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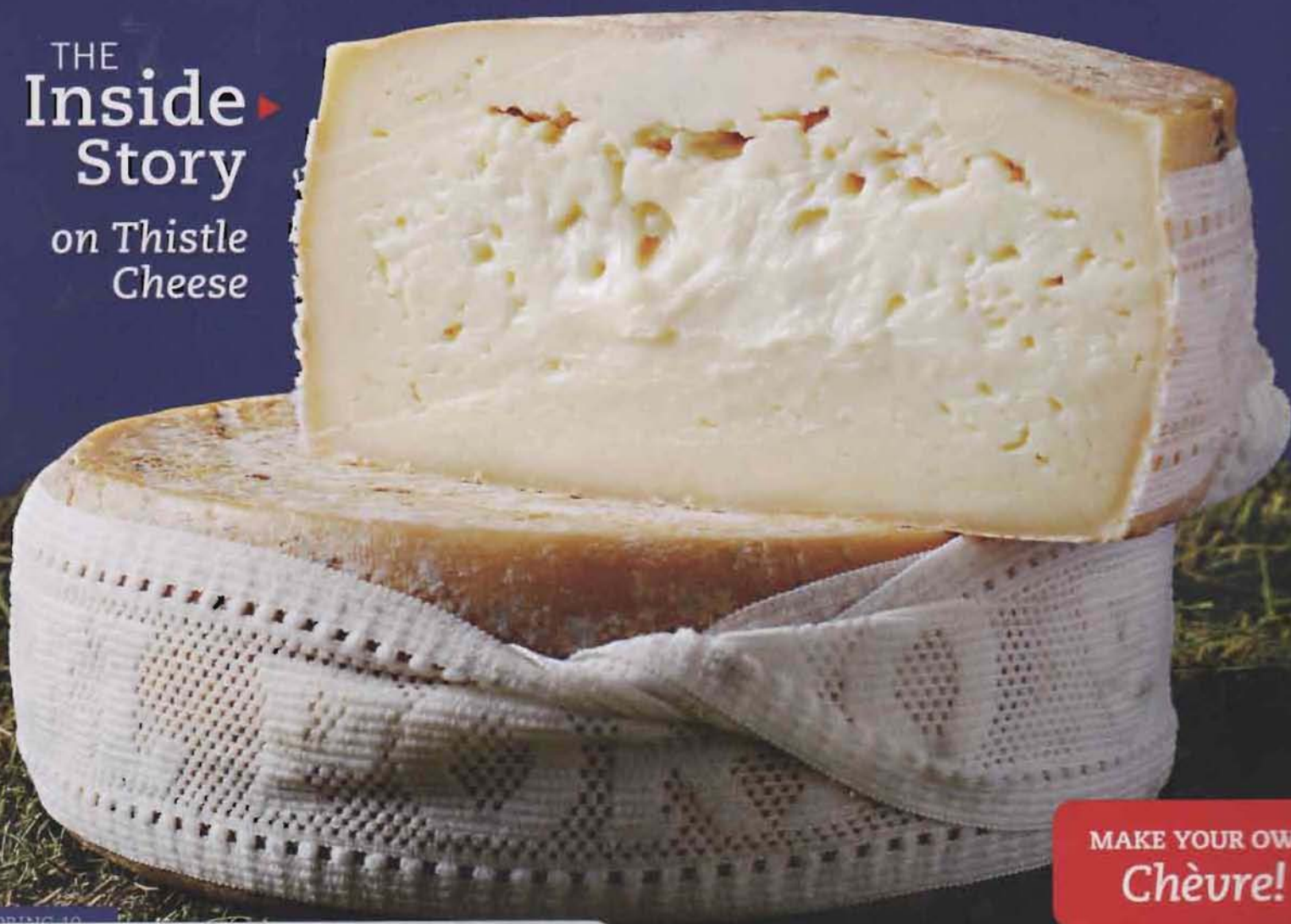
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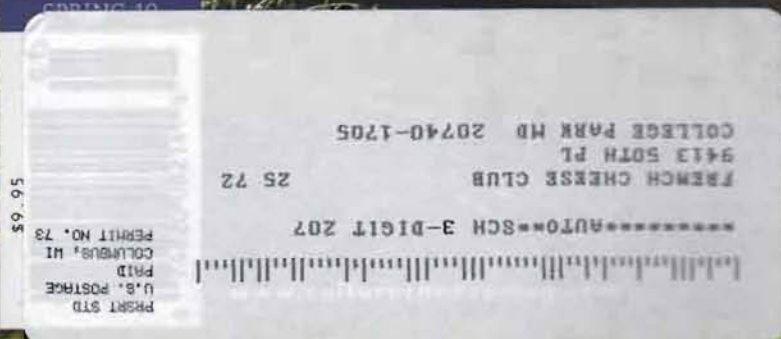
the word on cheese

