

the word on cheese culture

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It's a 21-hour drive from my home on Lake Ontario, followed by a five-hour ferry ride, to reach Fromagerie du Pied-de-Vent on Îles de la Madeleine, but I have made the pilgrimage three times in the last few years. The scenery and seafood of this archipelago of small islands in the middle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence are a big attraction, but really I go for the cheese—the soft, washed-rind, raw-milk Pied-de-Vent, whose glistening ivory paste reveals flashes of hazelnut, mushroom, and butter flavor. Little wonder its name in the local dialect refers to the sun's rays piercing through clouds.



Part of Québec, Les Îles de la Madeleine—no one who has visited calls them by the

English name, Magdalen Islands—are home to a fishing community of 13,000, best known for the lobster they supply to the best restaurants of Montréal. The islands are windswept to the degree that in the late summer they become a mecca for windsurfers. Miles of white beaches are also a big draw for tourists.

At present Pied-de-Vent is not exported to the United States or Europe, but, Arseneau says, with federal licensing and a new Québec certification system, anything is possible. Both Pied-de-Vent and another new Québec cheese—Le 1608 made by Laiterie Charlevoix—are Canadian originals, each with their own distinct sense of place but produced from Canadienne milk. By 2012, Pied-de-Vent and Le 1608 will likely have received the Québec version of France's AOC designation. They will be the first cheeses designated as AS (Attestation de Spécificité), which means the Québec government certifies their authenticity and quality so consumers receive what is promised and expected. Québec is the first jurisdiction in North America to develop such a program of recognition, certification, and inspection.

Havre-aux-Maisons, one of the area's eight major islands linked in the shape of a fishing hook, is the location of Fromagerie du Pied-de-Vent and its herd of black and brown cows. Descendants of cattle brought to Québec from Normandy some 400 years ago, they are the famed and once-endangered Canadienne heritage breed.

In 1997, when Jérémie Arseneau, who operated a local slaughterhouse, let it be known he planned to bring this special cow to his native Îles de la Madeleine and make cheese, residents, almost all of whom are fishermen, thought he was crazy. But Arseneau had met Jonathan Portelance, a visitor from mainland Québec, who lauded the Canadienne breed, explaining it was a smaller, hardier cow, one that would thrive on a windswept island—and whose milk, loaded with butterfat and protein, was perfect for making cheese.

Although 300 Canadienne cattle were initially brought to Canada in the early 1600s, Holsteins, Brown Swiss, and other heavy milk producers arriving in the late 1800s began to replace the breed, leading to near extinction of the Canadienne by the late 1900s.

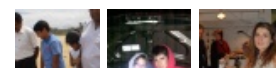
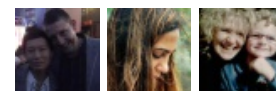
Fortunately, a small group of dairy people and cheesemakers, largely based in the Charlevoix region of Québec, recognized



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Arseneau, with the Canadiennes



Pied-de-Vent cheesemaker Stéphane Chiasson



Fromagerie founder Jérémie Arseneau (left) with Dominique Arseneau, milk production



A staff of six work on making and aging Pied-de-Vent

how well suited the Canadienne is for northern climes and formed an association a few years ago to resurrect and manage the breed, primarily to supply milk for artisan cheesemaking. A strong sense of place, or terroir, is part of their campaign. It was from Charlevoix that Arseneau brought 40 cows in the spring of 1998, herding them off the ferry just in time for their first milking on their new island home. By October the first wheels of Pied-de-Vent had been created by cheesemaker Vincent Lalonde, in collaboration with Arseneau, Portelance, and a consultant, André Fouillet. Lalonde was very much inspired by Reblochon, the French washed-rind from the Haute-Savoie region of the Alps.

By the fall of 1999, demand for Pied-de-Vent was such that Nancy Portelance, Jonathan's sister, and her husband, Louis Gadreau, formed Plaisirs Gourmets to distribute the cheeses. Thirteen years later the herd has grown to 75 cows in all, with 100 percent of milk production destined for cheesemaking—about 500 one-kilogram wheels per week. Aged 60 days before it leaves les îles for cheese shops across Québec, it will soon be federally licensed and thus able to be sold in any province of Canada. In the meantime the cheese is available only in selected shops outside Québec. Plaisirs Gourmets, which now represents 14 other artisan cheese producers, remains the sole distributor of Pied-de-Vent and a second cheese made by Arseneau's fromagerie, a firm raw-milk cheese called Tomme des Demoiselles.

Stéphane Chiasson, cheesemaker since 2001, leads a staff of six who make and age the cheeses. In the summer months they produce cheese seven days a week. The rest of the year, the creamery operates three or more days a week, depending upon demand.

Dominique Arseneau, the owner's son, supervises the Canadienne herd and dairy operations. Out in the hilly, green pastures overlooking the sea, the cows are fed only the natural fodder of Îles de la Madeleine for much of the year. The younger Arseneau is committed to the breed: "The Canadienne offers a better rendement fromager, meaning more cheese from less milk. Physically, with their short legs they are suited to the hilly topography of the island. They are also well adapted to our climate." The Canadienne remains the only cattle breed developed in North America. All the fromagerie's cows are registered with the breed association, and they each have a given name—all sharing the same surname: Arseneau.

"Fifteen years ago, we never thought that we could have milking cows on the island," says Jérémie Arseneau. "We take great pride in having done that even though people thought we were unrealistic and a bit crazy. Our cheese is among the first products to be exported from Havre-aux-Maisons. It has generated a lot of hope and excitement locally and created a sense of pride for les produits du terroir des îles."

Written by Georgs Kolesnikov

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