

Cheese CONNOISSEUR

SUMMER 10 \$5.95

Into The Soul Of France

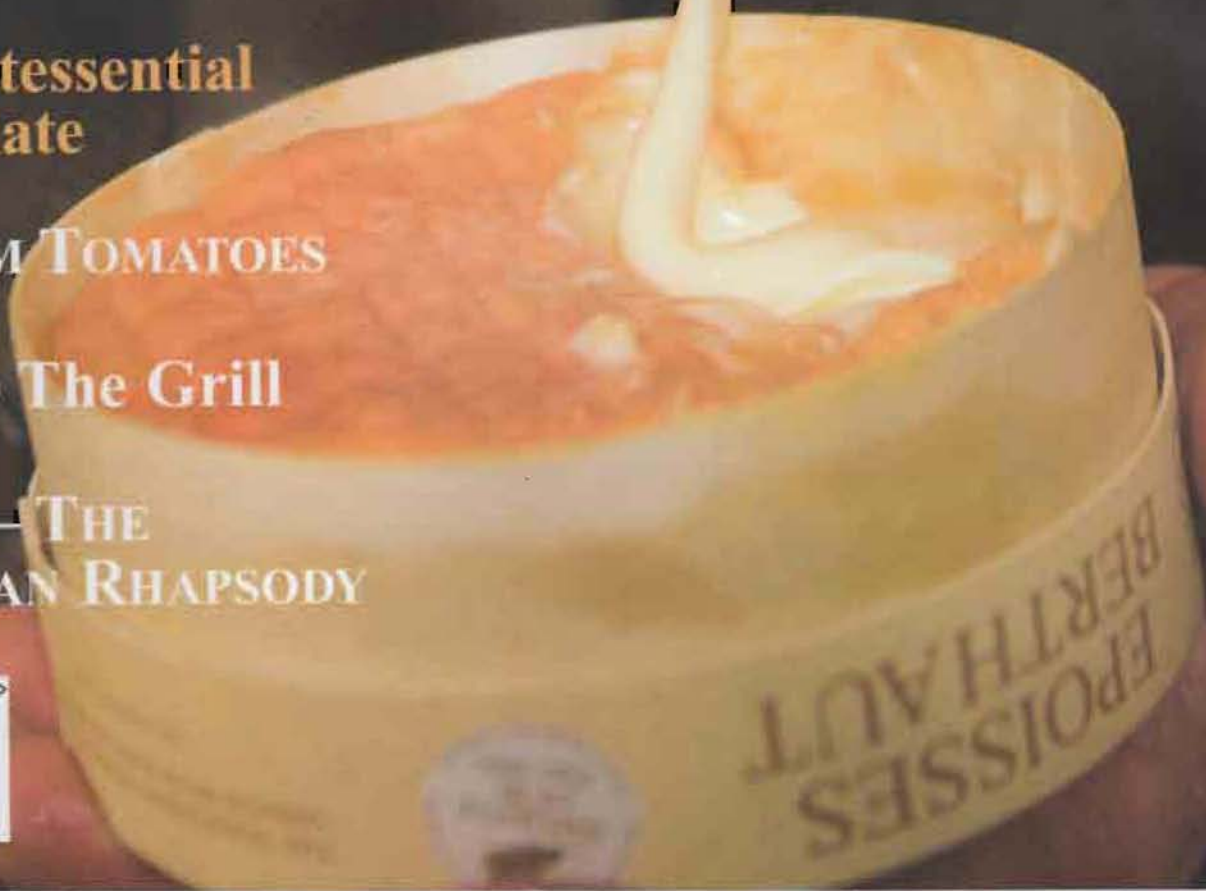
*Paris may be the heart of France,
but the countryside is its soul*

**The Quintessential
Cheese Plate**

HEIRLOOM TOMATOES

Plank Up The Grill

**TOKAJI — THE
HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY**





INTO THE SOUL OF FRANCE


PARIS MAY BE THE HEART OF FRANCE,
BUT THE COUNTRYSIDE IS ITS SOUL

by lee smith

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VÉRONIQUE LEPLAT



STOP



Paris is the French city most Americans are familiar with, yet it's as emblematic of France as New York City is of the United States. For most Americans, Paris means haute couture, haute cuisine and haute culture — offering a glamorous exterior while forbidding entry into its soul. The real Paris is hidden in its nooks and crannies — the small, familiar neighborhoods, local shops and boutiques where you're greeted by name and an easy camaraderie is the norm. Locals have their favorites — their chosen boulangerie (bread bakery) and patisserie (pastry shop); the small coffee shop where the owner is friendlier than the manager of the over-priced, snobby coffee shop down the block; and, of course, the fromagerie — the local cheese shop.