culture

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Cheese



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Chèvre!



"Dairy used to be an industry that was run from Washington... It is now run by the consumer."

—DAN CARTER, DAIRY BUSINESS INNOVATION CENTER, p. 18





CLASSICAL STUDIES
in Normandy



LEARNING ABOUT THE GREAT CHEESES OF
FRANCE'S FABLED DAIRY LAND

By

SUSAN HERMANN LOOMIS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVEN ROTHFELD



View across from the
Spruytte creamery

Nothing at the low-lying, timbered farm whose courtyard I've just driven into announces the place as one of the finest dairies in Normandy.

There isn't a proper sign or a cow to be seen or even a noise to be heard, aside from the sudden peal of bells from the needle-spined church across the street. But when owner and veteran dairyman Jérôme Spruytte suddenly appears, ambling across the courtyard to greet me, I know I'm in the right place. Hand held out and ruddy face offering a shy smile, Spruytte is apologetic. "We've got a market tomorrow and a cheesemonger coming today to pick up his order," he says. "I had to finish getting the cheeses ready and my wife will pack them up in boxes."

Spruytte and his wife, Françoise, are among the last artisanal Pont l'Évêque producers in Normandy. Six days a week, they produce 230 cheeses following exactly the same methods Spruytte's grandmother used more than 60 years ago. Their Pont l'Évêque is considered the best in the region, and they sell every cheese they make. "I'm the third generation here," Spruytte states. "I imagine cheese was made here before that, too." Pont l'Évêque is considered the oldest of the Norman cheeses, with mention of it in 13th-century texts, when it was called Angelot.

GOOD HABITS

"We haven't changed a thing," Spruytte says, leading me to a small wooden door in an ancient wooden building that leads to the dairy. "Except that, unlike my grandmother, we're obliged to test the milk and cheeses for bacteria count." We inch down a stairway so nar-

row that I catch myself holding my breath and emerge into a warm, low-ceilinged space suffused with the aroma of fresh, creamy milk.

"We milk the cows twice a day, and we make cheese while the milk is still warm," Spruytte explains. "We transform 800 liters of milk each day, from 80 Norman cows who eat food that we produce." When the farmer talks about "transforming" milk, he means adding culture and rennet to it and leaving it in a vat to coagulate. An hour later, the soft curds slide through a hose onto a large table lined with linen, breaking apart in the process. As whey drains from the table, the Spruyttes scoop up the curds and fill a series of square molds that will shape the cheese. These molds

three each cheese is salted by hand. "We can almost see the cheeses tense up once they're salted," he adds. "They start dripping then, too." Salt improves the taste of the cheeses, but, more importantly, it inhibits the growth of unwanted bacteria.

At six days, the cheeses are moved into an aging room, or cave, and left in the open air for four days, given a quarter turn each day. The Spruyttes then wrap each cheese in a special, permeable wax paper and stack them in large plastic boxes that remain in the cave to further age the cheeses.

As Spruytte explains the process, he leans lightly against a stack of metal racks covered with fat, white, luscious-smelling squares.



WE REPAINT EACH YEAR, AND WE ARE CAREFUL TO
LEAVE A PORTION OF MOLD-COVERED WALL."

are left to sit for half a day, then the cheeses are turned out onto plastic mats set on metal racks. At this point the cheeses are soft, so the Spruyttes crowd them on the racks and surround the lot with a pressurized metal band that helps maintain their shapes.

