

French Cheeses Accent Tradition, Terroir And Taste

Consumers and connoisseurs alike are discovering the joie de vivre of fromage

BY KAREN SILVERSTON

More varieties of French cheese are coming to the United States than ever before, and they are bringing their name, quality and sense of place with them. "French cheese-makers are widely regarded as great cheese-makers—perhaps the greatest," says David Grotenstein, merchandising manager for Union Market, Brooklyn, NY, and the judging chair for Louisville, KY-based American Cheese Society. "A strong French presence raises customers' expectations not only for their cheeses, but for everything at the cheese counter."

The notion of "terroir" is very dear to French artisan cheesemakers, and the country boasts 44 Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) cheeses among a treasure trove of 1,000 cheeses. For clarification, AOC is the same as the European Union's Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), but AOC is a much older designation. To learn about AOC cheeses is to learn about tradition and terroir.

"The point of the AOC system is to protect the name of 'terroir' products (cheese, wine or other specialty foods) and their traditions—the savoir faire that goes into their production and to make sure the product reflects the specific characteristics and richness of the region in which it is made," says David Rozenberg, associate brand manager, BC-USA Inc., New Holland, PA.

"A real connoisseur of cheese knows that when you eat a French cheese, you taste history," says Cécile Delannes, ambassador of the French Cheese Club, College Park, MD. "Imagine the level of expertise you reach when you make a cheese for centuries like Epoisses, Chaource, Saint Marcellin, Comté—they're matchless." The French Cheese Club comprises producers Berthaut, E. Graindorge, Lincet, L'Étoile du Sud and

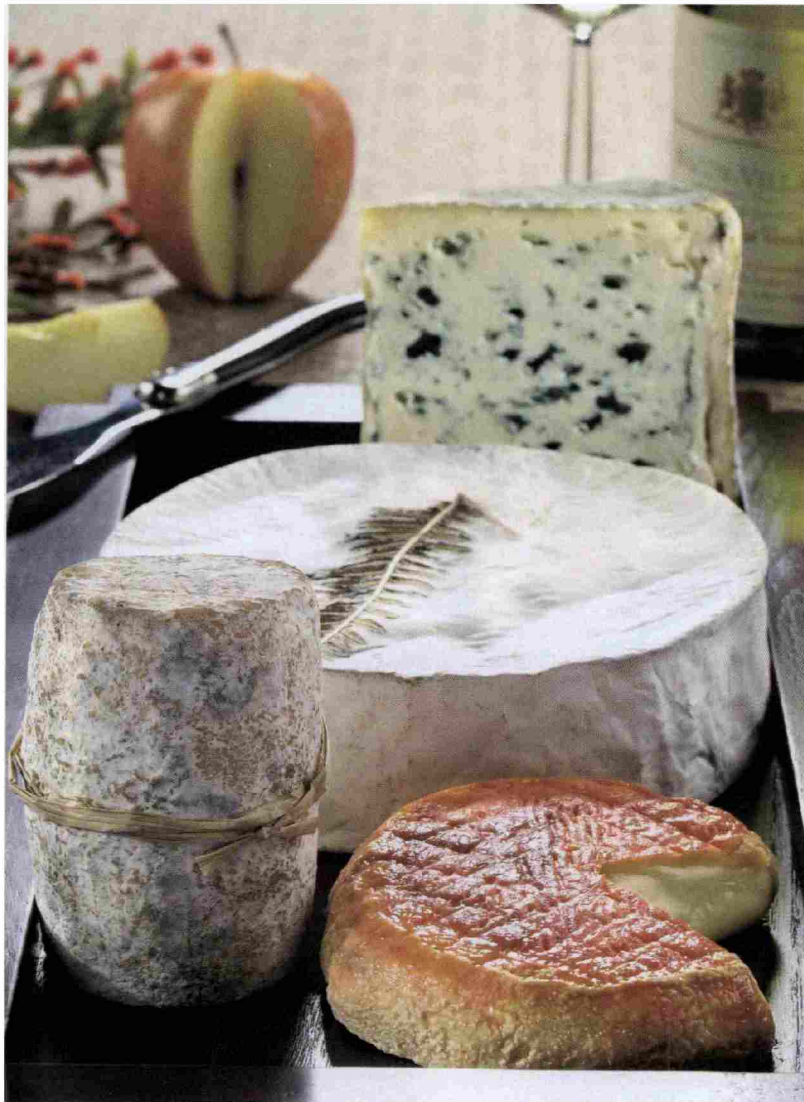
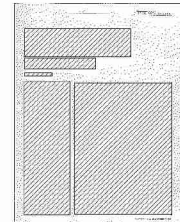


