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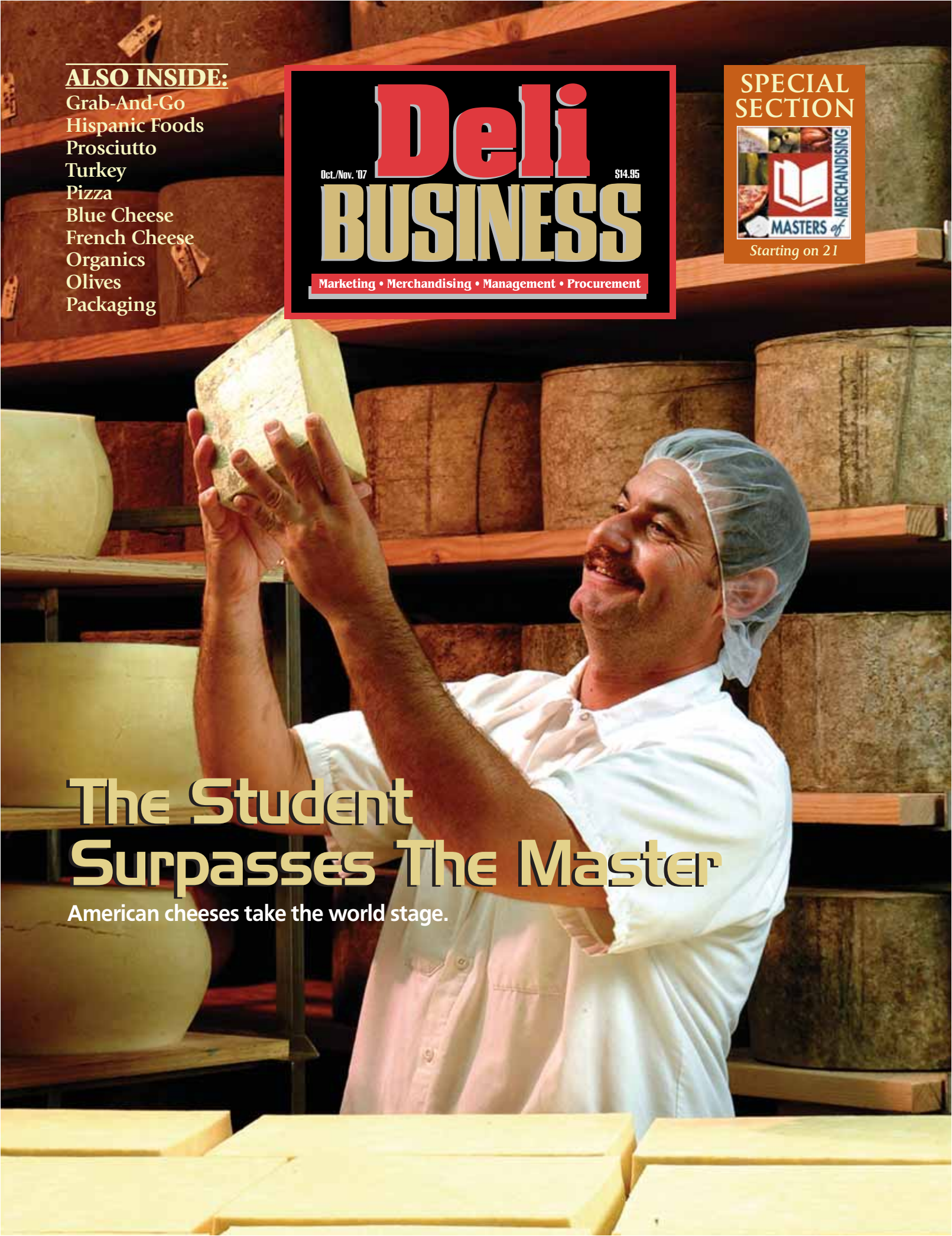
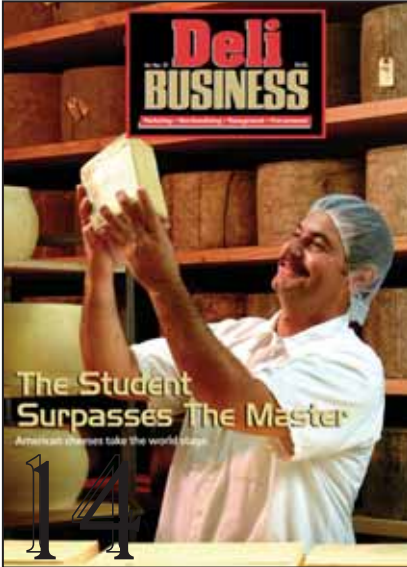


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French Cheese At Its Best

By Karen Silverston

Classic French cheeses are the world benchmark. They are the vocabulary through which we understand nearly all cheese. Although it is classic, the category is not only growing significantly but also continuously evolving.

