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French Connections

French cheese is seeing resurgence in popularity, regaining its glory days

BY T. ELIZABETH BLANCO



France is a top travel destination for Americans who then search out French cheeses when they return stateside. And, like wine, these products offer a wide range of flavors, profiles and origins. For years, specialty cheese and, most certainly, imported cheese, were synonymous with France. However, as years passed, England, Ireland, Spain,

Holland and Italy began sending their cheeses to the United States, while France stopped promoting theirs. However, all that is changing — and in a big way.

According to The French Cheese Club, an association of five family-owned French fromageries specializing in the production of traditional French cheeses, French cheese imports are up 12 percent for the first four months of 2010 as compared to 2009.



Increased at-home consumption and consumer interest for healthy and less processed food has had a positive impact on the French cheese segment.

The renewed interest in French cheeses is no surprise considering the overall growth of specialty cheese in the United States. In addition to literally hundreds of new cheeses being imported from Europe, American has its own burgeoning cheese industry. From coast to coast, small artisanal cheesemakers are producing high-quality cheeses, which end up in local stores, restaurants and farmers markets. Put it all together and the classic and not-so-classic French cheeses are poised to regain their once dominant position.

New technologies are allowing pasteurized milk cheeses like Brie and Camembert to more closely resemble their classic raw-milk counterparts. Better transportation methods and packaging have extended self

life, giving retailers extra days to get imports into the mouths of their consumers while the cheese is still in peak condition.

However, there are still challenges. "We've been suffering due to the recession," says Pascal Vaydie, import sales director at Lactalis USA, New York, NY. "The price of domestic milk was low last year and the euro was high. We've also seen some volume transfers from import to domestic products but the situation seems to be turning around this year."

Still, this category provides many options for retailers. France has a wider variety and range of cheeses than any other country, The French Cheese Club reports, including unique cheeses that can't be duplicated elsewhere. "French-style American-made cheeses are very good, but French originals have to be part of a well-rounded deli program," says Cecile Delannes, spokesperson for The French Cheese Club.

"The two French cheese types with the largest volume in deli are Brie and fresh goat cheese," Vaydie says.

"Brie is a standard, but many stores carry more than one type of Brie, such as triple and double crème varieties," says Larry Lukas, agent for France-based Dexpa, a French cheese manufacturer.

Camembert, a logical next step for Brie lovers, is catching on. Triple crème cheeses, such as **Délice de Bourgogne**, also sell well as does **Comté**, a mountain cheese adaptable to cooking as well as eating.

More sophisticated American palates are demanding stronger cheeses, such as washed-rinds. "People are looking for strong, traditional French cheeses, such as **Époisses**, **Affidélise** and **Trou Du Cru**," adds Delannes.

Along with bolder flavors, U.S. consumers are seeking cheese with more character. "Trends we're seeing include mountain cheese made from sheep's milk or a mixture of cow's and sheep's milk," says Dominique Delugeau, senior vice president of sales and marketing at DCI Cheese Company, Richfield, WI. "More people also are exposed to cheese from the Alps."

Upscale chains have been instrumental in exposing consumers to French cheeses. According to Todd Druhot, dairy and cheese

specialty at Atlanta Foods International, Atlanta, GA, Whole Foods has done well with French cheeses, as has King Soopers in Colorado and Harmons in Utah.

Retail Challenges

Retailers selling cheese that originates in France face a number of obstacles. In addition to marketing a relatively high-priced product, retailers have difficulty coming to terms with the longer procurement time. "It can take between five and six weeks for the cheese to be shipped by boat, so spur-of-the-moment purchasing requests are difficult," Druhot says. "And, we still need to give stores at least a couple of weeks to sell the cheese."

Limited shelf life after procurement can hinder a deli department looking to carry a large selection of French cheeses. "Shelf life is short once the product comes in from France," according to Delannes. "It's best to carry a smaller selection of 10 to 20 top-quality cheeses."

Proper handling is another difficult issue for many retailers. There are plenty of very stable French cheeses, but many cheeses require careful handling in order to please customers.

"French cheese is the hardest to handle, due to its instability and short shelf life," Lukas says. "Those delis that handle it successfully are ahead of the game."

Along with shelf life, pricing has been an issue in the current economy. Whether shipped by water or flown into the U.S., the cost of freight can be a significant factor. Of

French Cheese Types

SOFT

Brie
Brillat-Savarin
Camembert
Chaource
Époisses
Langres
Livarot
Mont d'Or
Munster
Neufchâtel
Pont l'Évêque
Saint-Félicien
Saint-Marcellin

SEMI-SOFT

Morbier
Raclette
Saint-Nectaire

HARD

Beaufort
Cantal
Comté
Emmental
Mimolette
Tomme de Savoie

BLUE

Bleu d'Auvergne
Fourme d'Ambert

Source: *Cheeses of France*

course, the value of the euro has not helped, but its recent plunge against the dollar should make all E.U. cheeses more affordable, at least in the near term.

"Delis should not switch to domestic just because it is cheaper," stresses Ingrid Prinz, export director for France's Fromagerie Henri Hutin. "Even during economic hard times, people will still spend money on the good imported cheese."