Like attentive parents, the Spruyttes must watch over their cheeses constantly. During the first four days the couple turns each cheese a quarter turn. "If we don't turn them, they'll stick together," Spruytte remarks. On day

We're in the so-called cave—a whitewashed, stone room that dates to the 15th century. One of the walls is covered with patches of nasty-looking black mold. Spruytte catches me looking at it. "That mold," he says with a mixture of pride and respect, "is as necessary to our cheeses as the rennet. We repaint each year, and we are careful to leave a portion of mold-covered wall. Without the mold our cheeses have little flavor." One comes to appreciate mold in France, for it is the friend that allows

cheese—and other foods—to develop flavor. It encourages the growth of favorable bacteria that edge out unwanted varieties, keeping cheese healthy as it ages.

By the time these cheeses are ready to leave the aging room they are 15-day-old adolescents. “We can’t sell them until they’re 20 days old,” Spruytte says, noting the rule dictated by the AOC (Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée) awarded to Pont L’Évêque, which is a designation of pedigree that stipulates not only what sort of milk must be used in the cheese but the specifics of every single step of its production. Spruytte recommends eating his cheeses between 28 and 42 days. “The flavor takes on a taste of hazelnuts just out of the shell,” he says, his eyes half closed as though he’s savoring the memory. The Spruyttes enjoy their cheese often. “Every day, without fail,” Spruytte says with a smile.

RAW AT REAUX

A couple of hours west of Pont l’Évêque in the town of Lessay is the Reaux dairy, a huge complex that couldn’t be more different from the Spruytte farmstead. Instead of a tiny laboratory with one milk tank and a table lined with linen, Reaux boasts one large tiled room filled with dozens of traditional pot-bellied vats of milk in the process of curdling to become Camembert. Along one wall is a battery of electronic devices that measure everything from acid content to bacterial flora in the milk.

Reaux has opted to continue making Camembert with raw milk, one of the few industrial creameries to maintain this practice. “It’s not easy to work with raw milk,” says Marc Brunet, director of production. “It opens us up to bacterial risk, but true Camembert is made with raw milk—and we make true Camembert.”



