

The Tour of the Question:

Cheese, Family and Revolution
by Chris Fite-Wassilak

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I walked the length of the Detroit airport looking for food. There was no shortage as such: newsagents with bags of flavoured pretzels, bumped-out coffee shops with stacks of sandwiches, and more than a few sports bar-cum-restaurants with oversized laminated menus handed to you by a podium-bound receptionist whose main function is to make the establishment seem more formal than the watering hole it is. I was hungry after a long flight, with a specific kind of craving for something substantial but not hyperbolic, something that might be relatively fresh or at least mostly vegetal-based. I passed by the fast-food court with pizzas, hot dogs and fried chicken, and another steakhouse, eventually circling back to one of the sports bars. It had a hockey theme, I think; the smallest thing I could order was a serving of nachos, which ended up being on a plate about an arm long.

Each time I return to North America, I have to re-acquaint myself with the warm and sticky spectrum of food on offer in places like the malls I grew up with, or their security-bound counterpart, the modern airport. Part of what amazes me each time after said re-acquaintance is my deep-seated familiarity—I know what ingredients and flavours to anticipate, along with what I fancy are my unique honed preferences from within that set. I don't need to describe to you what type of pizza was on offer; with the standardization of 'pizza cheese' and the spread of industrially produced mozzarella since the 1950s, you can clearly imagine the off-white layer sweating uneasily on top of a corn-starched bready

crust. You probably even already know what cuts and side dishes would be found at the spots specialising in grilled meat, the slabs of pumped-up beef accompanied by a few leaves of butterhead lettuce and wedges of firm, pinky tomato. At the hockey bar, my mound of corn chips was topped with the requisite orange-tinted cheddar, which was, as it turns out, exactly what I wanted. The trip had happened in an unthinking rush, trying to get to St. Louis in time to try and see my grandmother. Up until a week earlier, Grandma had been a non-stop chatterbox, with a sly sweet tooth and taste for Irish whiskey, who would lead her care home on day trips out and try and spike the juice at ‘cocktail hour’ when no one was looking. The nachos were a comforting touchstone, a sort of re-centring through a familiar tangle of gummy and crunchy textures, interspersed with dollops of tinny salsa and too-thick sour cream.

The last time I had visited my grandmother, we went to Crusoe's, her favourite restaurant where she went at least once a week. I think I ordered a fish filet, my aunt some type of creamy pasta, and Grandma a Reuben. Though my most lasting memory of the meal is more the weighty sense of starch hovering in the air, trays of garlic bread, breaded mushrooms, breaded and toasted ravioli being constantly carried by. The restaurant's set up would be well familiar to anyone born in the US in the 1980s or after, a novelty during the lifetime for their parents, and just being conceived during that of their parents: booth seating and

wooden tables stained a dark brown, the floor often carpeted, the walls similarly covered in pictures of what must be local lads and ladies done good; the lighting slightly dimmed, just a notch up from a bar, and the windows and doors covered in rounded awnings that, to my mind, are invariably a shade of red though the overall atmosphere tone is also the colour of a weak brown pan loaf. Food arrives via those oversized trays equivalent to another table, placed on a sort of fold-out trestle, hastily foot-arranged by the laden waiter before landing the vessel next to the table. The family restaurant is by now an American institution, its defining characteristic no longer apparently the fact that children are welcome, but more its seemingly wide-ranging menus, a sort of filtered pan-European mulch of meats grilled, fried and cured, sliced onto sandwiches, salads, pastas, sometimes pizza too. It's a palette that, as it strikes me now, appeals to the very young and the very old.

When I was a kid in Atlanta, my mom would try to treat each of us kids to a one-on-one meal of our choosing every few months. My brother regularly settled for the McDonald's just down the road, whereas I would always push for TGI Friday's, or Mick's (which was sort of the same, just with blue neon). It felt more special, more grown up to have a menu and a table. I always got the chicken fingers, a fried delight that also came with the sort of dawning awareness that there was a sick pun involved there somewhere—obviously chickens don't have fingers, and these

were roughly the size and shape from a sizable human's hand. I've eaten at TGIF's in Paris and Moscow, as a reticent, stubbornly homesick teenager, still ordering the same thing.

