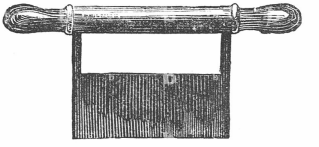
A CHEESE-MONGER'S TOUR DE FRANCE



Coupoir (*à fromage*).

À Sam. Merci mon pote.

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A CHEESE-MONGER'S TOUR DE FRANCE

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Profile Books

Le Plateau des Fromages

INTRODUCTION: PARIS

Tour de France

I began my Cheesemonger's Tour de France in Paris. Or, more specifically, I sat down to lunch at the Café des Musées, in the Marais. Opened in the 1920s, this, to me, is the quintessential Parisian bistro, with pretty mosaic floors, companionably huddled tables, and menus chalked up on blackboards. I ordered a chunky *terrine de campagne*, followed by a *boeuf bourgoignon* (the best in Paris, it has been said), and finally applied myself to the cheese board. On this particular Saturday, I chose a plump slice of Brie, its rumpled white duvet of a rind flecked with pink and orange, a long *tranche* of golden-hued Comté, and a piece of blue-veined Roquefort, all served with a peppery salad. Just the three cheeses – though I was sorely tempted by some fawn-coloured Ossau-Iraty and a little wedge of Crottin goats' cheese.

Here, in this Parisian bistro, *La France Profonde* was laid out before me. Each mouthful of each cheese carried with it something of the culture and the specific environment – the *terroir* – of its place of origin, or *pays*. Brie's rich golden colour speaks of the lush pastures of the Île-de-France, the historical region centred on Paris. Comté owes its distinctive character – its gigantic size, hard texture and sweet and nutty flavour – to the altitude at which it was originally produced in the Franche-Comté region.

Roquefort, which gives its name to *Penicillium roqueforti*, the blue mould that permeates all the world's blue cheeses from Stilton to Gorgonzola, has the smallest *terroir* of any cheese in the world. To bear the proud name of Roquefort, the cheeses must be matured in Roquefort-sur-Soulzon, a little village that straggles along the side of a massive limestone outcrop in the *département* of Aveyron, in southern France. Ossau-Iraty's name speaks of the disputed nationality of its Pyrenean homeland, where cheesemakers still take their flocks up into the very highest pastures in spring, and make cheese in the same way that their ancient forebears did. Crottin, made in the Val de Loire, appeared on the national cheeseboard as the result of a nineteenth-century tragedy, the phylloxera epidemic which killed most of France's vine stock and nearly wiped out the wine industry.

I was in Paris for much more than the cheese plate at the Café des Musées. What had brought me to the city was the Salon du Fromage, a bi-annual celebration of one of France's greatest cultural assets, held in an immense exhibition space at Porte de Versailles. You'd be forgiven for thinking a hangar-sized hall on the outskirts of town is a rather soulless place to display the fruits of a traditional farmhouse and artisan industry, but trust me, they need the room. There really are an awful lot of cheeses in France. And here they all were in all their myriad forms and colours: logs, pyramids, cylinders, millstone-sized wheels and tiny little buttons, with their grey coats, white robes, orangey-pink rinds and blue veins.

The names were a roll call of gastronomic pleasure: the familiar Brie, Comté, Roquefort and Camembert were prominent, of course, but keeping them company were many that are less well known outside France: Sainte-Maure, Salers, Picodon, Saint-Nectaire, Bleu de Gex, Bleu d'Auvergne, Bleu de Causses, and the most

Les confrères de Brie – serious men promoting seriously big cheese.

ubiquitous and least well-defined category of French cheeses, the *tommes* – Tomme d'Alpages, Tomme de Savoie, Tomme de Bauges, Tomme de Chèvre, Tomme de Brebis.

I wasn't just there for the cheese itself, though. To make a proper job of my pilgrimage, I wanted to make contact with cheesemakers and cheesemongers, whom I could visit as I toured the country. This was the best possible place for the task. Anyone who's anyone in the world of French cheese was in the hall. And some of them were clearly very serious about their cheese. Walking the aisles, I came upon a gaggle of older men in white robes and broad white hats, with gold chains around their necks. These were *les confrères de Brie*, the brotherhood of Brie. Around them moved groups of dauntingly gruff-looking men in the stereotypical *bleu d'ouvrier* overalls and cheesemongers in whites, some with the coveted tricolour of the

Meilleur Ouvrier de France on their collars, denoting that their excellence as mongers has been recognised by a grateful nation.