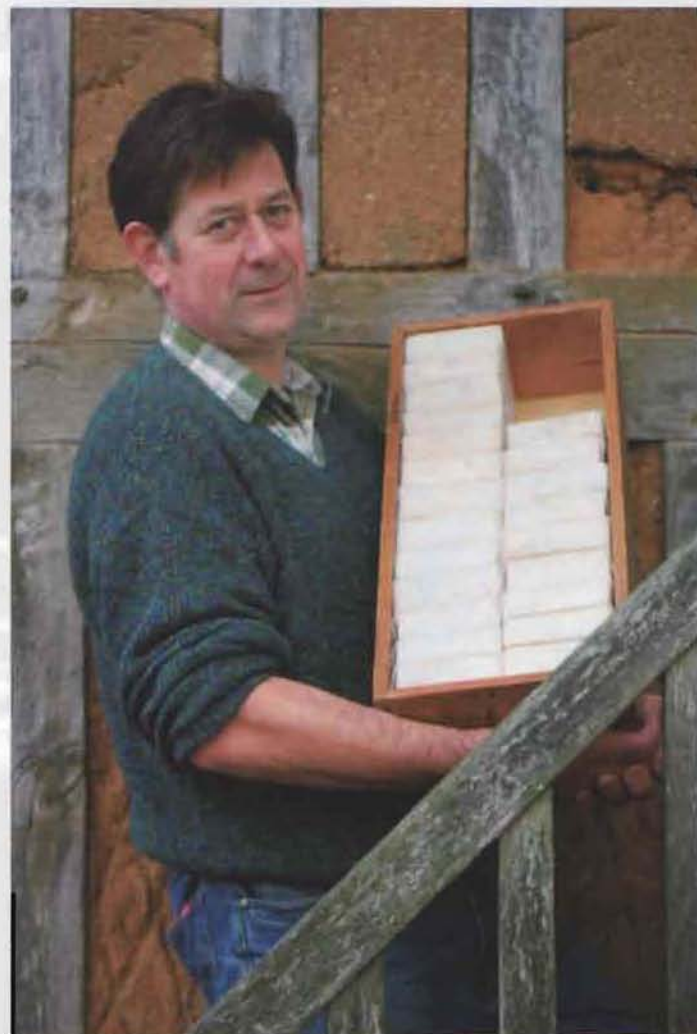
Pont l’Évêque

The method at Reaux hasn’t changed substantially since the days of farmer Marie Harel, credited with inventing Camembert in the latter half of the 18th century. Reaux collects milk from small farms and delivers it to the factory, where it is tested and then decanted into 25-gallon basins, which are left to sit in a temperature-controlled room overnight to mature. The following day the milk is heated, rennet is added, and, an hour later, the curds are cut with an oval rack called a harp. The curds are then ladled by hand into tall, stainless-steel molds. If Madame Harel had one cow, she probably made 15 cheeses a day; Reaux’s daily production is 12,000 cheeses. Harel’s Camembert would have been blue on the exterior, too, for it is *Penicillium candidum* that produces the white rind, and that bacterium wasn’t perfected for use in cheesemaking until 1912.

The Camembert process is painstaking. The atmosphere in the molding room

is tropical, at least 90°F, with a similar percentage of humidity. A dozen young men and women, dressed in white t-shirts so wet that they cling, walk up and down between rows of molds, ladling curds into each container. Every employee is responsible for one thousand molds; each mold is filled five times at 45-minute intervals. For a period of nearly five hours, the work is constant, interrupted only by a rushed trip to assemble and cut the next batch of curds.

Reaux Camembert also has an AOC that protects the name “Camembert de Normandie.” Legend has it that soldiers of both World Wars were nourished with Camembert, and they returned home with enthusiastic stories of this marvelous cheese. Soon it was being made from Australia to the United States, yet no one thought to protect the name Camembert. Today Camembert is made throughout the world, but Camembert de Normandie can be made only in a very confined area of France.



Jérôme Spruytte

Normandy cheeses (top to bottom) Pont l'Évêque, Livarot, Camembert, Neufchâtel



"We're required to use milk from Norman cows," Brunet says. "It's beautiful milk, very high in protein, which gives the cheese a perfect texture and its deep flavor."

Once the molds are full, each is tamped by hand, turned, and topped with a stainless steel weight. The subtle pressure urges the whey from the curds through the night; by the following morning they are ready to be unmolded and trimmed. The next stop is the salting room, where the cheeses are fed into a machine that whisks and twirls them through a veil of salt before they head to the aging room. Though just as damp as the molding room, the cool aging room feels of winter by comparison; instead of the cloying scent of nutrient-rich milk, it smells vaguely of ammonia and cream. Brunet inhales. "This is what it's supposed to smell like," he says. "We make good cheeses here."

We inspect Camembert of varying ages; each batch is marked with a color-coded tag so it can be traced back to the cow. Some cheeses are ivory, others are bright white, and others look as if they are buried in cotton candy. "This one," he explains, picking up a cotton candy version, "has a defect. It shouldn't have all this 'cat hair' on it—we won't be able to sell it."

After about 24 days, the cheeses are wrapped and put into the familiar round boxes made of shaved poplar, which allows them to breathe and age further; at this point, they're ready to go to market.

WRAPPED IN TRADITION

Along with Pont l'Évêque and Camembert, Normandy claims Livarot, a similar cheese with several major differences. Originally cited in 17th-century texts, Livarot was considered the meat of the poor, since the milk used to make it had been skimmed of cream, which was used to make butter. Made on small farms, the cheese was taken—while still fresh—to market in the town of Livarot, where it was purchased by "affineurs," other farmers who would age the cheeses to edibility on their own farms.

This is how the last remaining major producer of raw milk Livarot, La Fromagerie Graindorge, began. In 1910 Eugene Graindorge was both a Livarot producer and an affineur. His cheeses were so popular that he quickly became a full-time affineur and gave up production. His son, Bernard, resumed production after joining the company in 1935, and today the Graindorge factory, which is run by Thierry Graindorge, third generation of the family, is the only major producer of raw milk Livarot.

Livarot is made with milk from Norman cows; curds are cut carefully into small cubes and then mixed to pellet size and poured into tall, round molds in two steps to ensure the dense texture of the cheese. (Interestingly enough, while Livarot isn't marketed as a low-fat cheese, it contains half the fat of both Camembert and Pont l'Évêque.)