Soft-bloomy and washed-rind cheeses epitomize Normandy. Rocky, drizzly seacoast, salty marshes and cider orchards border meadows and lush pastures. The famous milk of the Normande breed of cattle reflects the unique grasses.

Soft-ripened cheeses originated in gentle Ile de France, where rivers separate rolling, wooded hills from farms, and in Champagne Ardenne, which is known more for its vineyards and forests than its tidy farms.

Washed-rind techniques were used by seventh-century Benedictine monks in Alsace. Grapes were thriving in Alsace long before viticulture became serious under the Romans.

Pressed, cooked mountain cheeses — such as wheels of Comté made from 500 liters of milk — represent farmers cooperating since the 11th century in the Jura Mountains. The Montbéliarde milk, artisan process, spruce boards on which the cheese slowly ages, and the airflow in the aging

chamber are all contributors to the character of Comté.

Pressed uncooked cheeses originated in

Pasteurized and raw milk versions of classic French cheeses excite American palates.

Jura, Savoy, Auvergne and Pyrénées. Morbier was made hundreds of years ago when winter in Jura prevented milk delivery to Comté fruitières. Its thin black line of ash is imitated in many modern cheeses.

Auvergne's drum-shaped cheeses originated 2,000 years ago in the Cantal Mountains. Mountain ranges converge in green Auvergne, the heart of Europe's largest volcanic system. Hot springs, lakes, rivers, and forests abound, and the Châtaigneraie chestnut grove occupies 500,000 acres.

Blue-veined cheeses all benefit from Roquefort's place of honor. Each legendary sheep's milk blue, aged a minimum of three months, ripens for at least 14 days in cool, humid Combalou caves, first mentioned in

1070. Sheep prevail in Midi-Pyrénées, with its limestone plateaus, deep green gorges and cascades.

Goat cheeses come from the heart of France: Poitou and Center. Burgundy, Perigord, Provence, Savoy and Pyrénées produce adored classics, too.

Market Revolution

"We are among the largest foreign suppliers of specialty cheese to the United States, and the United States is our seventh largest market for cheese. It is so strategic we decided to launch a campaign in the U.S. market," says Eric Duchene, head of the New York, NY-based French Trade Office for French food and wine exports to the United States.

"Ten years ago, we sold less than 8,000 tons, and in 2006, we sold 22,000 tons. It's a revealing increase — the biggest in all of France's markets in the world. The increase in U.S. producers is good for us, too. We see the sophistication of the U.S. market increasing, and it is not concentrated only in Manhattan, Boston and San Francisco — it's a major trend. It's not only the small specialist shop or the intermediate market — Whole Foods [based in Austin, TX] has historically carried cheese. Supermarkets are entering this business. All the French producers have someone as close as possible to the market to help give buyers confidence," adds Duchene.

The Cheeses of France campaign is building awareness via *Parlez Vous Fromage?* sampling events. Participants include Shop Rite, Kings and Pathmark stores in New York and New Jersey, Kroger stores in Virginia and North Carolina, Harris Teeter stores in Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina, and A&P stores across the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. "We're actively working with other chains on scheduling," says Sue Till, marketing director for Swardlick Marketing Group, Portland, ME.

Cheese Evolution

"Producing fresh and soft cheeses — Brie, goat cheeses, the ones you don't age — from raw milk has challenges that aged cheeses, in particular pressed cooked cheeses, don't have," notes Emmanuelle Hofer Louis, director of marketing for Anco



PHOTO COURTESY OF COMTE CHEESE ASSOCIATION

French cheeses set the standards by which all cheeses are judged.

Fine Cheese, based in Fairfield, NJ.