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CHEESES OF FRANCE



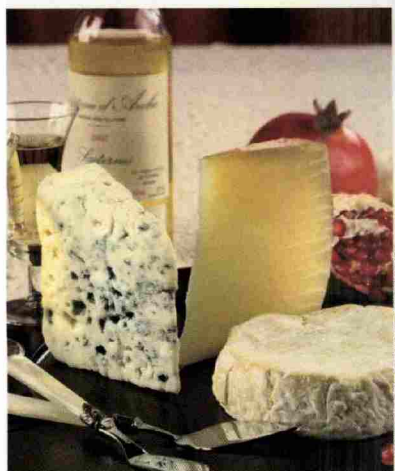


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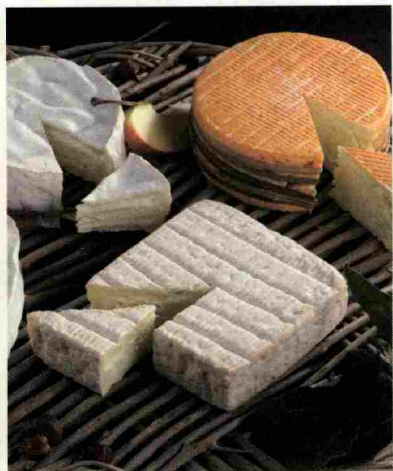


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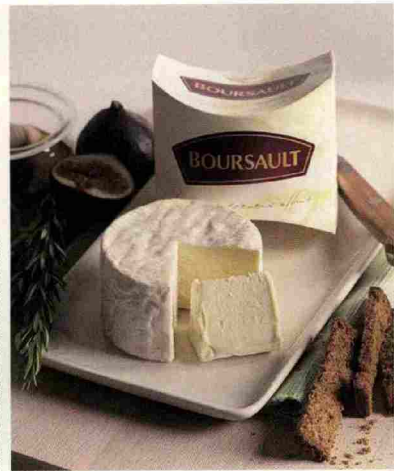


PHOTO COURTESY OF BOURSALT

Rivoire-Jacquemin, which teamed up to promote their personality-infused cheeses in the United States.

Comté Reigns In France

Comté is France's No. 1 AOC cheese, and Rivoire-Jacquemin produces several brands of Comté wheels as well as pre-packaged Comté. At 80 pounds, it's the gentle giant of the Jura Mountains. "In a specialty department, choices of Comté in the United States are extremely varied: multiple affineurs, selectionneurs and importers," says Jean-Louis Carbonnier, president of Carbonnier Communications, New York, NY, which represents the Comté Cheese Association in Poligny, France. "And of course, Comté is made in many different parts of the Jura Mountains, in many fruitières where each has its own terroir."

Importer and cheese consultant Daphne Zepos, of Essex Street Cheese Co., New York, NY, calls Comté a cheesemonger's cheese because each wheel and season tastes different. "One might be a little artichoke-y, the next like caramelized onions—and you want that variety," Zepos says. "There are flavor wheels about Comté's characteristic aromas. Its texture can be wonderfully velvety. After you've swallowed and you're exhaling, it is fragrant and creamy, with this aftertaste of butter and cream."

Issaquah, WA-based Costco Wholesale offers members of its U.S. club stores pre-packaged Comté. "Because Costco does so well selling fine wines, it's a natural transition to buy these cheeses," says San Diego, CA-based Tony Rizzo, Costco's buyer for the Southwest region. "I'm very impressed with the food safety practices I saw in France. They're detail-oriented and stick to tradition. The passion we saw in the artisan cheese-makers comes through in their cheese."

Affineurs with many years of experience apply their knowledge and personal style to the aging process of such cheeses as Comté, Salers and Laguiole. "They have to know the conditions of the cheese, when it was made and make the necessary adjustments to have a perfect product at the end," says Edouard Damez, bakery, deli and cheese buyer for H-E-B Central Market, an eight-store chain based in Dallas, TX. "You are getting a product that must be outstanding."

Flying In Freshness

To ensure freshness and quality, U.S. importers use different modes of transatlantic transportation to bring consumers French cheeses. "French cheeses are a very important part of our business—both by air and by boat," says Rich Rosenberg, vice president of sales and purchasing, Cheezwhse, Armonk, NY. "Flying it in costs more money, but if it isn't fresh, consumers are not going to buy it at store level. And our French air imports are a showpiece that upscale stores depend on."

Anco Fine Cheese, Fairfield, NJ, offers a wide variety of interesting and unique artisan cheeses. "Our air program represents most of the terroirs that France offers," says Emmanuelle Hofer Louis, Anco's director of marketing. "We're finding this gives consumers the best experience for the cheeses that do not have enough shelf life to be shipped by boat."