MAKING CAMEMBERT



Ladling curds by hand into molds



Young Camembert maturing on metal racks

The molds are turned several times during the first 24 hours, then the cheeses are unmolded and dipped in brine. After resting on wire racks and being taken to an aging room, the cheeses are dipped several more times during a six-week stint, rubbed with a brine that is colored red with the annato seed. The annato encourages the growth of bacteria (*Arthrobacter* or *Brevibacterium linum*), which gives Livarot its intense aroma and characteristic fresh, straw-like flavor. It's also responsible for the moist, almost gritty red rind.

Finally, each Livarot is wrapped with strips from the long, narrow leaves of the water sedge. The leaves are harvested in July and August, then dried and split. Before use they're boiled for several hours, and then they're wrapped around each cheese in five tight layers. Originally, this was to help preserve the cheese's shape; today it's for form and tradition rather than function, though it is a requirement for the AOC label. The bands gave rise to the local name for Livarot, Le Colonel, referring to the French army colonel, who wears five stripes across the shoulder of his uniform.

HAND AND HEART

Neufchâtel is the fourth of the four prominent Norman cheeses, and it couldn't be more different from the other three. Saltier, less elastic, and with a white rind that turns first a rusty red and then a buff brown as it ages, it doesn't fit the typical Norman cheese profile. To see how it's made, I head to the town of Neufchâtel-en-Bray and the Varin dairy.

I drive through gentle, lush countryside dotted by cows grazing under apple trees, wooded farms, and villages dominated by the church and main square. After winding down several narrow roads, I follow a handwritten sign that reads "fromages" and turn into a muddy driveway. On one side of the courtyard is a brand-new home, on the other an ancient barn, door ajar. Inside I

am immediately surrounded by the steamy aroma of cream. This is the right place.

Delphine Varin, a short, cheery woman with a face-framing halo of golden curls, calls to me from a tiny room painted the same color as the ivory, heart-shaped cheeses that she is in the process of turning. With the help of an assistant she takes hold of a large metal rack filled with cheese and flips it. I marvel at the choreography and wonder why the hearts don't spin off onto the floor.

Her job done, Varin greets me, proffering her elbow instead of her soaking-wet hands. She gets right down to business. "We make the AOC Neufchâtel, and about three years ago the rules changed so we're now required to use milk from Norman cows," she says. "We've always used milk from Montbéliard cows, but we're gradually switching." Varin and her husband, Olivier, have a tiny operation with just 47 cows, each of which has a name. With their milk she manages to produce more than 400 cheeses daily, each weighing about eight ounces.

Varin arrives at her dairy by seven each morning, finding a vat full of still-warm milk that Olivier has delivered from the barn. She blends traditional and contemporary methods to produce a uniform cheese, including sprinkles of a fermenting agent to stabilize flavor. "Cheesemakers used to add bits of cheese from the day before," Varin says. "I could do that, but it's hard to control so I prefer the powder."

She'll add rennet two hours later; meanwhile she has yesterday's curds to tend. They were hung in cotton bags for several hours, then, just before quitting work the night before at 8:30 p.m., she put the bags in a press to extract as much whey as possible. (It is this part of the process that differentiates Neufchâtel from the other Norman cheeses.) With the whey forcibly pressed out, the milk solids are grainy and thick, instead of wet and tender.

Livarot Festival

> In the heart of Normandy's dairy region, the town of Livarot hosts a festival every August devoted to cheese, which includes a competition to see who can eat the most Livarot cheese at one sitting. Past winners have consumed about two kilos of the local cheese within the allotted time (just 15 minutes), washed down with plenty of cider—another famous product of Normandy.





> NORMANDY

Lodging

Bernard and Madeleine Gossent

4 Sente de l'Abreuvoir
Heudreville/Eure

(0) 2.32.40.36.89

madeleine.gossent@online.fr

A beautiful Norman home whose flower-filled garden borders the river Iton. Breakfast is copious and includes homemade jams and pastries.

Hotel Le Pre Saint-Germain

7 Rue St. Germain
27400 Louviers

(0) 2.32.40.48.48

le.pre.saint.germain@wanadoo.fr

A comfortable, family-run hotel geared to the business traveler and located in the center of Louviers, which is equidistant from Paris and the Normandy coast. Its location is an ideal base for exploring the region.