The American family restaurant was birthed through a confluence of factors accelerated, like most things, by war: industrial innovations to move and feed soldiers led to cheaper car and food production, alongside a new mobilisation of a female workforce that meant that meals made outside of the home were in growing demand, and families had the wheels to get there. Kids, once unthought-of in the realm of dining out, were part of a new market that has become not just an industry standard, but somehow now feels inevitable, as if it was always there. It has become perceived as a sort of gastronomic catch-all, from pancakes to burgers to cheesecake, as if this is the standard of a continent rather than a specific interpretation of Dutch, German and Italian dishes percolated down through cities, suburbs and highways over a few short generations. The American family restaurant soon became an export commodity in itself, the oversize menus handed out across the world, in rooms surrounded by varying amounts of basketball, football or Hollywood paraphernalia.

Two years earlier, I was standing in a ditch that ran alongside a minor highway, attempting, in a persistent drizzle, to get a goat to cross the road. The animal, I'm sure, could sense my uncertainty,

as I tried to hedge her off and walk her back towards the farm that sat just on the other side of the two-lane road from the pasture. She would look at me sideways, stepping further away every time I tried to come closer, trying to keep an eye for the occasional passing car, and only imagining over and over a scenario where the goat gets run over. After circling around from the other side of the road, she'd eventually scurried back into the field, where I could at least close the gate and go ask for help.

I'd arrived that morning, dropped off by a friend, after a brief exchange in the preceding weeks with the farmer. (I'd tried ringing, and sent a few over-explanatory emails; his one response was a line—I was welcome to come put 'la main à la patte.' The saying *main à la pâte* is like the English 'get stuck in', and 'pâte' is used for both dough and cheese's main inner body. 'Patte'—paw—was his own added joke on getting to know the animals, a wink I'd overlooked until reading his email again a year later.) For months I'd planned the visit, hoping to spend a few weeks there to find the tempo of goat dairy farming, to learn what I could through direct exposure about the cheeses that Véronique and Christian Arnaud were making. The house was abandoned when I arrived; wandering meekly around the property, poking into the barn I followed a loud hum to eventually find him held in an intricately cobwebbed milking parlour, cheerful and relaxed. I spent the rest of the morning watching the herd's vat of milk get emptied into plastic tubs to mature for the next day's cheese making, and the

day before's milk—now a rubbery sheen of gelatinous curd—get quickly ladled into hundreds of oval-shaped moulds. The goats were then ushered across the road for the afternoon.

The Arnauds and their colleagues had been a vague obsession of mine for a while—stories about a co-op in the plateaus of Limousin, the least populated region in France, made up of *soixante-huitards* who produced the ash-rind goats cheeses we would occasionally carry on the cheese stall where I worked in London. Kids who'd been part of the May 1968 demonstrations in France, who'd had enough, packed up and headed to the countryside in search of the ideal life they'd been yelling for. Part of it was just the rush of thinking about '68, my own distant fetishisation of what was recounted as a time of upheaval and action. It also resonated with my own urge to flee; maybe not to forge an entirely new life, but to get away from the breakups and bankruptcy, and at least to envision something that wasn't the seething, enveloping city for a sustained period of time. The plan began to form in my mind on slow days at the market, rearranging and wrapping piles of cheese while waving off flies, telling the odd customer that the creamy, dense bit they were chewing on was made by anarcho-syndicalists. I started to form the belief that there was a political link between animal and farmer—that cows, huge, docile grazing beasts producing gallons and gallons of milk, were more capitalistic, and goats, fickle and independent foraging animals, were inevitably more left-leaning.

It had been a simple enough ask: help Vincent, the Arnaud's twenty-two-year-old apprentice, bring the goats back for their evening milking. I was relieved to be given a task, as all I'd done so far was drink their coffee and take pictures. The herd springily followed Vincent out the open gate while I brought up the rear, all one-hundred-and-fifty-odd of them clattering eagerly across the highway; it was just one that hesitated, countering me and bolting up to the top of the ditch between the pasture fence and the road. As a thin rain came down at a sharp angle, I spent the next half hour running back and forth along a mile stretch, second-guessing the goat and feeling increasingly naïve and awkward for not being able to just do this one thing. Standing in the road, the flimsiness, the simple silliness, of my idea of coming to be a part of this place was obvious; I simply was too much of a suburban boy.

