



# C'EST VRAI? CA PUE!

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SELF-CONFESSED FROMAGE TRAGIC **RACHEL** **BAJADA** HOLDS HER NOSE, DONS A HAIR NET AND VENTURES INTO THE PUNGENT WORLD OF UNDERGROUND CHEESE MATURATION - AND LEARNS A FEW HARD TRUTHS ALONG THE WAY





**W**hen I first arrived in Paris over two years ago, if you had tried to convince me that French cheese was an endangered species, I would likely have choked on my *salade de chèvre chaud*.

My first exposure to the concept of *les fromages en voie de disparition* (endangered cheeses) was through a French documentary called *La Guerre des Fromages qui Puent* (The War of Stinky Cheeses) — an eye-opening exposé revealing how countless French cheeses become extinct each year due to increasing hygiene controls, the globalisation of milk producers via mega dairy cooperatives, and the general decline in demand for premium artisanal products.

Somewhat distressed and curious to learn more, I arranged to meet with one of Paris's most respected, accomplished and outspoken

men in the cheese business: Philippe Alléosse.

A master *fromager* and *affineur*, Alléosse's task is to ripen cheeses in his vast network of Parisian *caves*.

He is not only a master when it comes to cheese making, but also a passionate ambassador for the preservation of what could be a dying art — the cultivation of stinky, gooey and delectable *fromage*.

#### SERIOUS BUSINESS

I meet with Alléosse at his cheese maturation *caves*, which are situated near Clichy in the buzzing and eclectic 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement.

Eager to get to the bottom of the situation, I ask him which exactly of the French cheeses face extinction.

His response is terrifying and astonishingly simple: "All of them."

As I prepare for my tour the *caves*, Alléosse explains that when many French people think they are buying a genuine Brie, Roquefort or Sainte-Maure-de-Touraine, what they're actually getting is a mass-produced, industrial cheese, which is essentially a rip-off of the genuine, artisanal article.

"It's not *appellation d'origine contrôlée* [AOC], and a lot of the time it's not even made from raw milk," he says.

"Take Camembert AOC, for example. There are only a handful of producers left making AOC Camembert, not to mention all the lesser-known cheeses made on a small scale, whose producers can't keep up with the strict hygiene regulations being imposed on them."

Alléosse is determined to show me first hand the dedication, patience and *savoir-faire* required for the genuine artisanal production



## LA CUISINE FRANÇAISE



of AOC cheeses – and it's serious business. For one, the hygiene standards on site are higher than your average hospital, and I soon find myself resembling a doctor about to launch into surgery, complete with long white coat and hair net.

Even my new, in-season espadrille wedges are given the treatment and tucked away in gorgeous blue plastic sockettes, which are apparently necessary if we're to prevent foreign microbes setting up home in the *caves*.

Occupying over 300 square metres underground, the *caves* are divided into four separate zones, categorised by cheese variety: *La cave à croûtes lavées* (washed rind cheese cave), which includes Reblochon, Maroilles and Epoisses; *La cave aux chèvres* (goats milk cheese cave); *La cave à pâte molle à croûtes fleuries* (soft cheeses with bloomy rind), which includes Brie, Coulommiers, Saint Félicien and Saint Marcellin; and *La cave à tomme pâtes cuites/pressées* (pressed or cooked hard cheeses), which houses varieties such as Comté, Beaufort and Pecorino.

We dive in, and the first thing that hits me is the smell, which could best be described as like taking a long, deep sniff from a bottle of pure, industrial-grade ammonia.

As I ask myself how I'm going to cope with this stench for over an hour, Alléosse senses my discomfort and assures me I'll get used to it.

I make a conscious effort to breathe through my mouth and Alléosse swings open the giant fridge doors guarding the first *cave*.

My cinetrash mind makes a quick comparison to a scene from a H.R. Giger sci-fi film, where you see thousands of alien eggs resting dormant underground.

But what lies before me is far more interesting and a little more terrestrial: in this room, the simple elements of milk, bacteria, perfect conditions and *terroir* combine to transform humble curds into complex, diverse and delicious cheeses.

I instantly want to know everything there ever was to know about cheese!

### GROOVIN' THE PUE

We start with one of the most renowned and stinky of all French cheeses: Époisses. Hailing from the Burgundy region, this cheese was one of Napoleon's favourites and, such is its *pue* factor, the French are apparently banned from carrying it on public transport (note: French Living Magazine is unable to confirm the accuracy of this tasty snippet, but











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delicious and dreamy, especially when served (in any way, shape or form) with the humble potato. It’s pure comfort food.

