

SPANISH CHEESE ACROSS THE BOARD

Some time ago, I put up on the wall facing my desk, a quotation from the great Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) which goes something like this: "The people that abandons its traditions is like a tree with rotten roots: it ends up getting blown away by the wind." Thankfully, the great traditions of the people of Spain are still alive at the roots.

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Translation: Hawys Pritchard
Still life: Menchu Artime
Photo: A. de Benito/ICEX

GAMONEU, ONE OF THE GREAT NATURAL CAVE-MATURED CHEESES, IS MADE IN THE HEART OF THE PICOS DE EUROPA NATIONAL PARK, NEAR THE DISTINCTIVE MOUNTAIN FORMATION OF EL CORNIÓN.

Luckily, the people of Spain have plenty of traditions to preserve. They have reemerged from every corner of the country, in response to the first drops of the blessed rain of freedom—dances, songs, foodways, the habits and customs which unappreciative, misguided modernists attempted to devalue as too old, too outdated, and too local. The cheeses which are just as much a part of the way of life of each and every one of Spain's towns and villages, have for centuries been an equally valid expression of their specific character. I always maintain that behind every cheese, there's a community, with all that that implies: patterns of life, customs, how it relates to its own natural environment and climate, and so on. In this article, I'm going to take you on a conducted tour of the natural and human background to Spain's "other," lesser known cheeses, products of the rich biodiversity that reflects the Iberian Peninsula's varied ecosystems. Cheeses such as San Simón, los Beyos, Afuega'l Pitu, Gamoneu, and Ahumado de Ávila, from the rainy part of Spain, "green" Spain, up in the north. Traveling eastward across the country as far as the Mediterranean, we find Garrotxa cheese, then heading south through Old Castile for Pata de Mulo, into Extremadura for cheeses such as Sierra de Gata, Ibores, and Torta del Casar. The Rondeño cheese from the Málaga hills is our last stop on the mainland before heading for the Canary Island of Fuerteventura, where Majorero is made. The whole across-the-board route takes in cheeses from valleys, mountains, plains, hills, and volcanic terrain, all with very different characteristics.

There are three broad types of climate in mainland Spain: Atlantic, Mediterranean, and continental. The climate of "green" Spain is typically Atlantic, characterized by long and almost continuous periods of rain, which account for the existence of abundant lush pasture for livestock, both in its many beautiful valleys and in the barely accessible but rich highland pastures to which herdsmen still lead their transhumant herds in the summer months.

Setting off from what the Roman Empire dubbed *Finis Terrae*—Land's End—in the magical, unpredictable land of Galicia, we head for the rolling, restful valleys of Asturias and Cantabria within which, like an enclave, is the natural paradise of the Picos de Europa. This sacrosanct, stunningly beautiful mountain mass contains natural chalk caves in whose dark, damp, silent intimacy all the greats among Spain's blue cheeses take on their enduring and unique qualities. There are certain elements common to the whole of this area which define and determine the characteristics of the valley and mountain cheeses made hereabouts:

- The abundant pastures make "green" Spain a paradise for cows. Up in the mountains, cows share their pasture with a few hardy sheep and goats, which provide an effective supplement to the cattle which are unwieldy in large numbers in this terrain.
- Biodiversity is a characteristic of these herds. Despite colonization by the ubiquitous Friesian, there are, fortunately, still herds of native breeds which make a splendid contribution to Spain's

cheese output. Breeds such as the glamorously named Rubia Gallega (Galician Blonde), Casina, Carreña, Tudanca, Parda Asturiana, and so on, are still the basic stock of many livestock farmers.

- The role of women on the farm is a multifaceted role: they are the tacklers of all the domestic jobs in the rural home, defenders and transmitters of family traditions and, on top of all that, the ones who make the cheese.

- The cheeses made here are small, fundamentally because the existing native breeds could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be described as champion milk producers. However, they make a valuable contribution to the small farm in the form of manure for the kitchen garden, they pull carts laden with firewood, grass, and harvested crops, they feed their calves and, at the same time, provide a (very) few liters of milk for domestic use and cheese making. The cheeses have to be small.