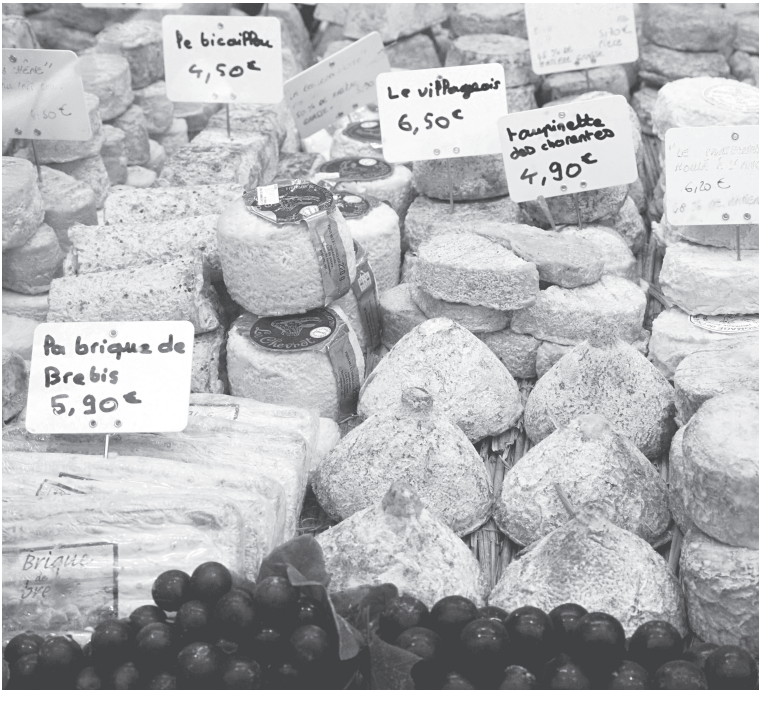
I tried out my French at a Brie producer's stall, which was staffed by an approachable-looking chap dressed in the off-duty outfit common to farmers everywhere: blue button-down shirt, fawn slacks and brogues. Franck, it turned, out was the marketing manager for Rothschild's farm and dairy – the last farmhouse producer of Brie left in its home *pays* – and he seemed surprisingly open to the idea of a visit. I went on to meet Virginie Haxaire, whose family have made the odiferous Munster in Alsace for generations, and at the Roquefort stand of M. Coulet I came across a group of senior cheesemakers who turned out to be much less gruff than I feared.

Among the international cheesemongering community it's widely assumed that France has managed to preserve the old ways of cheesemaking, and that there are producers all over the country that come from an unbroken line that stretches back into the distant past. But by the time I left the hall I was beginning to question some of my preconceptions. Why was there an unnervingly high number of factory producers represented at the exhibition? And when I asked some of the cheesemakers about the state of the artisan cheese industry in France, was the head-shaking and sighing merely the careful pessimism of anyone involved in a small-scale business with tight margins, or indicative of a worrying trend? I wanted to find out how healthy and resilient those traditions really are in France.

In any discussion of French cheese, it is impossible to avoid that exasperated question from President de Gaulle 'How can you govern a country that has more than 246 varieties of cheese?' In fact, it's impossible to put a precise figure on the number of French cheeses. Maurice Edmond Sailland, founder of the Académie Gastronomique, counted no fewer than eight hundred,

though since that was in an entry in world-famous *fromager* Pierre Androuët's guestbook, there might be a little hyperbole involved. Trying to count all the individual cheeses of France is a hopeless endeavour anyway. In the market at Saint-Flour, a small town in the Auvergne, I would meet an extravagantly hairy young hippy with a small offering of tiny, gnarly-looking goats' cheeses on his simple trestle table. When I asked what they were called, he answered with a shrug, '*Chèvre*?' Which of course simply means 'goat'. Should the Auvergnat hippy-cheesemaker's '*Chèvre*' count as a distinct variety, or is it to be subsumed in the general category 'goat'?

