

Take that, French cheese, foie gras

WASHINGTON – Roquefort cheese and some other popular European food imports could disappear soon from U.S. gourmet shops and supermarkets.

The imports, which also include selected processed meats from Italy and jams from France, are hostages in a long-running trans-Atlantic food fight over the European Union's French-led refusal to import hormone-treated U.S. beef.

If the EU doesn't lift its 20-year beef ban, the U.S. gets to impose punishing tariffs on selected products that EU members want to sell here. The World Trade Organization ruled that the ban had no scientific basis and in 1999 authorized retaliatory U.S. tariffs until the EU relents.

The first round of tariffs didn't make the EU budge, so the Bush administration's U.S. trade representative, Susan Schwab, announced a second round as she left office in January.

No one's likely to starve as a result, but the pending 300 percent duty on Roquefort, which could be imposed as soon as April 23, would drive its price into the unheard-of range of \$60 a pound.

At \$60, Roquefort "will die a slow death over maybe four months" as stockpiles sell out, predicted Dominique Delugeau, the vice president for sales and marketing at DCI Cheese Co., in Richfield, Wis.

While Roquefort is the most harshly attacked, other 100 percent U.S. tariffs probably would double the retail prices of bottled water from Italy such as San Pellegrino, chestnuts from France and foie gras, truffles, beef sausage,

bone-in hams, canned peaches and filled chocolates from 26 EU member countries, France prominent among them.

If EU members won't start buying U.S. beef, their best hope is that Obama administration trade negotiators merely threaten their European counterparts with punishing new U.S. tariffs and don't impose them. Incoming U.S.

Trade Representative Ron Kirk signaled that possibility by deferring the new tariffs' effective date, originally set for March 23, for a month.