Here is life both intimate and personal. Locals pick up a loaf of crusty bread and half pint of raspberries for lunch. They shop for food daily and look at its procurement as an art form rather than a chore. They buy cheeses in small pieces for consumption within in few days. On cold days, couples in warm coats and fuzzy hats sit outside sipping their coffee or hot chocolate.

But, even with its intimacies, Paris is cosmopolitan and urbane; the pastoral, agricultural countryside may well be the real France.

Travel though the countryside and the layers are peeled away. Such is the journey to Burgundy to find the unctuous treasure known as Epoisses de Bourgogne AOC or, more commonly, just Epoisses.

This uncooked, soft, washed-rind cheese makes itself known to your nose long before your palate experiences its pleasures. Heady, strong and meaty with a smooth, creamy consistency, Epoisses is redolent of woodland aromas. Once in the mouth, it tastes surprisingly mild and well balanced with earthy notes and hints of dried fruit. Epoisses was called the "King of All Cheeses" by the French gastronome and writer Brillat-Savarin, and it was reputed to be Napoleon's favorite cheese.

Burgundy, located in eastern France, is often thought of as the country's food capital. Driving through the province, one senses something special about this place. It's a land of gentle hills that seem to roll and undulate, creating the illusion of a living creature moving on its own volition.

One passes by meticulously manicured farms. Carefully tended vineyards whose grapes produce the famous red and white Burgundy and Chablis vines take shape on the hills.

The famous white Charolaise cattle whose meat is traditionally used for Beef Bourguignon — the classic, rich and hearty stew — drink at watering holes surrounded by carefully placed limestone rocks that look centuries old. Off in the distance, farmhouses look magical and, every once in a while, a castle emerges. One can easily imagine Charlemagne riding through these ancient lands long before blacktop and concrete — imagining the empire he was destined to rule.

finding epoisses

The ancient village of Epoisses is located in the département — or region — of Côte-d'Or halfway between Dijon and Auxerre. The Château d'Époisses, in the center of the village, seems to magically appear after a turn at the sign "Berthaut." Once a fortress and later a castle, it's changed hands many times since its reputed beginnings in the 6th century; its current semi-circular shape dates back to the French Revolution.

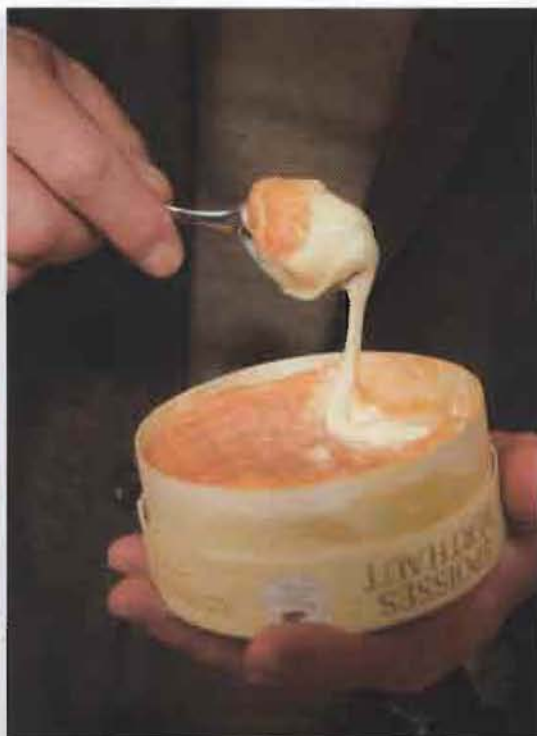
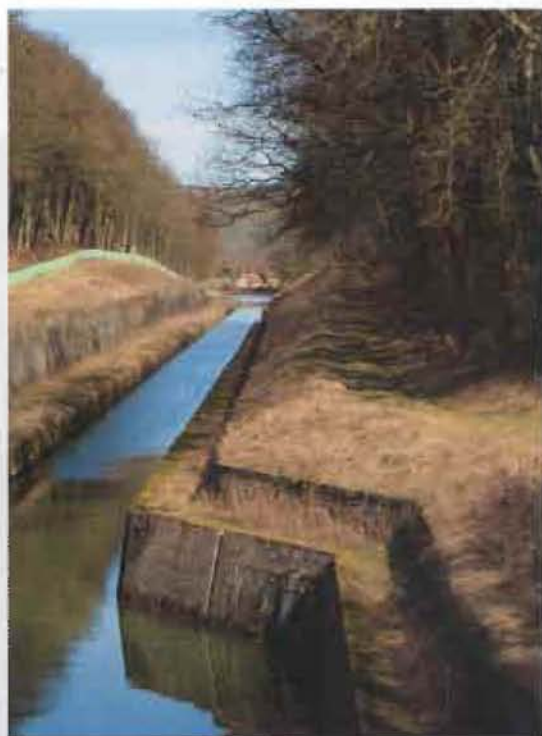
Today, the castle moat is filled in and the river that once protected Epoisses from the ravages of Crusaders and other marauding armies still loops around the village whose streets seem too narrow for one car, much less two. Originally laid out for horses and men, the streets wind and turn with little reason. Small restaurants and shops peak out of cubbyhole doorways. This is the birthplace of the spectacular cheese called Epoisses.