The number of proper cheeses is incalculable, though there is, inevitably, a national system of cheese classification in France. But before we get on to that, let us define what cheese is and what I mean when I say 'proper cheese'.



Let me count the cheeses: deux cents quarante-cinq, deux cents quarante-six, deux cents quarante-sept …

Proper cheese, in my book, is a solid made by fermenting the liquid milk of ruminant animals using a bacterial starter culture. And it has two main distinctions. In Britain, the cheese community talks about *farmhouse cheese*, where the cheese is made on the farm from its own milk, and *artisan cheese*, where the cheese is made from locally bought milk. The French have a similar distinction: *fermier* for the former and *laiterie* (as in a cheese dairy) for the latter. For me, these are all proper cheese.

We'd better also cover the basics of cheesemaking before we get out on the road. First, you obtain some milk from a ruminant animal, most commonly a cow, sheep or goat. This milk is full of milk sugar, lactose, which is one of the key ingredients in cheesemaking. To begin the journey from liquid to solid the next step normally is to add a lactophilic bacterial culture, which we call a starter, though some cheesemakers rely on naturally occurring cultures in their dairy to get the process going. The starter ferments the lactose into lactic acid, and this acidification begins to separate the liquid from the solid parts of the milk – the fats, proteins and minerals. Or, in shorter form, it separates the whey from the curd.

You could stop right there for very fresh cream cheeses, but the next stage is usually to add rennet, an enzyme derived either from the stomach of a ruminant or in more modern forms, from a fungus or a tailored bacterium. Rennet acts on a milk protein called kappa casein. By changing the structure of this protein, rennet causes the kappacasein molecules to knit together, forming a matrix that holds the milk solids and expels the whey. This firmer curd is then transferred to pierced moulds, to allow the whey to drain off, and at some point in the process – sometimes before moulding, sometimes after – salt is added, which further reduces moisture, protects against opportunistic spoilage bacteria, and – perhaps most important of all – makes things taste nice.

All those beautiful French cheeses I saw at the Salon, like all the other cheeses in the world, are made using the same fundamental process. The differences spring, in large part, from tweaks to this

basic procedure, including differences in the temperature of the milk, the amount of starter and rennet used, whether the curd is cut before moulding, the size of pieces into which it is cut, and when and how much salt is added.

After the making comes the ripening of the cheese, a craft which its practitioners might say is more important to the character of a cheese than the making. A person who practices this vital craft is called an *affineur,* and it's a measure of how much the craft of *affinage* (the verb means 'to refine') and by extension cheese itself, is valued in French society, that *affineurs* can receive the coveted *Meilleur Ouvrier de France* (MOF) or 'best craftsman of France' award. Holders of the MOF wear that tricolour on their collar, putting them in the august company of chefs, sommeliers, chocolatiers, carpenters, blacksmiths, stonemasons and a host of other life-enhancing craftspeople.

Now's the time to tackle the classification of cheeses. In the late nineteenth century, French cheesemakers began to realise that the reputation and the uniqueness of their local produce were being diluted by versions made in other *pays,* and even in other countries. They began to lobby the government for legal protection, without much success. Winemakers recognised the same threat and, tending to be richer and posher than cheesemakers (the movement was led by Pierre Le Roy de Boiseausmarié, a producer of the fabled Châteauneuf du Pape), did manage to get something done, and in 1935 the Comité National des appellations d'origine (CNAO) was set up. Winemakers could apply for the designation *Appellation d'Origine Côntrollée,* AOC (Controlled Name of Origin), which gave legal protection to each wine's unique methods and area of production. It took decades longer for most cheeses to be included in the system. After the Second World War the committee was re-created

as the Institut National des Appellations d'Origine (INAO), in which form it still exists, to protect regional foods.

The AOC system was admired by producers of other nations, and is now, in a broader form, an EU institution: the designation AOC covers only French products, whereas AOP, *Appellation d'Origine Protégée*, is an EU-wide designation. Cheeses in France get their AOC first, and an AOP classification usually follows. A cheese with an AOC label will tend to sell well, but the system has its detractors. Not every traditional cheese has an AOC, and not every cheesemaker wants one. Some refer to the AOC system as 'the golden handcuffs' in the sense that the restrictions that come along with legal protection can be onerous.

