

SLOW CANADA EDITION 3 - 12/2004

The Portuguese Cheese Company

Trans-Atlantic tastes catch on in Toronto, by Julia Rogers

Canada is a country of immigrants. With few exceptions, its foods have also immigrated and become hybridized versions (e.g., “Chinese-Canadian”) of what they once were. Our national pantry develops as newcomer tastes, habits and cuisines adjust to the Canadian context. Immigrants and their foods settle into identities that straddle old and new worlds.

What happens to a food during this transformation? Is it still authentic? Does it taste the same? Or is terroir the ultimate determinant of flavour and identity? These are questions that Slow Food Canada is ideally positioned to address, as it contributes to the international Slow Food movement.

This article tells the story of Toronto’s Portuguese Cheese Company, manufacturers and importers with a 40-year history in Canada. Their 11 cheeses* have undergone name changes and technological enhancements, and have decamped their original Portuguese-Canadian neighbourhood for the tables of Canadians of all backgrounds. With the exception of imported raw-milk St. Jorge, the cheeses use pasteurized Canadian milk, yet are made according to centuries-old Portuguese recipes. Let us reflect on the identity and integrity of immigrant foods as we learn about this successful small business.

In 1966, Manuel Jorge, an Azorean cheese-maker, came to Toronto as one of many Portuguese settling near Kensington Market. The community of approximately 20 000 had an active parish and two lively commercial strips. Jorge found eager customers for his locally made fresh and aged cow and goat milk cheeses. Large, Canadian-owned supermarkets like Dominion and IGA gave his and other “ethnic” products generous shelf space, seeking to lure newcomers used to patronizing small market vendors into their one-stop supermarkets. Within a few years Jorge moved his plant to the semi-industrial Mimico neighbourhood where it sits today alongside metal works, thrift shops and the improbably named Paradise Café.

During Jorge’s years as owner, Portuguese Cheese Company’s production and business practices changed very little. Pasteurizing, curdling, pressing, aging and packaging took place in a space the size of a modest family home. As several of the cheeses were regional specialties lacking any profile outside their home villages, Jorge renamed them for the benefit of Toronto’s heterogeneous Portuguese community. Unfortunately, names like “Goat Aperitif” were often more confusing than alluring. Despite this quirky marketing, and a sales approach of fully-laden trucks arriving at stores, the drivers calling out, “What do you need?” Jorge had a good livelihood up to his 1999 retirement.



When Anne and George DeMelo, first-generation Azorean-Canadian siblings, purchased the company, most accounts were Portuguese-Canadian, and most business was conducted in Portuguese. Manuel Jorge's "at-the-door" selling technique left the new owners with an initial "call list" of just four handwritten names.

The DeMelo's quickly established an efficient, bilingual approach to customer service. They renamed some cheeses after the Azorean islands (Corvo, Sao Miguel and Graciosa—formerly "Goat Aperitif") and subtitled them (Havarti-style, Cheddar-style) for non-Portuguese shoppers. They predicted correctly that their delicious, well-crafted cheeses would appeal to a broader audience. Business grew by 50% within three years. Anne DeMelo believes good timing was a factor. By the late 1990's Toronto's passion for lesser-known cuisines finally persuaded Portuguese chefs to stop cooking like Italians, and to present authentic Portuguese menus—some of them featuring the DeMelo's cheese.

Production was also updated. Employees still scoop, press and pack by hand, but they have streamlined these processes with the help of a cheese-making cousin, who flew in from the Azores to turn traditional, intuitive methods into precise recipes.

After 40 years in Canada, Portuguese Cheese Company has a new language and style of business. It has preserved tastes and traditions while acknowledging that pretty, pronounceable names help sell cheese, that modern families want smaller portions, and that Canadians like to cook (!) cheese, not just serve it as is. Toronto's multicultural milieu has brought unanticipated benefits. The company's rennet-free cheeses are popular among Caribbean and South-Asian communities; Queso Fresco is essential to Central-American cuisine.



The cheeses are undeniably successful, but are they authentically Portuguese? Their terroir is entirely Ontarian, lacking the raw milk flavours of Portugal. This aside, the cheeses are still made and consumed in an emphatically Portuguese context of old-country recipes, skills, and eating habits. Anne DeMelo enjoys this contradiction. She will soon import additional cheeses to please those who consider her products too Canadian. At the same time she is intensely proud that customers bring her cheese back to Portugal on their annual visits because they prefer it to what they find there.

* Vaquinha, Pico Novo, Pico Mountain, St. John's Cow Fresh, St. John's Goat Fresh, Queso Fresco, Serra, Graciosa, Sao Miguel, Corvo, St. Jorge

Tasting Notes:

Graciosa: fresh yogurt aroma, floral and tangy, supple

Serra: sweet nutty aroma, mildly herbal, chewy

St. Jorge: bold barnyard aroma, piquant, rich and smooth

Julia Rogers works at Whole Foods Market, Yorkville. She sells specialty cheese and leads taste education workshops.