

News, lore and bite-sized reviews



Farmstead Milk, Tutzing, Germany © Diana Rogers, 2007

The Artisan, the Farmer, the Marketer and our Cheese

Cheese marketers adore the word “artisan”, because it evokes a sentimental picture of rustic craftspeople (or hip young things) in rough-hewn surroundings (or funky green workspaces), practicing antique skills. The “A” word is used as indiscriminately as the words “light” and “lite” were during the fat-phobic 1980’s. Canadian law is now more rigorous when it comes to unsubstantiated nutritional claims, but words like farmstead, traditional and artisan remain unregulated. Labeling terms that lack legal definition mean whatever you want them to, and that makes them potently persuasive. And of course, it is giant dairy processors, not small producers, who are best able to unleash an arsenal of evocative words and images, never mind that what these suggest may be far from the truth.

Here, expanding on information in Bizier and Nadeau’s Répertoire des Fromages du Québec, are what I think descriptors of production scale should mean. Use them to help you choose and use your words wisely, and to decipher marketing spin.

Definitions

Artisan/Artisanal: *Cheese made from the milk of a single or pooled herds, at a non-farmstead production facility, using predominantly manual methods.*

Obviously there is some room for interpretation here. However, a producer like Lanark, Ontario's James Keith, whose *petite fromagerie* draws on two sheep flocks, and is super-low-tech by any standards, deserves to call his enterprise **Back Forty Artisan Cheese**. In contrast, Saputo-owned **Fromagerie Alexis du Portneuf** brags of its *coeur d'artisan*, but has an *âme d'industrielle*, evident in its huge output and reliance on modified milk ingredients.

Farmstead/Fermier: *Cheese made on the farm using milk from the producer's own animals, using predominantly manual methods. Affinage may take place elsewhere.*

A stricter standard, for sure. Chèvre from **River's Edge Goat Dairy**, made by the Wilman family on their farm in Arthur, is an Ontario example. Conversely, **Nutri-Spring Farm** Cheddar is NOT – it is no-name cheese labeled by a farm-based distributor in Dundas. Some Québec wares sport the **Cru Fermier** designation, indicating farmstead origin, and use of milk unheated above 40 degrees C.

Semi-Industrial: *Cheese made from a large quantity of pooled milk and perhaps also modified dairy ingredients, using a combination of mechanized and manual processes.*

Some producers in this category have grown from artisan roots, and may preserve more of that ethos by, for example, not using modified milk ingredients. A Québec example is **Fromagerie Kaiser**, making over 20 not-entirely-standardized varieties. Several Ontario heirloom cheddar producers, such as **Jensen** and **Black River** are in this category.

Industrial: *Cheese made from a large quantity of pooled milk and often also modified dairy ingredients, using highly mechanized and computerized processes.*

These are the big guys – **Parmalat, Kraft, Agropur, Saputo, Unilever**, et al. – and they are constantly buying out smaller processors.

Why Production Scale Matters

There are excellent, delicious cheeses (and poor, uninspiring cheeses) from producers of all sizes. If you demand more from your cheese than that it simply taste good, you might consider the following....

Does it express local flavours? With the exception of farmstead producers, virtually no Canadian cow-milk cheese maker can determine which herd and pasture are supplying the basic ingredient. Dairy pool milk is a blend. Contrast this to the situation in Europe, where iconic cheeses gain quality and identity because designated breeds are nourished

on delineated grazing lands. The provenance of Canadian goat and sheep milk is easier to control, as these sectors are small and allow cheese makers to purchase directly from dairy farmers.

Does it use fresh milk? In quest of economy and uniformity, semi-industrial and industrial processors may add modified milk ingredients such as protein powders and concentrates to the make-vat. These devalue local whole milk, add unnecessarily to the energy cost of cheese production, and may not even be of Canadian origin.

Does it support local skills and incomes? Small-scale cheese making was integral to our economy as a colony and young nation. Preserving and reviving that trade keeps work and income in the rural sector and encourages sustainable agri-food practices.

In My Fridge

Central-American-style dairy treats from Perola, 247 Augusta Ave., 416-593-9728.....

Crema La Vaquita is thick, heavy cultured cream, with 30% butterfat, and more tangy, “turned milk” aromas than crème fraîche. It’s a fabulous indulgence on chicken and avocado tacos, and as a sour-cream substitute in baking. Made in Ingersoll, Ontario.

Queso Panela is a textural cross between fresh mozzarella and firm tofu. It’s sweet and mild, and perfect in a tomato and onion salad, or as a melted layer in enchiladas.

Cajeta Envinada is goat milk *dulce de leche*, with a subtle vinous flavour underneath the usual tangy sweetness. The addition of wine also has a preservative effect – there is no potassium sorbate in this jar. This is a must try for fans of caramel.

On My Teaching Calendar

A busy summer at both locations of the Leslieville Cheese Market!

- June 18** **Farmer’s Market Cheese.** <http://www.cheeseculture.ca/news.html>
Leslieville Cheese Market East. 891 Queen East. 7 p.m. & 8:30 p.m.
- June 25** **Farmer’s Market Cheese.** <http://www.cheeseculture.ca/news.html>
Leslieville Cheese Market West. 541 Queen West. 7 p.m. & 8:30 p.m.
- July 9** **Backyard Beer Wine Cheese.** <http://www.cheeseculture.ca/news.html>
Leslieville Cheese Market West. 541 Queen East. 7:30 p.m.
- Aug 4** **Summer Harvest Cheese.** <http://www.cheeseculture.ca/news.html>
Leslieville Cheese Market East. 891 Queen East. 7 p.m. & 8:30 p.m.
- Aug 6** **Summer Harvest Cheese.** <http://www.cheeseculture.ca/news.html>
Leslieville Cheese Market West. 541 Queen West. 7 p.m. & 8:30 p.m.