

### Traditional cheeses:

### Crown jewels of Quebec's cheese heritage

*More than 500 types of cheese are now being made in Quebec, and our master cheese makers are continuing to create more! Most of those cheeses produced are fine cheeses using traditional methods, which make them part of the most direct line of ancestral cheese making here or in Europe. Crown jewels of our cheese heritage, traditional cheeses augment our body of expertise. They are largely responsible for awakening the taste buds of Quebec consumers, and they represent one of the main pillars of our cheese industry's development.*

#### A bit of history

Cheese making has a long history in Quebec. It was already well established in the time of New France. With the Conquest of 1760, cheese production became focussed on Cheddar, which gave rise to certain well-known products, such as Perron Cheddar in 1885. In spite of that mainstream, certain distinct types of cheese continued to be made through the years. For example, the recipe for the legendary raw milk cheese of the Aubin family of Île d'Orléans was passed on from generation to generation from the time of the early settlers until 1965; some are now trying to bring it back. As well, there are monastic fancy cheeses, including the famous cheese of "La trappe d'Oka" (1893), the cheeses of the monks of L'Abbaye de Saint-Benoît-du-Lac (1943) and, more recently, the fine cheeses of the orthodox nuns of the Brownsburg-Chatam monastery, close to Lachute (1993). All of that cheese production made it possible to maintain cheese-making expertise over the centuries in Quebec.

A new impetus arose with the arrival of European master cheese makers such as the Saputo family, Fritz Kaiser, the Bonnet family, François Conrad, etc.

Since then, a number of Quebec cheese makers have decided to take up the challenge and venture into the cheese industry. The variety of cheeses produced has grown rapidly, and awards and trophies have gradually been won. The results are now conclusive: ***our cheeses easily compare with the best in the world.***

#### Characteristics of traditional cheese

Just what does "traditional cheese" mean? It is a tangible reality, but one that is difficult to describe. Specialty, farm, artisan, regional and niche are among the designations for products based on production techniques handed down by our ancestors. However, some of those products have a distinguishing characteristic: they are made without using modern technology, and without any attempt to achieve a standardized, uniform composition. In that sense, traditional cheese is the result of painstaking work following centuries-old traditions and using only pure cow, sheep or goat's milk. The aromas, tastes and textures that set traditional cheeses apart depend directly on the quality of the livestock and feed.

Traditional cheeses are largely responsible for sparking consumer appetite for fine cheeses. Each week a new product gets added to the list of Quebec cheeses. Excellent cheeses are made throughout Quebec, year in year out. It is now common to find our specialty cheeses displayed right next to the best cheeses in the world.



## Cheese making: an art and a science

---

Basic cheese making is relatively simple. Using cow, goat or sheep's milk, cheese is made in four main steps. First, milk is curdled by adding starter culture and/or rennet. Next, various processes are carried out to extract the whey (or lacto-serum), depending on the texture that is desired. The curds that remain are then moulded, salted and drained. Lastly, the cheese is aged under carefully controlled conditions.

However, the art of cheese making is highly complex. In each of the four steps, the cheese maker may follow a series of secret procedures or recipes that directly affect the characteristics of the resulting cheese. That is when, more often than not, the traditions and know-how handed down through the generations come into play.

Some believe that everything begins in the field and stable, given the importance of the feeding and raising of livestock. Next is the choice of using raw milk (milk not heated above 40°C or otherwise treated for bacterial selection), pasteurized milk (milk heated above 62.5°C for 30 min) or unpasteurized milk (milk heated above 40°C before renneting or milk that has been microfiltered for bacterial selection) to control the bacteria present, as that will produce very specific characteristics in the cheese.

During draining, which removes the whey, the cheese maker can use various techniques—slicing, stirring, pressing or heating—all of which will have an effect. And the final stage is aging, which gives the cheese its final properties. Once the rind has formed, the cheese can be inoculated with various starters that have very specific qualities. As well, humidity, temperature and oxygenation are determining factors in developing flavour and texture. Some cheese makers also cover the cheese with plants such as mulch or leaves, or wash the rind with liquids such as wine, beer or cider.

## A wide range of products

---

Quebec's traditional cheeses are not only numerous, but also varied. They fall into five broad categories, according to texture. As well, the cheeses can have a bloomy rind, when sprayed with a bacterium, or a washed rind, when washed with brine or other flavouring solutions. Traditional cheeses figure prominently in the various categories.

**Soft cheese.** Example: Camembert. Creamy texture and delicate taste.

**Semi-soft cheese.** Includes a large number of varieties, e.g., Oka and Morbier. Supple, creamy texture. Generally mild, fragrant flavour that becomes stronger with aging.

**Firm cheese.** Examples: Cheddar, Gouda and Gruyère. Melts in the mouth and can be crumbled, despite the name. Rich flavour ranging from mild to sharp.

**Hard cheese.** Example: Parmesan. Generally granular texture and strong flavour.

**Blue-veined cheese.** Examples: Roquefort and various blue cheeses. The cheese is inoculated with a fungus to produce blue mould. Strong, sharp flavour.

## Recognizing quality

---

Cheese making is now a mature industry in all parts of Quebec. Through the commitment and know-how of our artisan cheese makers, the list of Quebec fine cheeses is growing longer each year. Don't miss out on these products: take a chance and try something new the next time you visit a grocery store, specialty food store or even a cheesery!

### Expert Advisors:

Patrick Tirard-Collet, ITA campus de St-Hyacinthe  
Ould Baba Ali, consultant  
André Fouillet, consultant