

News, lore and bite-sized reviews



Les Chèvres, Marché Hamel. (A Cendrillon-free photo) © Dave Mazierski, 2005

The Best of 2009 (A Cendrillon-free Report)

The biannual silly-season for reporting is upon us, and if the major news outlets can ditch discourse in favour of banter, so can Cheese Culture. Although this busy month doesn't permit enough deep thinking for expounding on a super-serious theme, it does allow a few moments for looking back with appreciation on highlights of the year in cheese.

Here's an admittedly personal, Ontario-centric nod toward the brave new products, creative cheese makers, adventurous consumers and persistent traditions which have made 2009 a pleasant diversion for fans of *fromage*.

Fresh Out of the Gate

While our province's craft cheese sector is not exactly growing by leaps and bounds, these past 12 months have seen innovative offerings from both veteran and neophyte producers. **Buffalo Mozzarella** and **Ricotta** have long been upper-crust Toronto staples,

flown in from Campagna, Italy. Now, Vaughan-based [Quality Cheese](#) delivers these delights by truck, having convinced a spate of consumers that locally made versions derived from the milk of Ontario's first dairy buffalo herd are a tasty, less expensive, reduced-carbon-footprint option to the DOP *formaggi*. Their Ricotta is my top pick, for serious ravioli and as an indulgent *dolce* with toasted walnuts and a drizzle of chestnut honey.

[Upper Canada Cheese](#) has spent several years tweaking their Guernsey cow milk wares: washed rind **Niagara Gold**, bloomy rind **Comfort Cream**, and the hard-to-find **Guernsey Gold**. Bucking the new-cheese-maker trend of offering a gamut of styles right off the bat, Upper Canada has taken a slower approach, and is only now releasing a fourth variety, the fetchingly named **Guernsey Girl**, loosely based on Cypriot **Haloumi**. **Guernsey Girl** does a great job of communicating the sweet richness of an heirloom diary milk. Also, you can fry it. So much fun!

Eastern Ontario's [Glengarry Cheese](#), and Prince Edward County's [Fifth Town Artisan Cheese](#) both have ambitious and experienced cheese makers at the helm, so it's no surprise they have extensive and growing product lines. It's also no wonder that their cheeses are delicious. Margaret Morris' **Figaro** and **Lankaaster** have broad appeal, while Stephanie Diamant's **Cape Vessey**, **Lighthall Tomme** and **Petaluna** have received critical and popular acclaim. The challenge, of course, will be for these small producers to support their diverse repertoires so that each item is perceived as having a distinctive personality, while also being integral to the line. All this at the same time as they are monitoring milk supply, distribution arrangements and over-excited mould colonies, no less. Kudos in all these areas are due to [Best Baa Farm/Ewenity Dairy Coop](#), who offer everything on the continuum from ewe milk, to yogurt, to **Brebis Frais**, to surface-ripened and aged cheeses, through to lamb: all of which keep getting better and better. Shepherd and cheese maker Elisabeth Bzikot's **Mouton Rouge** gets my vote as Ontario's best washed rind.

The Pendulum Swings

I've previously admitted to mixed feelings about the ascension of cheese to hipster status. Yes, the buzz has been great, and new aficionados are truly welcome, but the attendant clamour for only the latest, most local, most "artisan" oeuvre made me a bit nervous. Would cheese's Facebook fans post profusely about **La Sauvagine**, only to rediscover lactose intolerance without having stopped to smell the **Livarot**? Too sad, because it is iconic Old World flavours - providing historic context and quality benchmarks - that are the foundation of informed connoisseurship.

I'm glad to observe, at least at my classes and tastings, that appreciation of the classics is chic again. This may partly be due to budgetary concerns, as **Gruyère**, **Brie de Meaux**, **Comté** et al. score extremely well on virtually everyone's value versus cost index. But I've also witnessed a "dollars be damned" embrace of the pure excellence that's out there in the form of **Colston Basset Stilton**, **Ossau-Iraty**, **Montgomery's Cheddar**, and the mind-blowingly exquisite, 16-month-old, \$100/kg **Beaufort Haute Montagne** that I splurged on last month.

And I'm hoping it's not just my imagination, but folks I meet seem more and more to be drinking outside the comfort zone of default grapes and big-brand booze. During 2009 Leslieville Cheese Market's Night School saw *fromagistas* enjoying sultry **Chocolate Stout** and hop-crazy **Hopfenweisse**, sweet potent **LBV Port** and umami **Oloroso** without once comparing them to Stella and Yellow Tail. If cheese has been the gateway addiction to these worldly habits, then I'm doubly pleased.

In My Fridge

A care package of New York State treats from my parents in Williamsville...

Red Meck is a Fingerlakes Farmstead cheese of raw Jersey milk, with a passing similarity to Gouda. All brown butter, hazelnut and pear on the nose, it tastes initially innocent, like Emmenthal, but follows through with a sneaky acid bite, and a lingering pungent fruit finish.

Adirondack Cheddar is a far cry from what we Canadians expect from a one-year-old raw milk Cheddar, especially where texture and persistence are concerned, but it has an interesting burnt sugar flavour and acceptable zing.

Hudson Red is miscast as a Munster wannabe by its Twin Maple Farm makers. This semi-firm raw Jersey milk cheese is far too confused about its affinage (white and blue moulds overtake the *bacterium linens*), and too bitter and earthy to bear much similarity to the Alsatian original. But I absolutely love it, and hope consumers can get past its slimy pond rock appearance.

On My Teaching Calendar

Plenty of Leslieville Cheese Market tasting opportunities, to enjoy or give as gifts....

December 15 The Best of 2009. <http://www.cheeseculture.ca/news.html>
Leslieville Cheese Market East. 891 Queen East. 7 p.m. & 8:30 p.m.

January 14 Eat Better Cheese. <http://www.cheeseculture.ca/news.html>
Leslieville Cheese Market East. 891 Queen East. 7 p.m. & 8:30 p.m.

February 4 Alpine Cheese. <http://www.cheeseculture.ca/news.html>
Leslieville Cheese Market West. 541 Queen West. 7:30 p.m.

February 11 Dessert Cheese. <http://www.cheeseculture.ca/news.html>
Leslieville Cheese Market East. 891 Queen East. 7 p.m. & 8:30 p.m.

March 4 Québec Cheese: Past and Present. <http://www.cheeseculture.ca/news.html> Leslieville Cheese Market West. 541 Queen West. 7:30 p.m.