Oral tradition dictates that in the 16th century, the village was home to L'Abbaye de Cîteaux monastery. It housed a community of Cistercian monks who began making cheese. When they abandoned the monastery some 200 years later, the recipe was turned over to local farmers' wives who continued to make the cheese and, some say, who perfected the recipe.

The cheese remained popular through the centuries — over 300 individual farms were making Epoisses by the beginning of the 20th. But two world wars took their toll and by the end of World War II, production had all but died out. France was trying to rebuild after the war's devastation. Its people were hungry and everyone was encouraged to grow crops and raise livestock to feed those who had survived the conflict. The idea of experimenting with a troublesome "old" cheese was considered absurd and, to some, an unnecessary waste that bordered on treason.

This historic cheese was rescued from probable extinction by the bravery and determination of Robert and Simone Berthaut. In 1954, this farming couple from the village gave the world a gift.

Visionaries who remembered Epoisses and the hundreds of farms that had made it, Robert and Simone questioned the old-time farm wives about their traditional recipes. Even in the best of times and with great knowledge and skill, Epoisses is one of the most difficult cheeses in the world to make. So they were not surprised when their early trials resulted in inedible





cheese — cheese they buried in the dead of night in the middle of the fields in order to avoid the harsh criticism of the neighbors who saw their early tribulations as foolish selfishness.

But Robert and Simone persevered and single-handedly saved one of the greatest cheeses from almost certain demise. Today, as they sit in their home offering Simone's delicious, homemade Gougères — the classic Burgundy cheese puff that is crisp on the outside, light and airy in the center — they seem genuinely surprised that anyone would be interested in them, almost embarrassed by their success. But they are real French treasures whose struggles were born out a need to survive and a desire protect their heritage.

Their son Jean, the president of Fromagerie Berthaut, was brought up — almost literally — in stinky cheese. The cheeses were made in the house's renovated garage and

Jean's bedroom was directly above the garage. Each morning he woke to the wafting odors of ripening Epoisses, which changed ever so slightly as the cheese aged. As a young man, he would greet his father at the breakfast table and tell him what stage the cheese was at and what needed to be done. To say Epoisses is in his blood might actually be true.

It was Jean Berthaut who brought Epoisses out of Burgundy and to the world, refining the manufacturing techniques, bringing new technologies that allowed greater production, consistency, and safety while still maintaining the old-world traditions that keep Epoisses the king of all cheeses.

the making of epoisses

Epoisses is a stinker thanks to its secret ingredient, a bacterium called *Brevibacterium linens* or, as it is commonly





*Robert and Simone Berthaut,
holding their infant son Jean*



*Jean Berthaut,
president of Fromagerie Berthaut*

known, B. linens. All washed-rind cheeses are made using B. linens and all emit a profoundly stinky odor. Rumor has it that Epoisses cheese was once banned from all public transportation in France due to its offensive odor. But to those willing to brave its notorious bark, the reward is a delicious, surprisingly mild cheese full of flavor.

B. linens also gives washed rinds their distinctive color — shades ranging from a light mocha to pale orange to bright reddish orange. As the cheese ages, the color gets more pronounced so, generally, the darker the color, the older the cheese and the more pronounced the flavor. While some people question the word natural to describe the distinctive bright orange hue, it is the true color of B. linens and no coloring agent is added.

In the area surrounding the village of Epoisses, B. linens occurs naturally in the native flora, soil and air. It's even

found in the milk of cows that graze there, which is why it's critical that only locally sourced milk be used. It's said that if one were to leave a piece of plain cheese or slice of bread on a rock anywhere in the area for a couple of days, it would grow a reddish brown mold caused by wild B. Linens. It was this wild bacteria that the monks of L' Abbaye de Citeaux discovered, most likely by accident.

The tradition of washing cheeses in beer, wine or spirits is part of the heritage of monastery cheeses because the monks were often brewers and alcoholic drinks were available. Washing cheese protects the interior paste and provides a perfect yeasty environment for the finicky B. linens to grow. The result is always a pungent aroma and meaty flavor. Local lore says the pungency and creamy texture were welcomed during times of religious fasting or during shortages of meat.



epoisses sauce

Adapted from a recipe by Chef Cuisiniere Françoise Thévenard — known as "Fanfon" — of Restaurant Le Saint Vernier in Semur en Auxois, France.