SAN SIMÓN

This cheese comes from a Galician vale in "green" Spain. Made from the milk of the native Rubia Gallega cow, the method is very complex and labor intensive, which perhaps explains why the women from around Villalba, in Lugo Province, are gradually giving up making it at home. However, small artisan cheese makers are setting up commercially and taking over production. One thing that distinguishes this cheese from others is its pear or cannonball shape. Its attractively shiny, waxy amber-colored rind is the result of smoking before being offered for sale. The interior is

dense and straw yellow, and the creamy, lactic flavor harmonizes well with a slight smokiness. It is sold in units weighing about 1 kg (2.2 lb), and buyers should take into account the painstaking work that has gone into it and the finesse. This is a lovely, subtle cheese that only a Galician countrywoman could have created.

LOS BEYOS

We now enter the Los Beyos gorge, a sort of imposing corridor between the autonomous communities of Asturias and Castile-Leon.

This cheese comes from a steep mountain environment, whose tiny clusters of rural dwellings are inhabited by genuine heroes, now dwindling in numbers, who have survived a tough lifestyle that many compatriots abandoned for central Europe or South America. Small herds of Carreña and Ratina cows, both enormously hardy native breeds thoroughly adapted to the difficult local terrain, live alongside small, and also dwindling, numbers of sheep and goats.

Los Beyos cheeses are all small and cylindrical in shape. They are made up in the mountain pastures during the clement periods of the year, and in farmhouse kitchens when the days are short days in deepest winter. This cheese is made by acid coagulation, the milk from the morning milking being added to the evening milk and left to coagulate slowly by the fire overnight. After the curd is cut and the whey removed, the curd is put into molds to drain. After salting, the cheeses are formed and left to mature for 2 to 3 weeks until

the rind turns straw yellow. The interior is rather crumbly and pale yellow, slightly acidic, mature in flavor, and buttery on the palate.

AHUMADO DE ALIVA

This cheese is made in the autonomous community of Cantabria, mainly in the area around Liébana. Another mountain cheese, it shares certain characteristics with the Los Beyos, though the Aliva cheese is smoked over juniper wood. This tradition dates back to the time when the cheeses were made in the shepherd's hut during that part of the year spent up in the highland pastures by herds of native Pasiega and Tudanca cows and the occasional sheep and goat. The cheese is made in a similar way to Los Beyos, though the use of suckling kid rennet and maturing some cheeses in natural caves up in the mountains are practices specific to Ahumado de Aliva.

AFUEGA'L PITU

Back in Asturias again, deep in the valley formed by the region's two big rivers, the Nalón and the Narcea. From the hills that flank this valley, one can see as far as the Bay of Biscay. Sad to relate, the native breed of cow known as the Carreña or Asturiana de los Valles, typical of this region, is being ousted, without any regard for tradition, by the Dutch Friesian which is taking over with indecent speed. Afuega'l Pitu is a valley cheese, and another very labor intensive one. It is made by acidic coagulation, the milk being left close to the kitchen stove all night in winter and somewhere cool

on warm summer nights. The following morning, the curds precipitated to the top by acidification are ladled off and pressed to release as much whey as possible. The lightly drained curds are then placed in a cloth or a metal sieve for further draining. When all the whey has drained off, the curds are transferred to perforated molds shaped like truncated cones and left for three or four days to take on their characteristic shape. The small cheeses, weighing around 0.5 kg (1.1 lb), are then left to air in a cool, well-ventilated place. There is one variant, perhaps a response to the difficulty of storing these cheeses, particularly in summer, which consists in adding small amounts of hot or medium-hot paprika to the cheese when salting, which makes it look good and last longer. Afuega'l Pitu cheeses are sold soft and fresh or matured for 40-50 days, in which case the interior takes on a markedly dry, granular texture which sticks to the palate when eaten.

GAMONEU

We now climb to the heights of Asturias in the heart of the Picos de Europa national park, one of whose mountain formations is known as El Cornión: this is where Gamoneu, one of the great natural cave-matured cheeses, comes from. This is highland livestock farming territory, and herdsmen and their transhumant herds use it to the fullest, heading for its high pastures in spring and summer. The herdsmen live there in huts with other members of their family to help keep an eye on their

IN THE EXTREMADURAN COUNTRYSIDE AROUND LOS IBORES AND LAS VILLUERCAS, THEY MAKE IBORES, ONE OF THE BEST AND MOST DISTINCTIVE OF SPAIN'S GOAT CHEESES.

native Casina and Carreña cows and their few sheep and goats. The herd's yield from the same day's morning and evening milkings are mixed, and by the following morning acid coagulation produces curds from which they remove as much whey as possible: this is a significant point of difference with the other blue cheeses. After being pressed for several days to expel the whey, the cheese is sprinkled with coarse salt and placed on wooden racks where it is left for 10 to 15 days to air and absorb the smoke generated inside the hut. It then continues its development in natural caves in the chalky mountainsides where it will stay for two months until the lightly smoked rind it had when it was put into the cave has developed a dense, variegated reddish, grayish, greenish moldy down. These cheeses weigh around 3 kg (6.6 lb) apiece, and when cut, reveal some mold inside near the rind. The interior is dry and crumbly with a slightly piquant, mature flavor.