"The production of raw milk fresh and soft cheeses in France is more limited nowadays than it used to be. Even some AOC [Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée] organizations have softened their rules by allowing pasteurized products to have the protected designation as long as they comply with all other characteristics," explains Hofer Louis. "That allows more people — in France and abroad — to have access to those traditional cheeses. Authenticity also comes with pasteurization — the careful respect of traditional animal feed, age-old cheesemaking recipes as well as traditional aging processes, along with advanced milk pasteurization techniques, make the cheese look and taste authentic with even more regularity."

"The trend of producing cheese from pasteurized milk isn't limited to French cheese for the U.S. market. It's happening for cheese destined for French, European Union and other markets. It is also being done with cheese produced in the United States and Canada," according to Tom Toto, president of Advantage International Foods Corporation, West Caldwell, NJ.

"There are AOCs where the type of milk is specified and others where it is not. Some think, 'It is AOC so it has to be raw milk,' but, not all AOCs require raw milk," explains Pascal Vaydie, import sales director for Lactalis USA, New York, NY.

"The way AOCs function is not top-down. The requirements come from the people producing the product," explains Jean-Louis Carbonnier, president of Carbonnier Communications, New York, NY, which represents the Comté Cheese Association based in Poligny, France. They have to agree and map out what they want to do. They submit a request to the minister of agriculture. The decision is ratified by the government and then becomes law."

Many cheeses are produced by only one farm or company. These recipes and AOC rules can change. While some AOCs are moving toward pasteurization, Morbier is moving toward raw milk.

"People are polarized about pasteurized and raw milk. I believe there is a middle ground. As far as flavor, on some types it makes a huge difference and on some types it doesn't. On the goat cheeses, it doesn't seem to have as much bearing. On the soft ripened, it makes a big difference," says François Kerautret, executive vice president, Auburn, WA-based Peterson Company, a specialty food importer and distributor.

Available Here: A Sampling

"People still want to buy the classics. They have history," says Toto.

Many classics made from raw milk and enjoyed in France have soul mates made from pasteurized milk that comply with

ripened cheese specialist Robert Rouzaire. "It's the exception to the category. Where most Brie is mild, this is stronger, fruitier and much more like what a raw milk Brie would taste like," says David Grotenstein, general manager of Union Market, Brooklyn, NY.

Le Chatelain Brie was designed to have the same appeal as Le Chatelain Camembert, a pasteurized cheese with the greater aroma and more pronounced flavor associated with raw milk.

"France has two kinds of Camembert: the pasteurized one for everyday and the AOC raw milk one for entertaining. The pasteurized version is milder and more consistent in its taste profile than the AOC one, which makes it more suitable for daily consumption," says Anco's Hofer Louis.

Chaource AOC, known in Champagne since the 14th century, is so silky it is often mistaken for a double or triple cream, but its fat measure, 50 percent in dry matter, makes it single cream. "Chaource at its peak is a spectacular soft-ripened cheese," says Grotenstein.

"In Europe, single cream is more popular, and triple cream is more popular in the U.S.," says Kerautret.

Brillat Savarin was created in Normandy in the 1930's. "Henri Androuet named it for

**"PEOPLE ARE
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THERE IS A MIDDLE
GROUND."**

— *Francois Kerautret*
Peterson Company

United States regulations and are available here.

Fromage de Meaux is the pasteurized version of Brie de Meaux made by soft

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For Distributors' list, POP, In-store demo programs, and all other information, contact the Comté Cheese Association, phone: 212-896-1203, fax: 212-697-0910 email: comte@carbonniercommunications.com www.comte.com

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PHOTO COURTESY OF CHEESE FROM FRANCE

The French cheese category, though classic, is growing and evolving.

writer Jean Anthelme Brillat Savarin, who said, ‘You are what you eat.’ It was the first triple cream and it was created to go with Champagne — it’s rich, and creamy and luscious, but almost fluffy on the palate,” says Union Market’s Grotenstein.

“Pont-l’Évêque is a classic example of AOC cheese authorized in pasteurized and raw milk, and is one of the most popular cheeses in France,” notes Anco’s Hofer Louis. It has a soft body, generous aroma, and whitish-orange washed or brushed rind. It was known in the 1200’s in Normandy as Angelot Square.