French selections arriving to the States via air transport run the gamut: fresh goat's milk cheeses coated in herbs or spices; soft-ripened cheeses such as Saint Marcellin, Camembert and Chaource; washed-rind Le Montagnard, elegant triple crèmes, blues, and classics such as Pont l'Évêque and Livarot. Also on the list are Anco's unusual sheep's milk varieties like soft-ripened Peral,

washed-rind Caruchon and Brebiou.

"French is the biggest category for us on the imported side," says Helder dos Santos, sales manager, Chicago, IL-based C.E. Zuercher & Co. "What a lot of people want from France is soft cheese, and we do a really good job of taking care of those. There's more care needed to get them to the end user in good shape."

Tweaking Tradition

In the realm of protected names, however, each AOC makes its own rules regarding which cheeses qualify for this distinction. Not all raw milk cheeses can be legally imported; therefore, some AOCs allow cheeses made from pasteurized milk to qualify for the designation. For instance, Epoisses was once a raw milk cheese, but the appellation has changed to include pasteurized milk. "You can produce Epoisses from both pasteurized milk and from raw milk, but Roquefort can't be anything but raw," says Eric Duchene, head of food and wine, French Trade Office, New York, NY.

Wash-rind Epoisses won a gold medal in the Open Soft Cheese category at the 2008 Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association's World Championship Cheese Contest in Madison, WI. "There is almost a sensual attraction with Epoisses' powerful aroma, creamy texture, and rich, salty flavor," says French Cheese Club's Delannes.

Roquefort's hallmarks include beautiful blue-green veining, well-balanced saltiness, creaminess and spice, and a hint of the sweetness of sheep's milk. "Most stores have multiple French blues, such as Bleu d'Auvergne, St. Agur and La Roche," says Jeff Babcock, cheese category manager, European Imports Ltd., Chicago, IL. "Specialists may carry multiple styles of Roquefort because of its stature. We offer several—

Société, Papillon and our own selection, Life in Provence.”

Flavor profiles of soft-ripened cheeses, however, are evolving and improving. Le Chatelain Brie and Camembert in addition to Le Rustique Camembert and Coulommiers have been tweaked using pasteurized milk.

Francois Kerautret, executive vice president, Peterson Co., Auburn, WA, is introducing two new Camemberts to the market made from pasteurized milk, Whole Foods Hervé Mons and Le Pommier. With their

such as French Cheese Club member Lincet's triple crème, Délice de Bourgogne. The brainchild of 18th-century epicurian Brillat Savarin, this cheese is irresistibly creamy, buttery and melting.

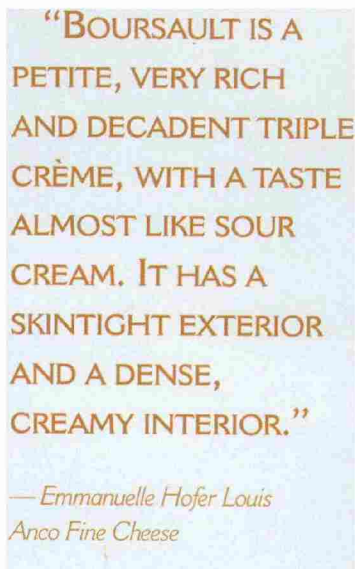
Varieties of Brillat Savarin may be fresh, affiné (cured with a rind) with much more intensity, or flavored with cranberries and other fruits. Lincet's velvety Brillat Savarin exudes a milky aroma with a faintly lemon sour tone.

Cheese specialist Roland Barthelemy,

who is featured on Ile de France's Web site, works with Maison Boursault to develop recipes using this cheese. "Boursault is a petite, very rich and decadent triple crème, with a taste almost like sour cream," says Anco's Hofer Louis. "It has a skintight exterior and a dense, creamy interior."

Goat's And Sheep's Milk Cheeses

Atlanta Foods International, based in Atlanta, GA, is bringing in Jacquini's highly anticipated Spring Reserve Selection, which



affinage and lactic ferments, these cheeses have a texture and aroma similar to raw milk Camemberts and adhere to all U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulations.

"I think American consumers are ready to appreciate these differences, but we have to sell Camembert as if selling strawberries: Quickly!" Kerautret says. "If you want it to be good, it won't be good forever. Otherwise, we'll have to go back to items that look good and last forever."

New Camembert au Calvados from French Cheese Club member E. Graindorge marries two Normandy classics. "It's lightly flavored with Calvados," says French Cheese Club's Delannes, referring to the apple-flavored brandy.

Le Roulé hails from Burgundy. "It's made from fresh cow's milk and cream, spread out on large mats, sprinkled with herbs or cranberries, and hand rolled to form a pinwheel," says Richard Kessler, vice president of marketing and sales, Fromartharie Inc., New Fairfield, CT. "It's pretty, with widespread appeal, and great for cooking."