Le Clos Jouvenet

Catherine De Witte
42 Rue Hyacinthe Langlois
76000 Rouen

(0) 2.35.89.80.66

cdewitte@club-internet.fr

This elegant B&B looks out over the city of Rouen and is just a 15-minute walk from the city center. Each room is an independent suite, and the hosts couldn't be more welcoming.

Restaurants

Hostellerie d'Acquigny

1 Rue d'Evreux

27400 Acquigny

(0) 2.32.50.20.05

Housed in an old auberge, this restaurant takes you back to the days of horse-drawn carriages and wonderful Sunday lunches in the country. The cuisine is classically inspired but with a contemporary flair.

La Chaumière

15 Rue Aristide Briand

27400 Acquigny

(0) 2.32.50.20.54

You'll never want to leave the cozy, fireplace-warmed dining room of this family restaurant. The Irish chef turns out a rustic country menu, while the French maître d' grills local meats in the fireplace and makes hospitality an art.

Le 37

37 Rue Saint-Etienne des
Tonneliers

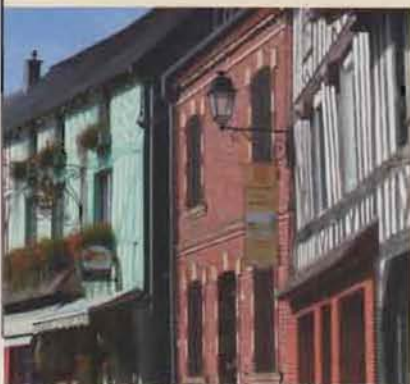
76000 Rouen

(0) 2.35.70.56.65

This is the baby bistro of Normandy's famed Michelin-starred restaurant, Gil. Fresh, contemporary, and convivial, it is alone worth the trip to Rouen.



> REAUX DAIRY
Lessay, France



Varin releases the press and weighs each sack of the dryish, pressed curds to determine how much salt to add. "Traditionally, Neufchâtel was salted on the exterior, by hand," she says. "The cheese was very salty. Now, most of us mix the salt right in with the curds so the cheese is less salty."

Varin empties the curds, sack by sack, into a large mixer, sprinkles them with salt and *Penicillium*, to jump-start the aging process, and mixes it well. She then turns out the golden yellow curds, which look like butter, onto a table and proceeds to pat them vigorously by hand into molds, turning them out just as fast. Unlike Pont l'Évêque, Camembert, and Livarot, the curds hold their shape right from the start. Once shaped, the cheeses are aged in a temperature-controlled cave, a windowless room in the barn. On the fourth day they are turned; this is when they begin to take on the white, velvety rind that characterizes the cheese. After ten days the cheeses may be sold, though according to Varin they're best after 20, at which point the rind begins to develop rust-colored stripes and the interior begins to lose its chalky quality. By three months, a Neufchâtel is entirely brown, and its interior decidedly firm yet creamy. Most are sold in the well-known heart shape, though Varin also makes the traditional short logs and small bricks.

"Why the heart shape?" I ask. "Apparently during the Hundred Years' War, English soldiers were stationed in this area," Varin explains, "and the French farm girls, all of whom made cheese, fell in love with them and started making heart-shaped cheeses. We just keep up the practice!"

I nod, thinking how it is this collective "keeping up" that makes each of the Normandy creameries I visited so remarkable. What sets the cheeses apart from each other, and apart from those in any other region, is the dedicated touch each maker brings to the craft, from Marc Brunet with his Camembert intuition to Delphine Varin with the firm slap of her hand as she molds Neufchâtel to Jérôme and Françoise Spruytte's careful and constant turning of each Pont l'Évêque to the detailed washing and brushing of each Graindorge Livarot. It is this handwork that serves to preserve not only the local milk but centuries of local flavor as well. Leaving the farm, cheese in hand, I feel as if I'm taking a piece of history with me. ■



François Olivier in his cheese shop in Rouen

Susan Hermann Loomis is the owner of *On Rue Tatin* (onruetatin.com), a cooking school in Normandy, France. She is also the author of nine books about food. The newest, *Nuts in the Kitchen*, will be published in April 2010.

TRADITIONAL NORMANDY CHEESES

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