

VACHERIN DU MONT D'OR

Another happy by-product of the Comté dairy is Vacherin du Mont d'Or. This succulent seasonal cheese is of such glory that it has become the solace of our winter months. Cheese of this name has long been made in Franche-Comté and in the Vaud, a star of gastronomy whose light transcends frontiers. The Francs-Comtois never questioned Swiss use of the name, but always believed that it originated on their own side of the border in the eighteenth century. Most of the Mont d'Or, including its peak, lies well inside Franche-Comté, but the Swiss had nonetheless started to claim the name as their own before I visited Franche-Comté in 1973. I thought the French claim unassailable, but in the event the Swiss purloined the exclusive legal right to the name Vacherin Mont d'Or, previously shared with the Francs-Comtois for so many peaceful years.

In those times, if the maker's name and village of origin were not on the box, the almost infallible clue to the cheese's nationality was grammatical: Vacherin Mont d'Or *tout court* was probably Swiss; the more pedantic Vacherin du Mont d'Or was almost certainly French. Now both are Swiss, and the Francs-Comtois have to be content with 'Le Mont d'Or' or 'Vacherin

du Haut-Doubs', a nonsense if ever there was one. Vacherin was invented before the *département* called Haut-Doubs was ever thought of. However, these are the names given to the cheese by their new AOC.

In the 1980s the Swiss have added injury to insult by pasteurising the milk for their Vacherin. This has not saved their cheeses from disastrous infections with *Listeria monocytogenes*, finally publicised in the winter of 1987-8 as having caused at least thirty-seven fatal cases of Listeriosis since 1983. This would have been bad enough if its effects had been confined to Switzerland; but the name Vacherin was blackened likewise through ignorant reporting about 'unpasteurised cheese'. Raw-milk cheese, on the contrary, has proved remarkably resistant to *Listeria monocytogenes*, though winter Vacherin-makers in France had to destroy their glorious, unsullied cheese because of indiscriminating sales-resistance. Some reports even suggested that Swiss Vacherin was the sought-after cheese and French the poor relation. This was ignorant *snobisme* at its most ridiculous. No experienced or informed cheese-lover would hesitate to prefer French Mont d'Or (or Vacherin du Haut-Doubs).

As we have seen, the mainstay of the dairy in Franche-Comté is the very big cheese requiring the daily milk of two or more farms, whence the practical value of the *fruitières*. In winter this region is often the coldest in France; early in 1987 the temperature dropped to -30°C . In the old days, when the milk of the smaller farms could no longer be brought into the *fruitières*, either they could mix several days' milk to make a Comté, which is undesirable for this sort of cheese, or they could make something smaller every day.

In my mind's eye I have often put myself in the place of a snowbound cheese-loving comtois farmer, collecting logs from the neat stack under the snow-heavy eaves. I have pictured his being suddenly struck by the warm beauty of the cut spruce and its resinous bark, which can glow like mahogany and smell like heaven. A cheese could look like this, he might well have felt. So, on a base cut across the log, with a ring of *épicéa* bark around it to contain its enthusiasm, a new soft cheese was born.

Bathing in brine helps seal bark and cheese together, and the resinous flavour and aroma spread into the cheese as it ripens. My nose tells me when the first cases of the new season's Vacherin have arrived in my shop in Streatley. Year after year, I find this seasonal joy as exciting as ever.

The surface of the mature cheese varies from pale yellow to pinkish gold, and is billowy. If cut before it runs, the interior is moist, pale creamy-white with a delicate scatter of tiny holes. A saw-edged knife is usually necessary to deal with the bark. When you pull or carefully cut away your portion of Vacherin from its bark, the outside edge of the cheese can be bright orange, and its odour magnificent. To enjoy the texture and savour to the full, slice the cheese in strips up to a quarter of an inch thick, and lay it, do not spread it, on thick crisp-crust bread. Make sure you have your share of the bark, and scrape it to sprinkle the tasty remains of cheese adhering to it over your slice. If you are not in stuffy company, lick your bark after each mouthful of cheese, and do not waste what is left; put it on the fire to die in a scent of

glory. I am writing this in front of our wood fire in Provence, with the euphoric aftertaste still in my mouth of the most succulent Vacherin this winter has yet produced. I bless the Badoz family at Pontarlier for making this February day worth a red letter in the calendar, despite a temperature well below zero. How satisfying it is that the box can boast a gold medal at the Paris Concours Agricole of 1985. My palate has been giving Badoz cheeses gold medals ever since the early 1970s when I first brought them into the United Kingdom.