Added Visibility

Because many American consumers have limited knowledge of French cheese, proper marketing and merchandising is imperative to selling these products. "Staff training is very important and demos are key. Marketing kits with flyers and recipes should be utilized," says Delannes of The French Cheese Club. At Wegmans, she notes, ready-to-serve cheese platters with signs draw in new French cheese consumers.

Some chains have brought in a cheese expert to educate consumers. Besides from the obvious need for knowledge, the expert should be passionate about the cheeses. And since the more obscure varieties can be intimidating, retailers can use demos to relieve consumer anxiety about trying something new.

Retailers can draw on organizations for marketing assistance. The Cheeses of France is currently running a promotional campaign for the fourth consecutive year, offering point-of-sale materials and demos to retailers



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CHEESES OF FRANCE

and suppliers. Its website will announce the demos, and each will have a weekly prize for consumers participating in the "Win a Dinner for 2" sweepstakes. An online advertising spot will be featured throughout the year.

Cross-merchandising is also effective when promoting French cheese in the deli. The most obvious complement is French wine, but the cheeses can also be paired with crackers, fruit and a variety of items.

"The best way I've seen it merchandised is in portable refrigerators. Delis can include one or two French cheese varieties, along with imported butter, and place it next to the fresh bread display," Dexpa's Lukas says. "Also, stores merchandise crème cheeses next to strawberries."

Physical positioning within the store is crucial. "Location also is important," Atlanta's Druhot adds. "Having the cheese in two locations increases the sales potential."

The layout of the French cheese display also impacts sales. "Every retailer has different philosophy on how to retail specialty cheese," says Chris Huey, vice president retail sales, Atlanta Foods. Some arrange cheese by country of origin, while others categorize products by texture, such as soft to hard. "Another school of thought is to merchandise cheese by usage, such as snacking, entertaining, ingredients for cooking, etc."

Whatever the display order, the case must be kept clean and product regularly rotated. Signage also is important.

"Using these cheeses in deli recipes is the ultimate merchandising technique," according to Fromagerie Henri Hutin's Prinz. "It's a great way to win new customers and keep the old ones."

DB

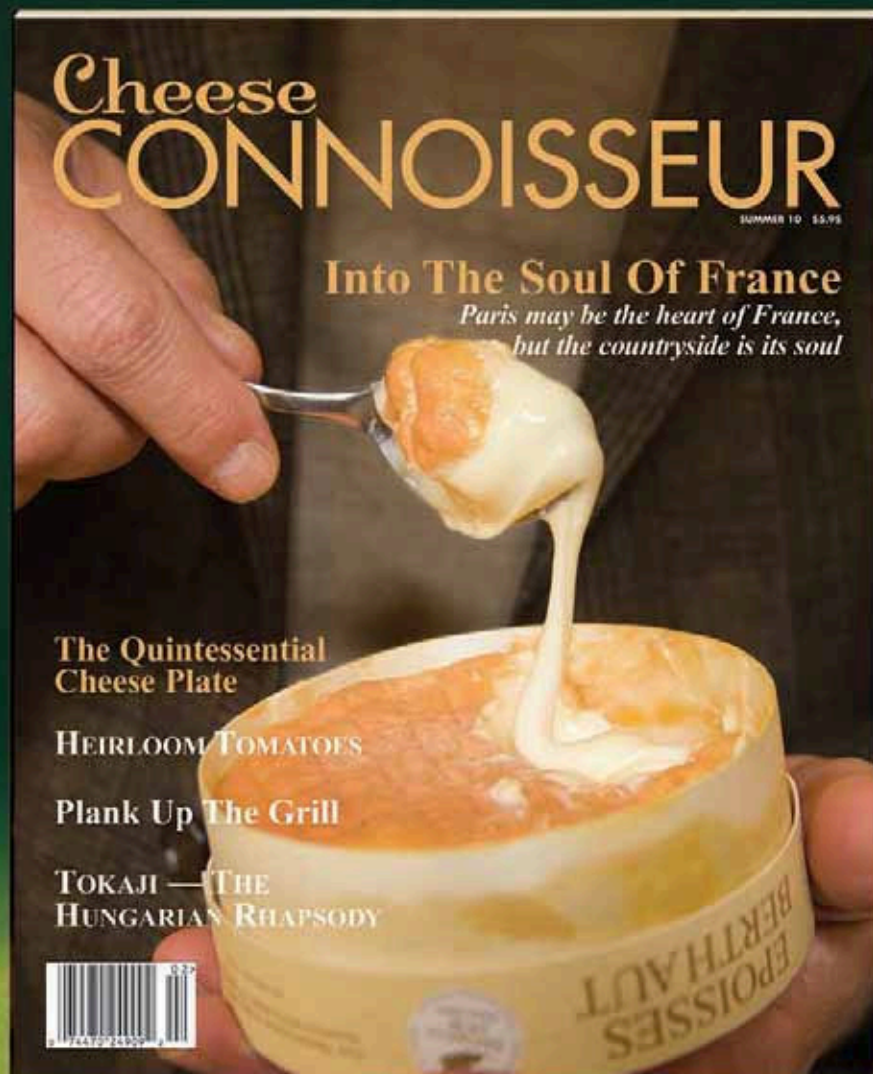


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FRENCH CHEESE CLUB

CHEESE CONNOISSEUR

The magazine for tasteful living

- Your customers' guide to fine cheese
- Trend-setting articles
- Helps build retail sales
- Available nationally



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