in San Francisco.

“The food scene in California really influenced us,” Ky said. “I was going to grad school and working at Bi-Rite Market, which is known for its artisan organic products. I fell in love with the food and the people.”

Mel, who originally moved to San Francisco to work in public relations for Google and Sony, quit to work at Pizzeria Delfina, a popular place in sisters’ Mission District neighborhood. Every Friday night was pizza night again.

Mel became a certified sommelier and a co-wine buyer for Bi-Rite Market. Ky moved to Rio de Janeiro on a Fulbright scholarship for a year, ate more delicious food, then moved back to San Francisco. Years passed, and the Guse sisters honed their skills in the vast and exceedingly delicious worlds of wine and cheese, eventually deciding to open a place of their own in Minneapolis, closer to family and in the midst of a burgeoning food scene.

come to chat about life with a friend over glasses of full-bodied rosé with a romantically ambiguous name like “Forlorn Hope.” (Try a glass. It’s delicious.)

“We want people to just take their time here,” Ky said. “There’s nothing else you need to do. Just relax. Eat. Drink.”

Fermented Eats

“Our menu is really focused,” Mel said. “We’re not trying to be everything to everybody; we don’t have the capability. We focus on what we know and what we do best instead of building a menu to service the cheeseburger crowd.”

The menu itself might startle any sturdy Minnesotan looking for “something that’ll fill me up,” i.e. a slab of meat and a pile of potatoes. On the GYST menu, you’ll find plenty of things to share with another person or a small group. Some of the boards include: The Mother (their gorgeously served flagship plate of six cheeses, three meats, pickled and fermented veggies, caramel popcorn, dried fruit, and nuts); the Meat Board (a selection of four charcuterie); and the GYST (a single cheese, a meat, fermented vegetable, and a chocolate)—which has been called “the Lunchable for grownups.”

You will also find a funky-delicious sandwich called The Sandor, which is reminiscent of Thai food—a focaccia smothered with peanut butter and topped with kimchi. Then, of course, there’s the grilled cheese, which Ky and Mel went to great lengths to perfect. They use three different cheeses, add tangy sauerkraut, and serve it with a dollop of mustard and a small kale salad.

The eatery works with local purveyors of fermented foods to flesh out its menu: Kiss My Cabbage kimchi, Gerhardt’s sauerkraut, Red Table Meat Co.’s cured meats, and local beers. Ky is excited to develop partnerships with other food and market organizations in the city, too.

As far as the wine and beer list goes, it’s as finely curated as an exhibit at The Walker Art Center. Having worked in the wine industry and developed relationships with distributors and growers, Mel and Jill have built an inventory that boasts unique bottles from all over the world—California, Germany, France, Spain, Chile, Portugal, Lebanon, Slovenia, Georgia, and Greece.

“When I see two people enjoying a glass of wine you can’t find anywhere else in the city, or a cheese that has been sourced directly from a farm, and people leave feeling so thankful, it’s great,” Jill said. “It’s an entire guest experience that’s focused on these products that are so carefully procured.”

Because GYST is a small space, it can operate smoothly with just four people running the show. Ky and Jim spend most of their time making, plating, and running food to tables, while Mel and Jill serve wine and beer.



“I love serving the foods we’re proud of and having conversations with new and regular customers,” said Ky, who is looking forward to summer when fresh vegetables will be abundant for fermenting.

“We want our atmosphere to always remain light and fun,” Mel said.

Keeping it light and fun sometimes means blasting Tina Turner while everyone sings along to “Proud Mary.” Sometimes, it means serving a happy hour “cavabucha”—cava and kombucha cocktails before attending a cider class. Other times, it’s just about sharing a laugh, a beer, and a grilled cheese with sauerkraut at the bar. On special occasions, it’s about standing on chairs and pouring rosé from Spanish drinking vessels into wine glasses. You’d hear, yet again, that someone feels like they’re not in Minneapolis anymore.

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