“It’s a quintessential washed rind that tells you all about the gooey, stinky, lovely, *Brevibacterium linens*-drenched, hearty washed-rind category,” adds Grotenstein.

Epoisses AOC washed with Marc de Bourgogne, Soumaintrain washed with brine and Affidélice washed with Chablis are from Burgundy; Munster AOC and Kirsch-washed Grès des Vosges come from Alsace.

“Edel de Cleron, Fromage des Clarines and Ecorce de Sapin are made by Jean Perin in response to consumer demand for Mont d’Or/Vacherin du Haut-Doubs,” notes Peterson’s Kerautret. Bois Blond aims at the same market. In France, people wait all year for Mont d’Or/Vacherin du Haut-Doubs AOC, a raw-milk winter cheese Franche Comté farmers invented centuries ago for themselves and named for the highest peak in Doubs. It is lightly pressed, not cooked but ripened, encircled in spruce bark for support and aged 21 days on spruce boards. While aging, it is turned and rubbed with salt water and fitted into its spruce box.

Timanoix is a cow’s milk cheese washed with walnut liqueur from the Abbey of Timadeuc and based on a recipe from the Abbey of Echourgnac.

Vache de Chalais is a cow’s milk cheese made in Rhone-Alps and resembling Banon. Banon AOC is made only from raw goat’s milk, aged five to 10 days, then protected in raffia-tied chestnut leaves for 10 or more days’ aging. It may be dipped in eau de vie before it is wrapped. Saint Marcellin from Rhone-Alps, slightly ripened, develops a thin, delicate rind and creamy interior.

Fleur de Maquis, a Corsican sheep milk cheese similar to Brin d’Amour, is herb encrusted. “Rosemary, juniper berry, a little dried pepper — you’ll taste both the milk and the seasoning quite distinctly. Great when it’s young but ages beautifully,” according to Grotenstein.

Ossau-Iraty AOC from Pyrénées is a pressed, uncooked mountain cheese made from milk of Manech sheep in Pays Basque and from milk of Basco-Béarnaise sheep in Béarn.

Bleu d’Auvergne and Fourme d’Ambert, cow’s milk blues from Auvergne, differ distinctly in texture, body and taste. “They’re both beautifully balanced and amazingly well-priced,” explains Grotenstein. Both of these cheeses are available in the United States in legally compliant raw-milk and pasteurized-milk versions.

“If you are going to have a world class cheese case, you need some classical aged goat cheese,” says Advantage’s Toto. Some manufacturers make raw milk and pasteurized versions. The originals are raw milk,

named for their towns. Producers name their pasteurized versions.

Rond Cendre is the pasteurized version

“IF YOU ARE GOING TO HAVE A WORLD CLASS CHEESE CASE, YOU NEED SOME CLASSICAL AGED GOAT CHEESES.”

— Tom Toto
Advantage International Foods Corporation

of Selles-sur-Cher AOC, a round goat cheese coated with ash. “If people are unfamiliar with goat cheese, it’s a good Loire valley chèvre to start with. When young, it’s fresh and tangy, has a nice saltiness and is sometimes a little lemony. I love the ash and think the presentation is terrific,” says Grotenstein.

Sainte Maure is a pasteurized version of Sainte-Maure de Touraine, a log with a wheat straw through the center.

Pointe de Bique (bique means goat) is a pasteurized version of Pouligny-Saint-Pierre, the tall pyramid, never ashed.

Pyramide and Tradition du Berry are pasteurized versions of Valençay, the truncated pyramid.

Chabichou du Poitou AOC is cylindrical, made in a mold inlaid with the initials “CdP.” “As Chabichou and Crottin age, you can try to keep them moist or you can let them dry. They can be grated if you don’t eat them in time,” notes Kerautret.

“Cheeses have been around for centuries but the awareness here is relatively new. The consumer here may not know that an Edel de Cleron is modeled after Mont d’Or/Vacherin du Haut Doubs — they may not even know what Mont d’Or is. This is the job of the retailer — to inform — and to explain why you carry the cheese, and always in a celebratory way,” says Grotenstein.

“As we cannot improve what the producer and affineur have done, the goal is to sell the cheeses as soon as possible. The best way to preserve a cheese is to eat it,” adds Kerautret.

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