



Thursday March 19, 2009

Special United States - Séverine CATTIAUX translated by Karen Silverston

French Terroir Cheeses on American Tables

Since 2008, the American Whole Foods chain (similar to Fauchon) has been selling Saint-Marcellin made by Fromageries de l'Etoile in 160 of its stores. A beautiful showcase for the French cheese made at Saint-Juste-Claix, in Isere, and a breakthrough rather rare on a continent still little trained in the tastes of terroir.

It didn't happen miraculously. The specialist raw milk cheesemaker revisited his recipes in order to capture the American taste buds and predilection, pasteurizing four of his leading products: Saint Marcellin, Saint Felicien, Rove des Garrigues and Le Provençal, in this way giving them a longer shelf life. The cheeses, branded l'Etoile du Sud, have been packaged for American sale (notably, in a plastic shell). They obtained their passport from the IFS and BRC certification.

The Isere-based fromagerie would not have undertaken these steps without the assurance of a channel. Along with cheesemakers Berthaut, E. Graindorge, Lincet et Comté Rivoire Jacquemin, l'Etoile du Sud founded the French Cheese Club in 2007. The Economic Interest Grouping (GIE) is supported by two advantages: exporters based in Rungis, and a sole American acting as ambassadrice, Cécile Delannes, a French American. Her role? To promote the cheeses of the Club through the media, organise tastings, train the American retailers, heighten the demand. Her zone to canvas? "The high end shops in cities where consumption of fine cheese is important: Boston, New York and Washington," she says. At 5 to 10 dollars for a Saint Marcellin, it is true that the American fan of French cheese has to be endowed with purchasing power.

After one year, the ambassadrice views her work as successful in giving consumers a better understanding of the products and increasing demand. Unfortunately, the crisis has slowed the impetus.

The startup is still modest: Fromagerie de l'Etoile sold 100,000 cheeses in the United States in 2008 (of its annual production of 10 million).

The general manager, Nicolas Guize, hopes to triple today's numbers in 3-5 years. In continuous contact with one of the members of the group, which changes every six months, the ambassadrice is not indulging herself. Once a year, each of the partners of the Club participates in an UBI-France event in order to meet importers. Nicolas Guize will be alongside her next June at the Fancy Food Show in New York.

A French Cheese Club and an Ambassadrice