

Say Cheese!

Few foods in the world vary as much as cheese. From “wiz”, that gooey concoction that barely resembles anything dairy, to artisan cheeses, wholesome, hand-crafted and fresh.

America, Spain, and Italy, and any number of countries produce delicious cheeses, but the undisputed leader is France, where in gastronome circles, cheese is often held in the same high esteem as the regional wines. On a recent tour of the Loire Valley, I visited *Fromagerie Dubois-Boulay* in the tiny village of Chavignol. Home to just 200 or so residents and 26,000 goats, this is where *Crottins de Chavignol* is produced.



The Dubois-Boulay family, the oldest - and one of only four “refiners” (or producers) of goat cheese in the village, have been hand turning the tiny two inch-by-two inch “buttons” since 1896. Today, production is overseen by the fourth generation Gilles Dubois. *Crottin de Chavignol* is an expression of the geography and history, reflecting the distinctive characteristics of the climate and soil of the region.

Goat cheese had been produced since the middle of the 16th century in Chavignol, which sits just outside of the ancient city of Sancerre. When phylloxera all but destroyed the grape vines hundreds of years later, vineyards became pastures, and goat cheese production flourished.

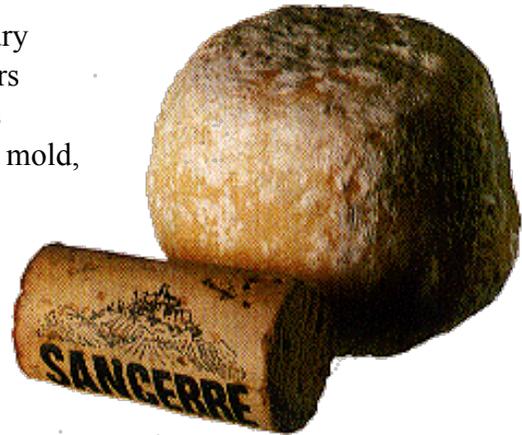
“*Crottin*, refers to the “crot,” an oil lamp. a shape resembling the original mold in which the curd is turned frequently to form a “button” and then set for 12-24 hours. Made exclusively from whole, unpasteurized goats milk, the little cheeses are then salted, dried, and ripened for up to 10 days. Initially the cheese weighs about 5 ounces but decreases dramatically as it matures, losing up to 75% of its weight.

Gilles was gracious in giving us an in-depth history of Chavignol and the role his family held in putting the tiny village on the French cheese map. We were then treated to a “crottin tasting,” consisting of four buttons at varying stages of maturity.



Bruce and Giles Dubois

The first tiny wheel was just weeks old and only slightly dry with a center of mild milk flavor and subtle hints of flowers and grass. The next sample, at about 4-6 weeks in age was slightly more dense and formed a thin crust of penicillium mold, which took on a more pungent aroma and flavor. At 8-10 weeks, the buttons' crust began to look like mini wheels of blue cheese (my favorite of the four) with a somewhat chalky consistency and complex flavor that I associated with mushrooms and American chevre. At three to four months, there was an obvious change in appearance, an intense woody-mushroom aroma and a nutty flavor.



A few days later, sitting under towering trees in a beautiful garden just outside Burgundy we uncorked bottles of the crisp, chilled Sancerre wines of *Alphonse Mellot* and re-tasted the *Crottins de Chavignol*, softened by a hot July sun. Spread on fresh, warm baguettes and layered with thinly sliced ham, we recounted the joy of our visit to Chavignol and Dubois-Boulay.



Dubois-Boulay's cheeses are rarely found in the US. Most of the production is taken in the local villages or in the better fromagerie's of Paris. You may want to try Murray's on Bleeker Street in Manhattan, DiBruno's in Philadelphia, or any of the Dean & DeLuca stores around the country. Be sure to look for

the PDO and AOC labels indicating genuine *Crottin de Chavignol* cheese.

Had our visit to Chavignol not been at the very beginning of our three week tour of French wine estates, we would have chanced trying to get some cheese into our luggage to bring home. Unfortunately, US Customs frowns on bringing unpasteurized dairy products into the country. In retrospect, that's okay. A return visit to Chavignol and Dubois-Boulay is welcome!

Cheers,
Eat, drink and be merry!

Bruce

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