GARROTXA

Moving on now to north-eastern Spain, we leave behind the fertile Atlantic zone for the Garrotxa area of Catalonia. This area is typical of the Mediterranean climate, with its rolling hills and valleys, and pines and Mediterranean flora marking the difference. This is the setting for a success story among the attempts to rescue traditional cheeses made by young exponents of the "back to the countryside" movement who, in the 1970s, turned their backs on their impressive academic

qualifications as lawyers and doctors to set about revitalizing this area's depopulated villages, working as artisans and swapping academic gowns for overalls, and the civil code for the instruction manual to the milking machine. They successfully launched an excellent goat's cheese which encapsulates all the finesse and charm that Mediterranean creativity is known for. They started out by renting typically Catalan 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century farmhouses (they are known as *masías* in Catalan), and set themselves up as goat keepers and cheese makers. They opted for the Murcian-Granadine goat as the most suitable one for their intentions, installing them in simple but comfortable stables built entirely of pine, and letting them loose to wander about for hours on end and graze on the aromatic pasture provided by the Mediterranean woodland.

Garrotxa cheese is made by coagulating the milk with animal rennet for a minimum of two hours, after which the curds are cut up into little bean-sized pieces, placed in cylindrical molds, and pressed gently. After mild salting in brine, the cheeses are left to air for a day, then transferred to natural caves with high humidity levels. They remain there for a minimum of 20 days, by which time each small cheese, weighing about a kilo (2.2 pounds), is covered in the delicate coating of gray-blue *Penicillium Glaucum* which is one of its distinguishing characteristics. Garrotxa is surprising for the delicacy of its aromas, its slight touch of acidity softened by a buttery, slightly melting effect. It is attractive in appearance, too, the gray outside contrasting

dramatically with the immaculate white of the interior. This little gem of the cheese maker's art with a touch of Mediterranean creativity has a guaranteed future.

PATA DE MULO

Turning our backs on the north, we now move southward towards the meseta of Castile, the Iberian Peninsula's great central plateau some 600 meters (2,000 feet) above sea level. In its continental climate of freezing winters and boiling summers, the sheep reigns supreme, virtually unchallenged, grazing on the post-harvest stubble of cereal, pulses, vines, and the like in flocks of from 300 to 1,000 head at a rate of six to seven km (four miles) a day. Within the meseta, in the heart of the part of Castile known as Tierra de Campos, a fine but almost forgotten cheese is made from the milk of Churra and Castellana sheep, two very hardy native breeds adapted for centuries to the rigors of this ecosystem. Pata de Mulo originated in Villalón, in Valladolid Province, as a fresh cheese. The milk from each milking is coagulated with lamb rennet for about an hour, then the curd is cut into little hazelnut-sized pieces. When the whey has been drained off, the curd for each cheese is wrapped in a cloth to form a cylinder, and expel more whey. The rolls are left on wooden boards where they flatten out slightly, taking on their final shape of a rounded parallelepiped. Traditionally, the shepherds would take these cheeses to the fair in Villalón de Campos to sell as fresh cheese. Unsold cheeses would be taken

home again and left to mature for two to three months, developing into a cheese with a natural gray rind, the interior perforated throughout with evenly-distributed holes, and a rather acidic flavor, creamy palate, and marked overtones typical of sheep's cheese.

SIERRA DE GATA

Still heading southward, we now enter Extremadura, a superb source of sheep's and goat's cheese. The Sierra de Gata is a dramatically beautiful granitic mountain range whose interior is dotted with little villages, all in locations providing shelter from the north winds and positioned halfway up the mountainsides, with woodland above them and pasture and crops below them towards the valley floor. The Retinta goat does well in this highland environment: it is a hardy breed with a coat the color of freshly stripped cork oak.

