An Introduction to French Cheeses

Over 40 years ago, General Charles de Gaulle said, “How can anyone be expected to govern a country with 246 cheeses?”¹ It seems the French failed to heed the concerns of the General, since it is now estimated that there are between 600 and just over 1,000 different French cheeses.

While this includes a decent proportion of local, artisan variations, there are also plenty of new, more mass produced varieties as well.

Cheese has long since been an integral part of French culture alongside bread and wine; a fondness and deep rooted history, surely unparalleled in any other country in the world.

The word ‘fromage’, takes its origin from Latin. During Roman times, cheese was made by placing curdled milk in perforated moulds which allowed the whey to drain away. The Latin word for these containers was ‘forma’. Around the 13th Century, forma became formage and finally in the 15th Century, formage became fromage.

During the Middle Ages, the tradition of cheese-making was developing in the French monasteries. It was the monks who taught farmers about animal husbandry as well as basic techniques to keep their milk clean. The peasants learnt ripening and ageing techniques from their teachers and cheese took off, rapidly became the major source of protein, as well as a great destination for any surplus milk production. Communities of mountain farmers began to form small dairy associations, mainly in the Jura and the Alpine regions.

In 962AD the first of the famous Trappist cheeses, Maroilles, is said to have been created at an abbey in the Thiérache region of northern France. Monks discovered that by rubbing the surface of their small, soft cheeses with salt, they could create a pungent aroma and distinctive flavour. Other Trappist cheeses followed later, including Pont l’Evêque, Chaumes and Epoisses to name but a few. One of the most famous Trappist cheeses, Munster, is in fact derived from the Greek and Latin words for monastery.

Roquefort is widely regarded as the earliest recorded French cheese. Such was its importance, that Pliny, in his book of around AD 79, described it as “the cheese that bears away the prize at Rome where they are always ready to compare and appreciate good things from every land”. In 1411 Charles VI granted the citizens of Roquefort the monopoly of ripening their cheeses in the local caves, as had already been customary for many

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¹although numbers other than 246 are often cited
²UN Food & Agriculture Organisation, 2008
³Canadian Dairy Information Centre, 2010
hundreds of years. Centuries later, in 1925, the first Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée (AOC) was granted to Roquefort cheese. Further regulation in 1961 declared that true Roqueforts must be ripened in the natural caves of Mont Combalou.

Today, a total of 46 French cheeses proudly display the AOC classification, with Charolais becoming the most recent addition in January 2010. AOC is described as “the denomination of a country, region, or locale used to designate a product of the region and of which the quality and the characteristics are exclusively or essentially derived from the geography”.

Certainly, many French cheeses have retained their individual characteristics, allowing the complexities of nature, combined of course with some well practiced skills, to dictate their size, shape and flavour. In mountainous regions, for example, large cheese wheels were made which could be stored and matured for long periods, until shepherds had the opportunity to travel the long distances to the nearest market. Meanwhile, cheeses produced in the flatter, more popularised areas tended to be fresher, softer and less mature as they were quickly sold and eaten. In the case of Roquefort, the blue veins are achieved by using tiny mushroom spores collected from the famous caves, which are then applied to the cheese to create fungal growth.

Opinions do vary, but unsurprisingly the most popular cheese in France is generally considered to be Camembert, with the best selling reputed to be Emmental, due to its widespread use in cooking. Outside of France, particularly in the UK, Camembert is again widely regarded as the best-known French cheese. The popularity of Camembert is generally attributed to two unrelated events. The first being the introduction of small wooden boxes which proved perfect for protecting the soft, fragile cheeses, and the second being the invention of the train. These factors alone enabled the cheeses to be transported from Normandy in a timely and suitable fashion for buyers in Paris and beyond.

The French export, in monetary terms, more cheese than any other nation in the world². However, this only amounts for 30% of their total production, meaning each year they consume on average a whopping 24.6 kilos of cheese per person, second only globally to Greece. This compares to UK consumption of exactly half that of the French, at 12.3 kilos on average³.

Why not enhance your menu today, by checking out our range of French speciality cheeses listed on the next page. If you can’t find what you’re after then speak with your sales contact at Reynolds, as we’re happy to source more wonderful varieties upon request.