

## Venerable French Firm's Best Roquefort

### THE CHEESE COURSE

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Like a reserve wine, a wheel of Gabriel Coulet's La Petite Cave Roquefort represents this French firm's finest output. The cheese maker selects wheels for the La Petite Cave designation based on the quality of the paste, or interior. These crème de la crème cheeses have well-developed and well-distributed pockets of blue and an exceptionally creamy texture.

But the comparison to reserve wine goes only so far. Winemakers often use their finest vineyards for a reserve bottling, or give that wine more time in oak. But Coulet makes Roquefort with roughly the same recipe every day. Why some batches develop differently may have to do with variations in milk quality, or with who made the cheese that day, but the fact that artisan cheeses do vary reminds us that nature has the last word.

The firm of Gabriel Coulet is third-largest among Roquefort's eight producers. A century-old company now run by M. Coulet's descendants, it buys raw sheep milk from farms in the region and transforms it into one of France's best-loved cheeses. While still in the vat, the milk is inoculated with the *Penicillium* spores that will eventually produce the cheese's blue veins. But the spores remain essentially dormant until the young wheels are pierced to create air channels and provide the oxygen the spores need to grow.

When the wheels are eight days old, they are taken to natural caves in the region to ripen. The appellation rules for Roquefort require this sojourn in the humid caves, which, in the case of the Coulet Roquefort, lasts about three weeks. The veining develops during this time. Finally, the wheels are wrapped in foil and placed in cold storage for anywhere from three to eight months.

Roquefort can be easily sabotaged by poor handling between the dairy and the cheese counter, so even La Petite Cave can be disappointing sometimes. Ask for a taste. The cheese should have an off-white to ivory background; a buttery, silken texture

with no granularity; and a sweet, gentle finish, without the astringency or biting pungency that mars a lot of Roquefort. In good condition, La Petite Cave Roquefort delivers a taste experience you won't soon forget.

Sauternes is the predictable match for Roquefort, but why be predictable? A fine, aged sherry also embraces this cheese.

*La Petite Cave is available at Wild Raspberry in Cromwell, Say Cheese in Simsbury and Fromage in Old Saybrook.*



JOHN LEE / SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

**ONLY THE FINEST WHEELS** of Gabriel Coulet Roquefort are given the La Petite Cave designation.

Printing imperfections present during scanning

