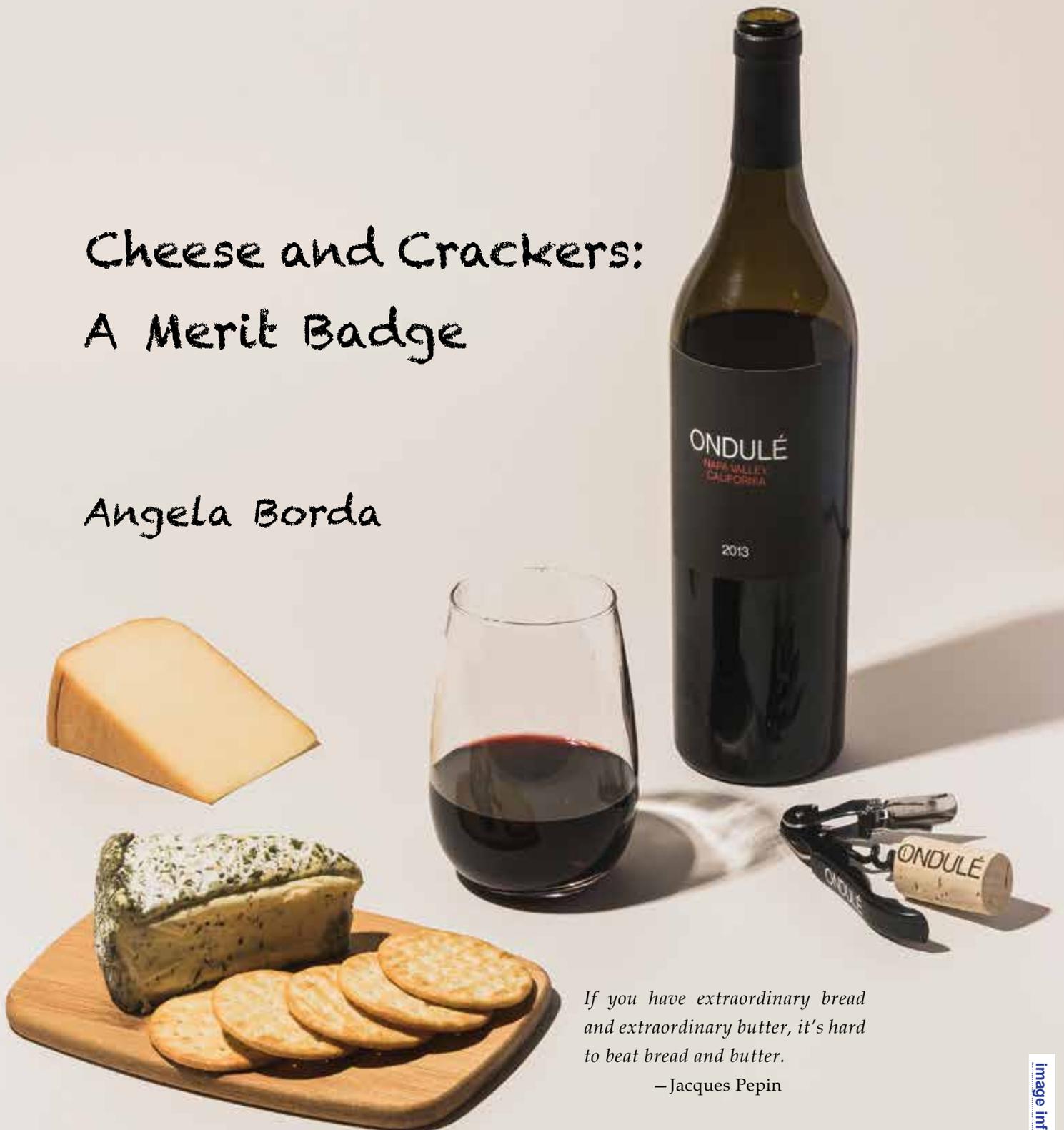


# Cheese and Crackers: A Merit Badge

Angela Borda



*If you have extraordinary bread  
and extraordinary butter, it's hard  
to beat bread and butter.*

—Jacques Pepin

**I**T BEGAN FOR ME NOT WITH BREAD AND butter but cheese and crackers. I would love to say that I'm referring to something glamorous like a tangy chèvre sprinkled with honey and lavender flowers. But I mean cheddar cheese from the bulk bin of the health food store, sold by weight, its only remarkable feature being that my mother could afford it. The crackers were Ak-Mak's, also from the health food store, thick wheat crackers dotted with sesame seeds. The mortar to these bricks was mayonnaise. That's all. Crackers spread with a blanket of mayonnaise and topped with a Cadillac-sized slice of cheese. It was the late seventies in California, and my parents fancied themselves rolling stones. My siblings and I were little pebbles, tumbling after them on adventures both amazing and terrifying. That was my first food memory. My first love. Cheese and crackers.

