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A strong stomach for cheese



Société d'original is making a blue from a fungus found in a caribou's gut

by Pamela Cuthbert on Thursday, June 14, 2012 8:10pm - [2 Comments](#)

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WHAT IS THIS ?



Getty Images; Photograph by Brandon Titano; Photo Illustration by Stephen Gregory

If you think the only link between food and a collection of live maggots, dead mites and half-digested organic material is the compost bin, it's time to reconsider cheese.

Fresh milk needs fermentation to transform into curds and whey; sometimes bugs and fungus are the micro-organisms used to trigger it. And now a small Quebec company is experimenting with fermented lichen, normally found in the second stomach of forest caribou, to produce a new blue.

Société d'Original, a boutique food supplier based in Montreal, has a list of clients that includes New York chefs Daniel Boulud and Dan Barber and Toronto's Jeff Claudio. It sells about two dozen artisanal products, including wild herbs foraged from the boreal forests of the province. When they found out the Inuit of Quebec traditionally eat the lichen from the caribou's stomach, their newest project was born.

"They say it tastes like blue cheese so we started thinking: why not make our own fungus to make our own blue cheese? There is lichen everywhere and we make our products from what nature has to offer," says co-owner Alex Crux. Lichen is produced by a symbiotic relationship between a fungus and a bacteria or algae.

For centuries, cheese has been inoculated with *Penicillium roqueforti*, a naturally occurring fungus found in decaying vegetation, to create roquefort, Stilton and many more blue cheeses. "Every time we talk about cheese, it's about the European traditions," says Crux. "I don't like to be treated like a colony." For their blue, the company buys goat milk from the Petit family farm in the Gaspé and *Usnea* lichen foraged by Gérard Mathar and Catherine Jacob of Gaspésie Sauvage in Douglastown, Que. "We create a mould that comes from roasting and boiling lichen and then letting it rest to ferment," Crux explains.

Rob Gentile, executive chef at Toronto's Buca Osteria, can't wait to get his hands on some, still in the experimental

stages. “I use all of the Société d’Original products as much as I can,” he says. “We’re about pushing boundaries and these guys are in line with our thinking.”

There are other examples of cheeses that rely on natural and sometimes controversial sources of fermentation. There’s the notorious Casu Marzu, the Sicilian invention that Gordon Ramsay called “the most dangerous cheese in the world.” It’s a sheep’s milk product, a small wheel of pecorino, which is cut open and left in huts to be colonized by flies that lay eggs on the cheese. The hatched maggots start eating their way through the cheese, leaving a trail of excrement. Humans eat it, excrement and all, when the maggots are still wriggling inside.

Would Gentile, who is from Italy, serve Casu Marzu? “I would definitely do something with it,” he says. “It would freak me out maybe, and maybe I would squish the maggots, but I’d love to try it.” The cheese is not available in Canada and he couldn’t even track some down last year on a trip to Sicily. “You have to work hard if you really want it.”

A more commonplace French cheese, the Edam-like Mimolette, is aged by mites that live on the rind. As the cheese ripens, the mites make small cavities in the cheese. It’s still made that way in Normandy, but Canadian laws banned the live mites years ago and so the cantaloupe-coloured cheese we buy is dipped in wax to kill the bugs. Robert Burns of Toronto’s La Fromagerie misses the live action. “They ship it in a coating of black wax, and now Mimolette looks like a bowling ball.” Then there is Milbenkäse, a rare cheese from eastern Germany, fermented by mites fed a special diet of rye flour whose excrement produces further fermentation. Oh, and you eat the mites with the cheese.

By comparison, a cheese made with lichen seems relatively clean. Société d’Original is one year and three batches into development of their blue. “We’re not too far from creating something really cool,” promises Cruz. He hopes it will be on the market before year’s end. “We want to create a North American gastronomy,” he adds. “Something new and something representative of who we are and where we live.”

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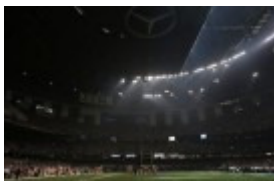
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