Apart from Swiss purloining and sullyng of the name, the recent French history of Vacherin has been a happy one. The number of farms contributing winter milk to making the cheese has risen from 150 in 1960, with a total production of 200 tonnes, to nearly 400 farms and approaching 700 tonnes of cheese in 1986. I like to think that I have contributed personally to this rise in prosperity by introducing Vacherin for the first time to countless private customers (including many Americans), and to restaurateurs and fellow cheese merchants in Britain.

Making begins for a few *fromagers* on 15 August, the earliest permissible date, and ends on 31 March. Late in the season few makers produce it daily; the quantity tails off sharply, little being made after mid-March. Every drop of milk for Vacherin comes from Montbéliardes or Pie-rouges de l'Est on their winter diet of natural hay, and must be used unpasteurised. The standard of cheeses is very high, but it is vital that they should not be sold too young and firm for the market, however strongly retail demand may tempt *affineurs* to release them. Paradoxically, the smaller cheeses take longer to ripen; let out too young and kept too cold, they will be lost forever. At their best, usually deeper than the big cheeses, they are superb, and are ideal for a household or small restaurant. Buyers just need to test for softness with great care.

Vacherin perpetuates the old relationship between the forester, the *gruyer* of ancient times, and the *fromager*. I was told in 1973 that three or four specialist *bûcherons* go round the forests inspecting spruces (locally called *fuve* rather than *épicéa*) after they have been marked for felling, to select and buy the best barks. These are stripped from the trunks and cut horizontally into circlelets an inch or more wide, for sale to the makers of Vacherin. They are called *sangles* and the sellers are sometimes nicknamed *sangliers*, which means wild boars. Vacherin production has more than trebled since 1973, so there must now be more of these bark-strippers, dealing with hundreds of trees in the course of a season.

I revisited Franche-Comté in mid-September 1986, coming down from Alsace through Belfort and Montbéliard, late enough in the season to see Vacherin being made. In slightly misty autumn sunshine, the comté was at its beautiful green best: dairy country *par excellence*. We drove 60 miles between flowery pastures with not a black-and-white cow in sight: nothing but the rich red and white of sturdy Montbéliardes and Pie-rouges de l'Est. On either side of the road the valleys are enclosed by wood-topped hills and ridges up to 1100 metres high. The farm buildings, more beautiful than barracks and more modest than mansions, are yet on that sort of scale. They

embrace one or more houses, a dairy, and extensive barns for forage, farm implements and winter housing for the beasts. Some are in chalet form, with one widespread gable reaching almost to the ground. Most are in the shape of an English Queen Anne house, but with smaller, square, wide-bordered windows.

We stopped north-east of Pontarlier at Montbenoît, in the heart of the little valley called the Saugcais. With its eleven villages, this *pays* was given by the Sire de Joux in 1127 for the founding of a monastery. The first Augustinian monks were Saugets from the Valais, who called in lay compatriots to help clear the lower-lying forest, and to establish pasture and dairy. A sixteenth-century abbot, Cardinal de Granvelle, was Charles V's confidant; this, no doubt, helped to keep Charles supplied with his much-cherished Comté cheese. There are still seventeen centuries-old *fruitières* in this delectable little region. (The abbey at its centre has remarkable cloisters, statues and choir stalls; do not miss La Loi d'Aristote and the attractive Delilah wielding sheep-shears on her slumbering Samson's locks.)

We stayed the night above Montbenoît at the well-named Bon Repos (the nearby railway line has only two trains a day). The Poulet au Vin Jaune et aux Morilles was excellent. As the remarkable Vin Jaune is very expensive, we contented ourselves with the generous amount of it in the chicken, and drank an acceptable Blanc du Pays en pichet at about a tenth of the price.

Next day we visited Monsieur Bernard Philippe's *fromagerie* at Chaffois, just west of Pontarlier. He himself has retired from cheesemaking, which is now done by his son Claude and two assistants. They were fully occupied with the new season's Vacherin every day except Sunday, when they resumed Comté-making to allow them a shorter working day. Even this limited relaxation would be sacrificed in November, to prepare for the enormous Christmas demand for Vacherin.

The 2.5-centimetre-wide strips of bark, the *sangles*, are bought in bunches of about twenty-five. Enough for one day's cheeses are soaked overnight in salt water, and brought to the boil in the morning to bring out the aroma and flavour (this also eliminates any foreign bodies, insect or fungal, which might affect the cheese).