The AOC system brings us to the concept of *terroir*, something that's crucial to this book. *Terroir* is the idea that the physical characteristics of a place, the type of soil, the varieties of plants that grow in that soil, the amount of rainfall that waters them and the amount of sunlight that nourishes them, all have their effects on the character of what that terrain produces. France, as de Gaulle's quote underlines, has many *terroirs*, from the hot scrubby hills of Provence to the limestone outcrops of Aveyron, from the rich soil and lush fields of the Île-de-France to the flowery pastures of the Alps.

And that's just *terroir* at the macro level. Recently, cheese scientists have been exploring the idea of the microbiome of a cheese, the unique population of bacteria living in the local soil and on its grasses and herbs, on and in the animals themselves, and – in the form of various moulds and yeasts – on the wooden shelves and rough stone walls of traditional dairies and maturing *caves*. It turns out that these microscopic flora and fauna may have as much effect on a cheese's character as the macro elements of soil, herbage, climate and elevation.

But *terroir* is even more than physical geography, local climate and microbiomes. A cheese gets some of its character from the culture and the economic circumstances of its makers. As we'll see in Chapter One, Brie is weirdly large for a soft cheese, a fact

One of literally thousands of tasting samples at the Salon.

that relates to its *pays'* location right next to the markets of Paris. Mountain cheeses such as Gruyère, Comté and Beaufort are hard-textured and large because they are made in the mountains (all will be explained in Chapter Three), although they only attained their full colossal size in the nineteenth century, when increasing urbanisation provided increasingly large markets, and railways provided the means to get the cheese to them.

Central to the idea of *terroir*, as well as to French people's sense of their identity, is the *pays,* a word that comes from the Latin *pagus,* which was used in Roman Gaul as an administrative term to denote the area controlled by a particular tribe. *Pagus* itself is the root for 'pagan' and less obviously 'peasant' in English; in French, the much less pejorative term for someone who farms a smallholding is *paysan*. Graham Robb, in *The Discovery of France*, summarises rather poetically what the word came to signify: 'A *pays* was the area in which everything was familiar: the sound of the human voice, the orchestra of birds and insects, the choreography of winds and the mysterious configurations of trees, rocks and magic wells.'

Pays still connotes a very specific locality, but it can also be used to signify France as a whole, or it might denote a region (such as the Île-de-France), or a *département* (like Aveyron), or an ancient pre-Revolutionary province like Champagne. It's sometimes used to describe even more ancient entities, such as the Duchy of Burgundy, and can even be used of a tiny *lieu-dit* or 'said-location', which might be as small as a single field and have a name that hints at how hard the life of a *paysan* could be: *Tout-y-Faut* (Everything is gone), for instance, or *Malcontent*.

In 2016 the French government reduced the number of its regions (excluding the old colonial possessions) from twenty-two to thirteen, merging the longstanding historical regions to make super-regions, which are subdivided into *départements*, which are further divided into *arrondissements*, *cantons* and *communes*. These super-regions are not much use for cheese touring, because they don't reflect a historical or cultural reality. Our voyage around the

pays of France will therefore be dividing the country differently. We are going to stick to mainland France, the 'Hexagon', and most of the *pays* we'll be visiting are represented primarily by a single cheese – the rugged Auvergne, for example, is represented by the appropriately rugged Salers cheese. That said, I will of course be taking the opportunity to present you with other delicious cheeses from each place, and one region, Brittany, is characterised by its plethora of new-wave cheeses, rather than a single hero cheese.

For much of France's history, Frenchness flowed out of Paris. Parisian French was made the language of official documents as early as 1539. And yet, even as late as the 1870s, only about a fifth of the population were speaking Parisian French, and the state-sanctioned idea of Frenchness stood in opposition to the powerful and localised forces of *La France Profonde*. This dichotomy still pertains to an extent, as evidenced by the farmers who have recently laid siege to Paris to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with what they see as the autocratic and uncaring rule of the capital. It can be argued that France is a country of multiple essences, that its soul resides just as much in the rural *pays* and provincial cities as it does in Paris. Such is the story of its cheeses.