We were living day-to-day in a motel in downtown Santa Cruz, my mom looking for God, and us kids looking, often in vain, for lunch. When my mom hung up from the phone booth and told us the news, it was like the angels opened up the heavens and sang for us. My mom's friend, Sky Hawk, was going to Egypt to attain enlightenment, and she needed someone to take care of her son and husband while she was gone. So up the mountain we went to Scotts Valley, a beautiful, semi-wild community in the redwoods. The property had goats, chickens, blackberry patches, orchards, and a few cabins here and there with refugees who had burned out on the freewheeling life in downtown Santa Cruz. My mom was installed as cook and babysitter and general hippie hausfrau. For the first time in my life, I saw my mom go to the grocery store with a twenty dollar bill and buy bags (plural) of glorious food. No more living in the car. No more eking

out containers of yogurt at the gas station. She sewed sun dresses for me, tried her hand at making goat cheese, and collected eggs from the hen house each day.

John, the owner of the property, liked to ride motorcycles on the mountain roads, and he would lecture me to lean into the turns with him as we hurtled through tunnels of tall, somber redwoods, my eyes tracking the asphalt that we kept dipping toward. My friend Grace went with him once, and came back with the plastic in her sneaker melted into the bubbling skin of her ankle. Her foot had gotten too close to the exhaust pipe. But that was just tough luck for her. Nobody knew where her mother was or when she was coming back.

John also liked to take us joy-riding on country roads in his old BMW. He would roll back the sunroof and poke his head out the top, steering the wheel with his feet, us kids in the car shrieking in delight. Days like those ended in cow pastures, floating on inner tubes in "lakes" with little bits of cow patties bobbing alongside us in oily water.

Beyond Scotts Valley lay a bleak landscape. Away from the carpets and beds and full refrigerator of that place, we were the children who slept on dirt floors and played with headless dolls and feared things with no names or shape. Children with nightmares of bears eating them alive. Children lost for days on the sidewalks of Santa Cruz. Sometimes it is safer to wander than to stay in one place.

There is much my brother cannot remember, and sometimes I envy his forgetting. But I don't mind the memory of crowding onto tall stools at the kitchen island in Scotts Valley, waiting impatiently as my mom prepared the afternoon snack. I remember the snap of the cracker under my teeth and then the unthinkable riches of both cheddar and

mayonnaise on my tongue. Love blooms all the more fiercely in scarcity. I am certain that the other first-graders in my class who lived in Victorian houses on streets named Elm and Maple did not think about cheese and crackers the way I did. Not at all.

A revolving cast of broken, searching souls came through Scotts Valley, invariably ending up naked in the hot tub, passing joints, scraping by on the margins of society. They passed us around in the hot tubs, much like joints, naked children sitting on the squishy laps of men. Many single mothers traveled through, living on the road, their children left with strangers, one man who thought he was a reincarnation of Jesus, another who ate nothing but wheat-grass juice, spiritual seekers who couldn't afford shoes. I had a habit of hurting myself when I was unhappy or scared, and that summer I ran straight into a glass door, nearly slicing off part of my finger. My younger brother often withdrew into his own quiet world. Sometimes he disappeared, and I couldn't find him. The landscape of the property held its own shadows, bereft, forgotten corners thick with spider webs, old Christmas ornaments smelling of mildew, oil-stained garage floors, an awareness that this momentary sanctuary was only so safe, perhaps not safe at all.

Our dad, estranged from our mother, would zip up to the door in his VW van and take us out for the afternoon. Sometimes it was a park, sometimes the beach, anywhere that was free. One afternoon I sat with him on the warm sand, entranced by the immense blue of the ocean and the sky, wondering when I would see him again. My dad reclined, wearing his revolutionary beret and wavy long hair, brown corduroy pants, cowboy shirt with pearl snaps. A man who didn't belong on the beach, but he was trying, for our sakes. No towels, no bathing suits,

no little plastic bucket and shovel. There was a bottle of wine half sunk in the sand. He broke off pieces of a baguette, slathered them with mayonnaise, and then sliced cheddar cheese with his Swiss Army knife. A variation on cheese and crackers. There was a little bit of sand sticking to the mayonnaise, and in the back of my mind, my mother's instructions to find a pay phone and call her collect if my dad kidnapped us. Childhood afforded me no innocence. I knew what they were all capable of. I knew he would leave, and I wouldn't be able to find him. But at least there was cheese and crackers.

Life in Scotts Valley lasted only a few months. Eventually Sky Hawk came back from Egypt, ready to be a mom again. I remember wondering if she was disappointed that she hadn't found enlightenment in the pyramids. And I remember, too, the feeling of getting in our rusty station wagon and driving away to the unknown. Unknown if there would be a house to live in. Unknown if there would be food to eat.

To this day, my brother turns green if I mention Ak-Maks and healthfood cheddar. But I can't get enough of it. I spread embarrassing amounts of mayo on Ritz crackers and put cheddar on top, perhaps half an olive too. Yes, I appreciate more sophisticated varieties: the salty perfection of aged Parmigiano-Reggiano, the lux feel of brie melting onto the tongue, complex crackers imbued with dried figs and rosemary. My palate has traveled far beyond bulk cheddar. But a part of my heart has not. Some loves are more like merit badges. Let me say this, rather than say the other things about broken bones and gnawing hunger and dark rooms with no windows or doors, let me have that innocence this once. We'll call cheese and crackers a merit badge for surviving in the wilderness. ❖