Christian laughed it off at dinner that evening: the goats have to trust you, and that takes a while. We were having a simple meal of merguez sausages that he had pulled out of the freezer, made from last season's male kids, and a lamb's leaf salad. Véronique put out some bread rolls, each with one of those edible stickers stamped with the organic *Argiculture Biologique* logo, and a vacuum-packed block of Comté cheese, which bore the same emblem. Tomorrow, I would help with the milking, and it would be different, he said.

We hadn't seen the casket lowered into the ground; we'd left it shadowed under a temporary gazebo in the cemetery, and filed off towards a nearby Catholic high school that had offered their basketball court for the reception. The gymnasium had broad, diagonal dark purple stripes over a wall of lavender painted breezeblocks. A dozen or so tables had been set up in rows that filled just under half the hall, two of them set together at one end bearing chaffing dishes and a few aluminium trays. Crusoe's provided the food, of course. Beef lasagna, cannelloni and a salad of iceberg lettuce, all of them topped with Provel cheese.

Provel is, I've been told my whole life, a St. Louis speciality. The main place it features is on the small, firm squares of flat bread that is claimed as the city's style of pizza. It's otherwise used liberally as generic garnish and melting cheese, the selling point being its medium-soft but coherent body with a low melting point: it droops but still holds together. It is, as packets of the mass tell you, 'pasteurized process cheddar, Swiss and provolone cheese, ideal for sandwiches and pizza-burgers'. This seems to be its entire rationale for existence, having been devised as a request from an Italian-American deli owner in St. Louis to a national cheese producer and importer based in Chicago: make a cheese with a clean bite that would melt easily but wouldn't stretch. The history of Provel has been pieced together in stages by several Missouri food writers, as well as a Washington University anthropology majorⁱ, eventually separating urban legend from its relatively

mundane story, through interviews with relatives of the various deli owners that claimed to have conceived of the cheese, as well as with Edward Imo, founder of what is still the most prominent purveyor of St. Louis pizza, and finally ending with the procuring of Provel's 1950 trademark file.

It was, originally, a mixture of cheddar and provolone, made in the style of processing cheese that had been invented in Thun, Switzerland by Gerber (not the baby food company) in 1911: slowly mixing together several cheeses, bringing them up to a high temperature, produced a new, pourable, uniform paste that could last longer, travel further and remain unchanged in a wider range of situations; perfect for exporting to European interests in hot, tropical climates, and ideal for military rations. Canadian James Kraft patented his own version in 1916, producing five-pound bricks of bright orange reconstituted cheddar that came in long, rectangular wooden boxes, and almost immediately selling over six million pounds of it to the US Army during World War I. Provel at some point became a mix of cheddar, provolone and Swiss—it is only the name that is trademarked, not the contents or production process, and the ingredients list now also includes ‘smoke flavour, powdered cellulose to prevent caking’, which are perhaps what give it its ever-so-slight tang and self-contained quality that its defenders cite as virtues.

While the histories of Provel point back to John Sigillito, who ran a grocers under the name International Food Products,

as the original purveyor of Provel, the juncture between why it came to be made by the J.S. Hoffman Company is regularly glossed over. There isn't any documentation of development or negotiations, but it's interesting to note that a man running a shop in The Hill—an area of St. Louis that since the 1830s had been settled by families from Lombardy and Sicily, and is still home to a host of Italian restaurants and shops—would pass by considering a dairy farm or cheesemaker nearer to home. There was no shortage of cheese in Missouri, and during the 1940s the state was one of the ten leading cow milk-producing states in the country (the US Department of Agriculture 1945 census lists 390,022,263 gallons of milk produced, a figure which continued to grow year by year; it's only after the 1964 census that the figures begin to gradually, but consistently, decline). But these were simply smaller farms.

'Thirty-five years of "know-how" enables us to produce the types and kind of cheese your customers want. HOFCO quality brings them back for more—builds volume and profits for you,' claims an ad from the '40s. For decades, cheese production, in the US particularly, had focused on consistency and shelf performance rather than flavour. The J.S. Hoffman Co. had a reliable, national profile. Whatever drew Sigillito to them, the Provel trademark mentions that the name first came into existence on 15 April, 1947, and was first used commercially on the 5th of June that same year, being produced in their factory in Green

County, Wisconsin.