1: SEINE ET MARNE

King of Cheese, Cheese of Kings

Brie

The first thing you see when you arrive at La Ferme des Trentes Arpentes is a large green metal dome. It looks like an early warning radar system, or part of an oil refinery. What it doesn't look like is anything you would expect to find at the last *fermier* producer of Brie de Meaux in its home *département* of Seine-et-Marne, in the region of Île-de-France. But that is where we are. The low white dairy buildings look pretty modern too. Oddly, though, the main entrance is framed by a huge arch of deer antlers.

The antlers and the Brie are here thanks to Baron Edmond de Rothschild, multi-millionaire cheese enthusiast and keen hunter. By the 1980s *fermier* Brie was extinct in the *département*, and what traditional production that remained was limited to the *laiteries,* which bought in their milk from neighbouring farms. Even that was threatened by cheaper factory-made Brie, much of which was being produced in Marne and Meuse rather than in Brie's home *département*. The reasons for this state of affairs include the industrial revolution, Louis Pasteur and sugar beets – but more of that later. At this point the baron stepped into the breach. He knew that the *département's* cultural patrimony was under threat and decided to revive *fermier* cheesemaking in Seine-et-Marne.

La Ferme des Trentes Arpentes, the new-build home of traditional cheesemaking, is not run by an old Brie-making family but by professional farm manager Didier, and the cheesemaking is overseen by by a cheery young chap called Alexandre. Didier, a tall weathered-looking man with aquiline features, showed me round. The green dome, it turns out, is an anaerobic digester, which converts the whey, old bedding straw and the other waste products that are inevitable wherever cows are in force, into methane, which is then used to power the dairy. It's hi-tech, but this is just the sort of optimisation of resources that farmer-cheesemakers have been practising for centuries.

More of a break with tradition, perhaps, is the robot milking system that Didier was also keen to show me. It was not, as you might have imagined, a Wall-E armed with a milking pail, but a contraption which the cows walk into whenever the urge takes

Cows with names, chewing the cud at the Rothschild farm.

them. Their udders get a wash, the milkers are popped on, a scanner checks their milk yield and overall health, and a hopper full of tasty pellets keeps them happy while the robot gets on with the milking. One of the cows, called Pika (they still have names, not numbers here) figured out how to game the system and would come round again and again for a feed, and got quite hefty in the process, but that glitch has been fixed and she's gone back to sharing nicely with her sisters.

At first, the robot hadn't been popular with Gael, the herdsman, a short powerfully built man with the bone-crunching handshake of farmers everywhere. When Didier proposed the new system, he threatened to leave. Now Gael tells me he wouldn't work anywhere without one. For one thing, the cows look after their own milking, and there are no more of the brutal early starts that have made milking such a chore for centuries. More importantly for Gael, the cows like it. The pellets are obviously very good.

From the cow shed, the fresh milk takes a leisurely journey through a pipe set over the yard, past those antlers and into the dairy, to be turned – still unpasteurised, of course – into a particularly excellent Brie.

Brie is a soft cheese, and a member of the mould-ripened family – or, in the less prosaic French, *croûte fleurie*, which approximates to 'bloomy coat'. A full-sized Brie de Meaux – the best known of the appellations – is about thirty-three centimetres across and can weigh up to three kilos, which is freakishly large for a soft cheese. As the cheeses mature, a rind consisting of a white mould called *Penicillium candidum*, a wrinkly textured yeast called *Geotrichum*, and an orange-pink bacterium called *Brevibacterium linens* develop on the outside and ripen the paste within. All these helpful microbes make a contribution to the flavour. The *Penicillium* gives

a taste of fresh button mushrooms, the *Geotrichum* adds cooked cabbage, and the B*revibacterium* imparts a barnyardy funk. They also collaborate: the *Penicillium*, for example, has a bitter note which is ameliorated by the *Geotrichum*. So if you want a really great Brie, look out for that hint of orange, and a crumpled surface. Many supermarkets will sell you a 'Brie' which is dead white and as smooth as ironed sheets in a fancy hotel. That's the ghost of a Brie, not the thing itself.