When the morning milk arrives from the farms it is added raw to the naturally ripened overnight milk, already in the copper-lined *chaudrons*. In each of these in turn 1000–1200 litres are brought up to 35°C. Renneting is done half an hour later, and within another half hour the curd has usually formed. After being rested for half an hour it is cut into cubes of about 5 centimetres and stirred about six times at ten- to fifteen-minute intervals with the *pelle* (a dustpan-shaped scoop). When the curd is right the whey is pumped out, ready for collection by the pig farm next door.

Meanwhile the pierced moulds are prepared. For the larger cheese these measure 25 centimetres across and are nearly as deep. They are filled straight from the vat. The small moulds are about half that diameter but deeper. They are ranged in a mobile trough. A vertical-sided tray with holes fits over the ten or so moulds; the curd is poured on by the bucketful, and

eased by hand into the moulds below. These are removed to a bench when full and replaced by empties until the curd is exhausted (the trough can be swung on its cradle for cleaning and turned over for draining).

Inside the full moulds the curd is turned once before it has drained enough to be turned out on to the bench where it is encircled in the spruce bark. Inevitably, the big moulds hold slightly varying quantities of curd, and on release from the mould it must be gently pressed to a proper depth: too deep a cheese overfills its box; its crust sticks to the lid and may be pulled away when the lid is removed. The curd may spread slightly before the cheesemaker secures it in the *sangle* by pinning the overlapping ends together with a pair of sharp wooden dowels. Forty or so new cheeses are ranged on a fine-meshed sheet over the wide, plastic-covered shelf of a trolley. They are then covered with another meshed sheet, another plain sheet, and a very light but strong hardboard. On top of this the whole process is repeated until all the cheeses have been dealt with.

The curd for the small cheeses is turned out of the moulds as though it were going to be a *fourme* of the Forez type (see Chapter 7), but the content of each cylinder is cut to produce six to eight small cheeses. These are ringed with shorter strips of bark, secured with elastic bands, and then shelved like their bigger brothers.

In the evening the cheeses have an hour-long salt bath, and the next day they go for ripening into the *caves* of Monsieur Philippe at Bannans, the next village to the west. Vacherins are kept separate from Comté and Morbier in a humid *cave* of their own. They are turned and rubbed with lightly-salted water daily, except Sundays, for at least three weeks. Because, paradoxically, they are deeper, the smaller cheeses need longer. The maximum temperature in this *cave* is 14°C; at just 1° higher the cheese ferments and overfills its box, with the damaging results we have described and the further disaster of spoiled flavour. As Monsieur Claude Philippe said, 'Vacherin is either very good or it is hopeless. There is no in-between.'

His father took me to watch the boxing of the matured cheeses, glowing with their gold to pinkish, supple, undulating surfaces. The larger boxes are between 25 and 30 centimetres across, to allow for inevitable variations in such thoroughly hand-made cheeses. The charming girl on the job removed the dowels from the bark overlap in the big cheeses (or the elastic bands from the smaller), and gently persuaded cheese after cheese into the matching box that she selected with an unerring eye from the many ranged at the back of her table against the wall. Every now and then no box was big enough. She then gauged how much of a tuck she must take in the cheese to make it fit, nicked a tiny triangle from the edge, and closed the wound as she eased the cheese into its box, where the cut edges of bark made a perfect join. I caused her and Monsieur Philippe some satisfaction and amusement by begging a few of the resinous triangular trimmings and relishing them as I watched.

Over the years I have handled many of these skilfully trimmed Vacherins, and can testify that they quickly heal without any deterioration of the cheese. The surgery is betrayed to a knowledgeable eye only by a more

pronounced fold in the crust, and by the line of the join in the bark, which makes a better starting point for cutting the cheese before selling or serving than the double thickness of the overlap.

After each cheese is tucked down, the mark made by the brown bark is wiped from the upper inside of the box and the lid is put on. The Philippe cheeses usually bear the imprint of Messieurs Arnaud of Poligny, the final *affineurs* and distributors, and the number PS25 identifies their Chaffois provenance. The boxes are piled four high (another reason for being careful not to overflow them) and are kept at a temperature of 11°C until they are sold.

We left Franche-Comté carrying with us the aroma and flavour of one of France's most luscious cheeses, which dates back 200–300 years. Travelling along route N437 hearing cow bells on either side of the road, we came across the foundry at Labergement Sainte-Marie, where Obertino et Cie make every imaginable size of bell, set off with magnificent collars. Along this route there are frequent sawmills, and enormous horses are still used for the most difficult extractions of timber from the forests. The road through Mouthé and Saint-Laurent is called, with good reason, 'La Route du Comté', but one of its prizes is the rare chance to eat fresh *truite de source* with local *vin blanc* in the sunshine in front of the Hôtel de la Truite at Foncine-le-Haute; enough said.