Sierra de Gata is a classically mountain cheese: unadorned, rustic with a broad palette of aromas and flavors. The Retinta goat grazes freely on the mountainsides, relishing the aromatic and other plants it comes upon, and disposing of a fire hazard in the process. Sad to relate, in areas where goats are no longer grazed, forest fires have been seen to increase dramatically. The best part of the year for making country cheeses is January to September, when there is the greatest abundance of good, fresh pasture. The milk is coagulated with kid's rennet, and the curd is cut and drained of whey and then placed in perforated molds to carry on draining and to form the cheeses into their characteristic flattened

MAJORERO IS MADE ON THE CANARY ISLAND OF FUERTEVENTURA IN A VOLCANIC ENVIRONMENT WHERE THE GOAT IS THE ONLY ANIMAL ABLE TO SURVIVE ON ITS VERY LIMITED RESOURCES.

cylinder shape. They are then left to air and mature in the warm, damp mountain air—this is why the rind is always damp. It is often protected by successive rubbings of good local extra virgin olive oil, which eventually lends a little zing to the creamy interior whose flavor is distinctly floral with overtones of goat's milk. Like most country cheeses throughout mainland Spain, these are small, not exceeding 1.5 kg (3.3 lb) in weight.

LOS IBORES

Still in Extremadura, the lovely countryside around Los

Ibores and Las Villuercas is the source of Ibores, one of Spain's best and most distinctive goat's cheeses. Retinta, Verata, and Serrana are the local breeds of goat, and they thrive on the natural resources provided by the area's pastures and lower hillsides, giving milk that is rich in aromas, fat, and protein. The goats are kept in small herds, and the cheeses made from their milk are also small. The milk is coagulated with natural, suckling kid rennet. The process of cutting the curds and draining the whey is carried out quickly, and the curd is then

placed in small perforated cylindrical molds. They are salted manually and left to air and mature in a cool well-ventilated place. It is common for these cheeses to be rubbed with oil and paprika to protect the rind from insect attack. Forty to 60 days later, the cheese is ready for eating, its interior markedly white, and its texture soft with occasional holes evenly distributed. The flavor combines tangs of oil, acid, and salt with delicate floral aromas which, along with the touch of paprika, make this a really memorable cheese.

TORTA DEL CASAR

To a different setting now, very close to Cáceres in the Extremaduran tableland, where we find one of Spain's most superb cheeses: Torta del Casar. It is made from the milk of Merino sheep, the breed that is something of a national mascot. The Merino is native to Spain and has been jealously guarded as a national exclusive though it has traveled all over the world in the course of history: Merino sheep were even taken as booty by Napoleon's troops during their brief occupation of Spanish soil. The Merino sheep was always valued for its wool and meat, though not so much for its milk. Now, though, the situation has changed: the demand for wool has dropped drastically and other sources of lamb meat put up stiff competition, so that Merino-milk cheese is now the breed's best product. Merino sheep yield very little milk, but it is rich in fat and protein. The milk is coagulated using vegetable rennet obtained from the cardoon thistle, a differentiating factor which gives the cheese a slightly bitter flavor and, along with the gooey texture of the interior, its creaminess and lactic taste make it unmistakable. The cheeses are a flattened cylindrical shape, with a natural rind which is so yielding that it tends to split. The local way of eating this cheese at home is to cut off the top and dip into it, spreading it on slices of country bread.

RONDEÑO

Back now to a mountain environment, but this time in Andalusia's Serranía de Ronda. Here, too, small herds of



GARROTXA IS ONE OF THE TRADITIONAL CHEESES RESCUED BY YOUNG EXPONENTS OF THE "BACK TO THE COUNTRYSIDE" MOVEMENT WHO SWAPPED THEIR ACADEMIC GOWNS FOR OVERALLS.

pretty Málaga goats feed ecologically on the natural mountain pastures. Their milk is coagulated using rennet from suckling kid, the curd is cut and drained of whey, and then molded in bands of plaited esparto grass (though the use of these is dying out). This compresses the cheeses and forms them into cylinders decoratively stamped with the imprint of the mold. They are salted and aired in cool, well-ventilated places in this area's lovely farmsteads, known as *cortijos*. Sixty days later, they are at their peak of readiness for eating, the flavor roundedly creamy and mature with floral and aromatic overtones which add grace notes to the characteristic goat's cheese flavor. Though Rondeño has tended to be eaten fresh, people are starting to rediscover its qualities as a mature cheese.