Many French cheese gurus will tell you a Brie is only properly matured when these microbes have softened the paste all the way through to its core. Some *affineurs*, however, like to leave a chalky stripe in the centre, whose firmer texture and clean acidity is a lovely contrast to the rich buttery paste surrounding it. This stripe is known as *l'âme du fromage* or 'the soul of the cheese'.

For that portion of humanity that is neither French nor a massive cheese obsessive, Brie is simply the name of the most famous of French cheeses, alongside Camembert. But Brie is also a historical and cultural region within the *département* of Seine-et-Marne, just east of Paris, which lies within the administrative region of Île-de-France. The region is feminine, La Brie, and the cheese is masculine, Le Brie. La Brie is also a specific geographical entity – the Plateau de Brie, rising from one hundred metres above sea level in the west to two hundred metres in the east, the name being derived from the Gaullish word *briga*, meaning hill or height.

However, it's not quite that simple, because the region of Brie contains many smaller Bries. In the thirteenth century, the Counts of Champagne, who owned the eastern part of the region (comprising Meaux, Provins and Coulommiers), subdivided it into two distinct regions: Brie Française to the west and Brie Champenoise in the east. In the sixteenth century a third sub-division was created, La Brie Pouilleuse, whose capital was Château-Thierry, now in the *département* of Aisne. And we are not done yet, for within those three Bries there are others: La Brie boisée (Brie of the Woods), La Brie humide, La Brie centrale and La Brie laitière. Outside

Seine-et-Marne, in neighbouring *départements*, you'll find La Brie Val-de-Marnaise, La Brie d'Esternay and La Brie des Étangs.

But back, for now, to Rothschild's Brie. The long low-ceilinged cheese room has a red-tiled floor and white walls, and light pours in through a wide window at one end. Warm and steamy, it's full of movement and a constant rattling as a team of white-clad cheesemakers go about their work. Against one wall an array of large white plastic basins, each in its own trolley, are full of curd in varying states of setting. Driven by a large dose of rennet, the curd for Brie de Meaux sets in ten minutes, which is fast for a soft cheese. Cheesemakers walk among the basins testing the set of the curd by resting their little finger on the surface. Science still hasn't come up with anything that beats instinct born of long practice. The set curd is then cut with a long aluminium knife, using fast vigorous strokes – the knife striking the sides of basin after basin is the source of that rattling sound. After the cutting comes the ladling, which more than anything else is what defines a traditional Brie. The skill is in the gentleness with which it is done, to retain as much creaminess as possible, combined with speed, so the curd does not set too firmly, and consistency, so each ladleful is the same size and the cheese forms perfectly.

Interspersed with straw mats (another stipulation of the AOC), the moulds are stacked on long narrow steel tables. The cheesemakers move in an easy swaying motion up and down the tables, wheeling their basin between the moulds as they go, dipping the *pelle à brie* – the broad shallow ladle that's specific to Brie-making – into the curd in elegant swoops and letting the slices (or *éclisses*) slip gently into the moulds. I've always found ladling a beautiful thing to watch, but this was something else – it was like a hypnotic dance piece.

When the new-born cheeses have drained off enough whey, they are turned out of their moulds, salted, and laid on wire racks, which are wheeled, in towering stacks, into the *haloir,* or drying room. This is kept at a low temperature, a sort of early spring chill,

which is just what the yeast needs to get going, and at this point the air is full of a sharp and slightly fruity smell, with none of the funk or ammonia of the aged cheese. I asked Alexandre how long the new cheeses spend in the *haloir*, and he replied with a complex shrug: it depends on the season, the weather, how the starter cultures are feeling, the mood of the cows. Alexandre uses smell more than any other sense to determine when it's time to move the cheeses on. As to how you acquire that skill – another shrug: 'By doing it … a lot.'

As the cheeses mature they are moved to another *haloir,* warmer and more moist, where their coats (*robes*) of white felty-looking mould begin to grow, and then into the final room, the *salle d'affinage.* By that stage the *robe* is almost fully grown, rumpled and downy, with flecks of golden brown and orange. In this last room an *affineur* was at work, flipping cheeses with an impressive combination of speed and gentleness. Turning cheese is the main task of the *affineur,* alongside the ceaseless washing-up – the cheeses must be flipped so that the air gets to every side of them and their bottoms don't get sticky. The ammonia – a by-product of the ripening process – was heavy in the air, stinging my nose and making my eyes water. Intertwined with ammonia, though, are all the aromas of a finished Brie: the fungal note like fresh button mushrooms, cabbage, pepper and a hint of the barnyard.