New packaging protects delicate cheeses

is made from pasteurized milk and currently maturing in France. "We're excited about these goat cheeses, and we'll have them for the holidays," says Todd Druhot, gourmet cheese buyer and director of Atlanta Foods' cheese importing program. "Because they were made in April and May, they're the best milk, and there's an assortment of shapes in each package, so they're interesting for the retailer. When you see the same cheeses in stores in France, they're encased in mold, but when you cut into them, they still have a nice, white chalky center and aren't overripe. They taste wonderful."

Sevre et Belle produces a very traditional, creamy, non-acidic goat cheese. "The company creates its own cultures and sources milk only within 30 kilometers of the dairy," says Amel Chevrollier, Interval Export's marketing manager based in Trappes, France. In the United States, importer Interval USA is headquartered in Fort Lee, NJ.

French Cheese Club member L'Étoile du Sud exports pasteurized goat's milk cheeses such as Boucantrin, made in the village of Loubressac, and Le Provençal, a soft white specialty cheese from Provence.

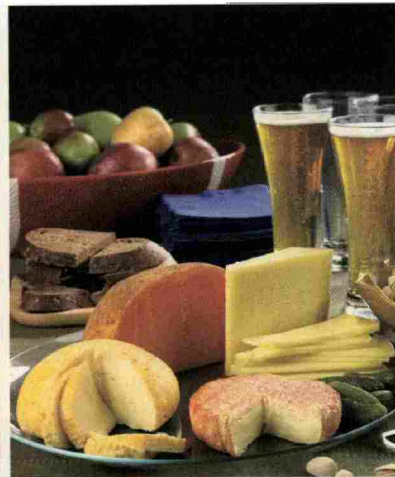
The cheesemaker also exports Rove des Garrigues, named for the twisty-horned Rove goat. "This little fresh goat cheese is like eating a piece of wild thyme steeped in milk," says Jill Forster, imported cheese lead organizer for Kowalski's Markets, an eight-store chain based in Woodbury, MN.

P'tit Pyrénées, aged 70 days, is made from sheep's and cow's milk. "It's interesting because it's mixed milk, with the very particular sheep's milk flavor and the roundness of the cow's milk," says Pascal Vaydie, import sales director. Lactalis USA, New York, NY. "New Valbreso Light fills a demand for a light product that tastes good." Valbreso Light is made from 100 percent sheep's milk and contains 55 percent less fat.

New Arrivals

Valcrest, a Rhone Alps co-op, produces regional goat's milk and cow's milk cheeses, including the Bourdin and Curtet brands of Saint Marcellin, Saint Félicien and Vache de Chalais. The company also is branching out into goat cheese canapés. "We're making Cerises and Aperichèvre as well as ready-to-bake, oven-safe Le Cocktail and other hors d'oeuvre trays for retail and foodservice," says Françoise Magis, sales manager, Valcrest America Corp., New York, NY.

Anco is introducing a line of sliced French cheeses: Brie and Fol Epi in eight- and 25-slice packs. "The thin, round, foldable, interleaved slices are great for upscale sandwiches and burgers," says Anco's Hofer Louis. "You have portion control and no waste."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CHEESES OF FRANCE

Soignon's Crumbled Goat Cheese won the gold medal for retail packaging at the 2008 Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association's World Championship Cheese Contest. The resealable pouch stands by itself and holds four-ounces of tender, tangy, perfectly crumbled fresh goat cheese, salad-ready.

"It's completely natural," says Dominique Pénicaud, CEO, Couturier North America, Warwick, RI, importers of Soignon. "Just fresh, unripened goat cheese, with no additives or preservatives, from our farmer cooperative in Poitou." Other Soignon products include logs, mixed-milk Chaubier, goat Brie, Bûche, Chabichou de Poitou and Crottin.

Crème de Chaource was created in response to demand from French chefs using Chaource in recipes who wanted something as spoonable as Cancoillotte. "Try Crème de Chaource melted on a piece of toast—it's delicious," says French Cheese Club's Delannes.

To heighten consumer awareness about French cheeses, the Cheeses of France Marketing Council is touting "The Fromage

Plate" as part of its "Parlez-vous fromage?" campaign. The Fromage Plate features maître fromager and noted author Max McCalman's recommendations for exploring the variety of French cheeses and the different ways one can prepare French cheese plates. The Cheeses of France Marketing Council represents the interests of all imported French cheeses.

"A simple idea like designing and displaying an appealing 'fromage plate' at retail will stimulate consumer involvement and drive at-home usage," says Portland, ME-based Mike Collins, Cheeses of France's U.S. marketing director. "The fromage plate makes purchasing cheese fun. It's an easy way to entertain and a great way to experience the wonderful tastes and textures of the cheeses of France."

Steeped in terroirs and traditions, French cheesemakers are bringing variety and creativity to the U.S. market. And for many Americans, the phrase "Parlez-vous fromage?" needs no translation. **DB**