Eager to know the secrets of such a cheese behemoth, I ask Alléosse what the Reblochon is washed in.

His answer is disappointing, to say the least. “Ça, c’est un secret,” he says with a devious grin.

“Je ne le dis à personne (‘I don’t tell anyone’)... If anyone else knew, I wouldn’t have the best Reblochon, would I? Not even my wife knows. The recipe has never even been written down. It has been passed on through three generations of *fromagers* purely by word of mouth. And it will stay that way.”

As we move into the next *cave*, I ponder the wonderful – and slightly worrying – fact that the secret to creating such a highly coveted product is in the hands of one man.

And there’s no spare copy.

Next, we find a room full of cheese mostly made from goat’s milk, and the different varieties of *chèvres* are endless: pyramids, bricks, cylinders, *bouchons* and heart shapes.

I spot one of my favourites: a Corsican cheese covered in a soft blue-grey mould, wild bush herbs, juniper berries and fennel seeds – the lovable Brin d’Amour – which, as Alléosse beckons me over to a large rack of log-shaped *chèvres*, he tells me is frequently imitated and sold under the name of Fleur de Maquis.

I identify the logs as Le Sainte-Maure-de-Touraine, the Loire Valley’s famous goat’s cheese, which Alléosse tells me is also prone to imitation.

“The large majority of what you find in the supermarket,



From top right: Langres maturing in caves; Three Reblochons at various ages; Alléosse with two goats cheeses at different stages of ripening

at *le marché* and at a lot of *fromageries* is not the real AOC kind,” he explains.

“The straw that sits inside the log to keep it stable during maturation must bear the markings and name of the producer. If the straw is blank, it could have come from anywhere.”

**POWER AND MITES**

Lastly, I am guided to the fourth *cave*, which is also the coldest.

This special room houses the most mature, complex, exotic and fascinating of cheeses – it’s the *cave* of pressed/hard-cooked cheeses, or what I would label as The Cheese Hall of Fame.

There are Spanish Machengos, Italian Pecorinos, huge wheels of Beaufort and Comté, and beautiful old Mimolettes, with crater-like corroded crusts.



**VOULEZ-VOUS Y ALLER?**

**WHERE:** Fromagerie Alléosse Boutique  
 13, rue Poncelet 75017 PARIS  
 Metro Ternes (line 2)  
 Tél. : +33 (0)1.46.22.50.45

**WHEN:** Tuesday to Saturday  
 9am - 12.40pm, 4pm to 6.45pm  
 Sunday 9am - 12.45pm  
<http://fromage-alleosse.com/>  
 Cave visits on special request and appointment only





I remark that Mimolettes look like something has been eating away at them, and Alléosse laughs and says, "Well, it is being eaten – it's covered in cheese mites!"

He taps one on the bench and a pile of dust gathers. But this is no ordinary dust – it is actually a pile of microscopic bugs whose actions on the cheese's surface influence flavour and character. This cheese is literally alive.

It's during this moment that I truly begin to grasp and appreciate this artisanal trade for what it is: a miracle of nature, an art, a science, a passion and a skill that has been handed down through humanity since it was first created over 6,000 years ago.

Walking out of Alléosse's *caves d'affinage*, I feel so fortunate to have seen and experienced this ancient tradition first hand, and feel so glad that artisans like Alléosse are keeping the tradition alive in the current climate of big industry and mass production.

At the same time, I can't help but feel a sense of melancholy at the sad reality that France, the original cheese Mecca of the world, has a cheese industry that is fast declining.

It's impossible to imagine France without its wonderful, stinky cheeses. Let's hope we never have to.

**CHEESE BITES:**

- Of the 100-150 raw milk cheeses available, three disappear each year, meaning around 40 have become extinct in the last decade.
- While Americans, Australians and Britons are increasingly going for unpasteurised cheese, in France raw milk cheeses dropped to 179,750 tonnes in 2008 against 183,500 tonnes in 2006.
- Bleu de Termignon, Vacherin des Bauges, Vacherin d'Abondance, Persillés de Tignes des Aravis and de Semnoz, Reblochon du Mont-Cenis, Colombier des Aillons, Galette du Mont-d'Or are just some of the cheeses that have disappeared. During the last 30 years, more than 50 traditional cheeses disappeared, whereas industrial production continues to increase
- French people eat 23.9 kg of cheese per capita per year, which is the second highest consumption rate, just after the Greeks. But that good score hides a cruel reality: raw milk cheeses are only 7 per cent of that consumption.



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