MAJORERO

Taking off from Andalusia across the Atlantic, we reach the end of our tour in the Canary Islands, each of which produces its own cheese, usually made of goat's milk. Majorero is made on the island of Fuerteventura from milk obtained from the Canary goat, a large breed with a variegated coat. In this volcanic environment, the goat is the only animal hardy enough to survive on the very limited resources available. I remember being amazed to see the local goats nibbling away at the volcanic rocks for lichen. Majorero is made in small, isolated farms, set in the most arid surroundings on which the sun beats down. The milk is coagulated using rennet from suckling kid which separates it in an hour. The curd is then cut and drained and the chopped pieces are put

into molds handmade out of plaited palm fronds. These shape the cheese into characteristic cylinders imprinted with the pattern of the mold after being pressed hard to extract as much whey as possible. After salting, the cheeses, which usually weigh from 3.5 to 5 kg (7.7 to 11 lb), are aired in the driest, mildest place available. To prevent the cheese from spoiling, the rind is sometimes spread with oil, red paprika, and a local toasted flour known as *gofio*, a variant of a technique that we have seen before, and a fine example of know-how about natural ways of preserving foodstuffs. Majorero is an amazingly delicious cheese, smooth, sweet, creamy, and with the goat's cheese taste only very slightly in evidence. The oil and paprika are also very slightly discernible in the flavor, though not enough to alter it radically.

Our across-the-board tour of Spanish cheeses ends on this island outpost. There are plenty more that we could have stopped to sample, for there are excellent examples to be found all over the country. They're still one of Spain's great untapped resources.

Mariano Sanz Pech, generally acknowledged as one of the leading authorities on Spanish cheese, is an agronomist and food scientist whose work has been focused on the cheese producing-sector since 1969. A former president of the Asociación para el Fomento de los Quesos Artesanos (Association for the Promotion of Artisan Cheeses), he is currently president of the Consorcio de los Quesos Tradicionales de España (Traditional Cheeses of Spain Consortium).

See Main Exporters on page 138.

OPINION OF A CHEESE CONNOISSEUR

Text: Steven Jenkins

Garrotxa

Fast becoming Catalunya's most important food export behind cava and olive oil, Garrotxa is sturdier and longer-lived than either of the region's other two remarkable cheeses, Montseny and Montsec, yet it retains their alluring and irresistible flavor—nutty, peppery, lingering—as well as their luxurious mouth-feel, while improving upon their rustic visual appeal with its steel-gray, velveteen cloak sensuously sloping shoulders and bone-white interior: a singular and all-important cheese.

Majorero

The brilliant goat's milk cheese from Fuerteventura (Las Ca-

narias) has enormous appeal because of its abundance of flavor—rich, brassy, bright and full of nuance (rosemary, thyme, pepper, pine), its unobtrusive goatiness (too much of which can be off-putting), its barely perceptible salinity (resulting in a perfect balance between sweet and salt) and its toothsome, yet rich and creamy mouth-feel despite its flinty texture.

San Simón

Galician cheeses are far too mild for my personal satisfaction, but this gorgeous cheese has such visual appeal I can only marvel. More a burnished work in ancient walnut, this bed knob of a cheese com-

mands attention just by showing up. Remember to slice it horizontally. Attracts customers like a litter of puppies.

Torta del Casar

Soon perhaps, the fact will be universally acknowledged that Extremadura produces one of the world's four or five greatest cheeses. Because of TDC's excruciatingly delicious flavor (fried egg, almond paste, hickory smoke, creme brulee, white truffle) and near-erotic texture, this stunning sheep's cheese has rocketed past every other cheese in my experience, (despite its high price) in terms of importance, theatricality, memorability, and regional integrity. Though frequently a

firmer cheese, Queso de la Serena, also from Extremadura, is otherwise indiscernible.

Afuega'l Pitu

Brilliant cheese; seemingly neolithic in its primitive and rustic appearance; again, a cheese I term "excruciatingly delicious": intense flavor of black walnuts; amazing palate-coating mouth-feel; lingering, lip-smacking aftertaste; a fascinating link between Asturias and France's Perigord region: their besace (beggar's purse) de chevre, though Afuega'l is of cow's milk. I am completely devoted to this cheese, and as an aside, Asturias ranks for me as the single-most important cheese-producing region in the world.