- 2 cups heavy cream
- Pepper to taste
- 1 bouillon cube, chicken or veal, crumbled
- 1 8-ounce Epoisses cheese, cut into chunks

Heat the cream in a double boiler and season with pepper. Add the bouillon cube. When it dissolves, add the Epoisses and reduce flame to very, very low heat.

Leave on very, very low heat for a minimum of two hours to allow the flavor to develop.

Serve over... everything!



Jean Berthaut faced quite a challenge — how to keep the old techniques but tame the wily B. linens in order to obtain a consistent excellent cheese.

The first step is to design the make process to be as modern as possible. He accomplished this by building a state-of-the-art dairy-processing facility complete with robotics to keep the environment free of unwanted bacteria and as consistent as possible.

After milking, the fresh whole milk is gently heated to 25° to 30° Celsius. It's then left to rest for eight hours, after which rennet is added and the cheese rests for another 16 or more hours. The slow lactic coagulation is needed to keep the curd smooth and silky.

The curd is then very gently cur to release the whey. In smaller plants, the resulting curds are gently placed in molds

but in the case of the ultra modern Berthaut plant, giant robots transfer the curd. After draining for another 48 hours, the cheeses are gently taken out of the molds and dry salted. They continue to dry in humid rooms with flowing air.

When Jean was first learning to mechanize the process, he visited many of the old traditional cheesemakers who said the cheese must dry in wet, windy weather. Beautiful, warm weather with blue skies would destroy the cheese. He thought this was just part of the folklore that surrounded the cheese, but he was wrong. The old-timers were absolutely correct — mastering the winds was a major key to producing consistent cheeses.

At this point in the make process, when the cheeses are still snow white with little flecks of emerging B. linens appearing on the rind, it's time to leave the modern world



and go back 400 years, to a time when everything was done by hand and it was an artist's touch that allowed the treasure of Epoisses to emerge. The cheeses are moved to another building — no mechanization allowed. Everything is done by hand and the natural bacteria encouraged to flourish.

The cheeses will be washed and rubbed by hand. Epoisses is washed once the first week with a salt-water solution. Gradually, the washings will increase and Marc de Bourgogne — a spirit made from the pressed skins, pulp, and seeds leftover after wine grapes are processed into wine — will be added to the brine with increasing strength. Too much Marc de Bourgogne will kill the B. linens, killing the cheese. Too little and the cheese will not become Epoisses.

After time, the rind slowly turns sticky, its characteristic red-orange color blooms and a rich aroma fills the air. Its fla-

vors will be sweet and subtle, never bitter. This is a big cheese for big foods, pairing perfectly with beef.

adventures with epoisses

Epoisses is perfect at any time, spooned out of its wooden hoop and eaten on hearty breads. It's wonderful with dark berry jams, especially blackberries; in fact, the pairings are endless. Try your favorite honey, apples, and ham. One of the classic pairings is beef — on a sandwich or over a steak. Red meat and Epoisses just seem to love one another.

Epoisses is a wonderful cooking cheese, but only for the strong hearted. Outsiders may question its overpowering aroma of stinky feet and object to the intense olfactory assault caused by heating or baking. For those who don't find the aroma off-putting, the result is culinary wonder. CC

Legendary Taste



Traditional cheese made by
Jean Berthaut
Époisses, Burgundy ~ France



8.8 oz



1431
Époisses
&
Perrière



Cut to order 2 lbs



14 oz

1640 Soumaintrain

1875 Affidélice



7 oz



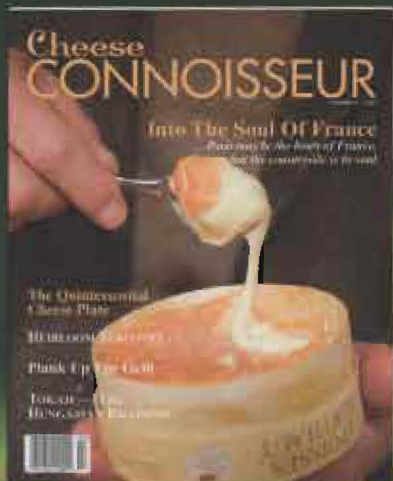
2 oz

1980's Trou du Cru



CHEESE INFO ~ TRADE RESOURCES ~ RECIPES
WWW.FRENCHCHEESECLUB.COM

Don't ever miss an issue!



The magazine for tasteful living

Sign up at
www.cheeseconnoisseur.com to start your subscription