All of which I got to sample in the packing room, where I was offered a slice of Rothschild's Brie on a comically colossal knife. It was a neat-looking cheese, slimmer and smoother than many, with a gently wrinkled *robe* and just a light dusting of golden flecks. Restraint and elegance characterise Alexandre's philosophy of cheesemaking, and his cheese. The paste is a lighter colour than the opulent gold of many Bries, with a clean and delicate flavour – milky, peppery, with just a light hint of steamed cabbage and the merest memory of the barnyard.

Though I don't normally hold with adulterated cheeses, I wasn't going to turn down the proffered samples of honey and nut Brie,

Basins of curd being ladled at the Rotthschilds' Brie dairy.

mustard Brie, and the queen of them all, truffle-flavoured Brie. Very nice. As I ate, I watched the Bries being halved and quartered with casual swipes of that massive knife, and packed into light wooden boxes stamped with 'Brie de Meaux Fermier, Baron Edmond de Rothschild', ready to go out into the world.

Travelling around Seine-et-Marne involves driving around what feels like a gigantic plain – the Brie plateau. Huge, undulating fields stretch off into the distance, relieved occasionally by a coppice of trees, a brick-built farm or a hamlet consisting of a few stone buildings, clustered together as if to keep each other company under the enormous sky.

Many of the settlements in Seine-et-Marne, however, nestle in the valleys of the rivers Seine and Marne and their tributaries, and it can be a relief to leave the stark beauty of the plateau and descend into one of these little valleys. Coming down off the plateau, a narrow road cuts across a field and crosses the Morin river into the village of Saint-Cyr-sur-Morin. The lower part of the village has some affluent-looking old houses that suggest what a rich region this once was, and the place still feels very well kept, with a profusion of neatly tended and flower-filled gardens. The principal attraction, housed in the village's former mill, is the museum of Seine-et-Marne, where the display of cheesemaking equipment is a joy for any cheese historian. There is a little single-legged wooden milking stool that you strap round your waist so that you could move easily from cow to cow, along with some impressively huge cow bells on broad leather straps. Along one wall stands a massive stone draining table with grooves for the whey to drain off. There's a battered old *pelle à brie*, a curd knife, and some other ladles resting in a curd basin, much like the kit in use up the road at Ferme des Trentes Arpentes. But the cheesemaking display is

Saint-Cyr-sur-Morin, back in its heyday.

only a small percentage of the museum's collection, which reflects the fact that for most of Seine-et-Marne's history, dairying was just one of a portfolio of farming industries, which included growing arable crops and cider apples. It was only in the latter half of the nineteenth century that cheesemaking became Seine-et-Marne's most lucrative business.

But the story of Brie, as the signature cheese of the region, goes back way before then. The Île-de-France became known as the 'Garden of Kings' for its proximity to Paris, and its history is entwined with the history of France – or rather, *one* history of France, the history of the French aristocracy and royalty, and their long project to bring the nation's numberless *pays* under the centralising rule of Paris.

The story of Brie is told with brio by eminent *fromager-affineur* Pierre Androuët in his book *Le Brie,* whose subtitle, *Fromage des Rois, Roi des Fromages* (Cheese of Kings, King of Cheeses), affirms the cheese's royalist pretensions. It's no surprise that Androuët is

a proponent of the Paris-centric view of France. He was born in the city in 1915, and abandoned architectural college to help his father turn a wholesale cheese business into what is still one of the most famous cheese shops in the world. Androuët's brief fling with architecture wasn't wasted: in the mid-1930s he designed a restaurant attached to the shop, which rapidly became the go-to destination for Paris's great and good. The visitors' book contained tributes from Curnonsky, prince of gastronomes, and the writer Colette, whose entry read: 'If I had any advice to give my daughter … I'd tell her "be careful not to marry a man who doesn't love wine, music and cheese."'

Un peu de Brie? Young women enjoying the cheeseboard at the Androuët restaurant in Paris, around 1936.