How a factory-made Wisconsin cheese remains a source of local pride in a part of Missouri is part of its curiosity. Provel was sold in other places in the Midwest in the '50s, like Ohio and Wisconsin—but only St. Louisians that have clung to it, or vice versaⁱⁱ. Even its constituent parts diverge into countless other directions: provolone, a stretched-curd cheese that originated near the foothills of Vesuvius, but now within Italy made in the more industrial northern region of the Po Valley, already has a clean, even taste to its pale pate; cheddar, a hard, pressed cheese that was originally cloth-bound and matured as small barrel-shaped wheels that over a hundred years became detached from any connection to Cheddar, Somerset in southwest England to become the Western world's default moniker for a slightly acidic hard cheeseⁱⁱⁱ; and Swiss, the American term for any cheese that attempts to gesture towards the flat, savoury nuttiness of the Alpine skimmed-milk Emmental. All of these cheeses, interpreted through immigrant nostalgia and dreams of prosperity, had become milder and smoother while being made in larger and larger venues on the North American continent; becoming, perhaps, less distinct types of cheese than texture and consistency delivery systems. Other cheeses considered distinctly 'American', such as Colby and Brick, are slight variations on that familiar, warm taste of industrial cheddar; Provel sits on that same, broad middle flavour profile, and distinguishes itself by being just a little

bit softer and a touch smokier. After a series of corporate takeovers, Provel is now produced by Churny, a subsidiary of Kraft.

‘We were the people who wanted to live freely,’ Christian told me. ‘Independent and autonomous. We wanted to live in isolation, withdrawn into ourselves. We had hair down to the middle of our backs, we were remaking the world. We wanted the minimum: a vegetable garden, some goats and to make cheese, because that was the hippie dream.’ The word ‘baba-cool’ in French feels like it goes further than ‘hippie’, somehow holding both awe and a detached irony from the role. ‘We did the milking, made cheese in the kitchen, and sold our cheese at a market down the road. We were savages.’

The Arnauds were part of a wave of neo-ruralists that moved from cities across the Western world in the '60s and '70s. Perhaps what is most striking about them, and their farm, is that they're still there. Christian was 12 when the student riots broke out in Paris in 1968, ‘nourished’, as he put it, by the ferment of the period. It was August 1975 when he and a bunch of friends headed south. Limousin appealed because of its obscurity, because it was empty and away from the world as they knew it. It is still an area of beef cattle rearing and oak logging, the hefty, ginger Limousin breed cows dotting most fields, trucks laden with felled trunks regularly thundering down isolated roads. They odd-jobbed

on various farms, eventually squatting an empty house in the middle of a forest in Corrèze. The region has a long history of a mostly quiet, rural communism, that has come quite prominently to the fore in recent decades as it has waned. Most famously, guerrilla bands of maquis resistance fighters in the damp hills and woodlands during World War II managed to prevent the Germans from ever fully occupying the area and delivered a few decisive blows to their forces. More recently, a commune in the small village of Tarnac came under national scrutiny after nine of its members were arrested—though never charged—for planning an anarchist insurrection.

Christian recalls hundreds of people, teenagers to mid-twenties, coming down to settle in the area up through the '80s. Véronique, who is two years younger, had moved down there with a previous boyfriend and taken up a cheesemaking apprenticeship, and in 1979 they set up their own farm. Getting some second-hand moulds to shape the curds, they made Crottin de Chavignol, a small, thick cylinder (the name meaning 'goat's turd') that would be readily familiar to French shoppers. They formed a union of goat farmers in the area with thirty-five farmers, each with just ten to twenty goats.

'They lasted five, ten, fifteen years—then they went back to their jobs or their studies, went back to the city and gave up. Some of them found it too hard, they couldn't get by; some didn't work hard enough, or just didn't have the "feeling".' He uses the

English word, to emphasise whatever essential sentiment it is that means you can stick out the daily routine, go through the process of milking, making and delivering a fragile, expiring product for at least nine months of the year, and face up to a massive dairy and food industry that constantly tries to undercut your costs. ‘Others, once they reached 35, 40 years old, were content with they had done, because they felt that had explored the issue.’ He uses the phrase ‘tour de la question’, which gives more of the sense of a journey, a problem circled around, and the attendant eventual exhaustion.

In the early nineties, the Arnauds decided to make their own style of cheese: an oval-shaped ash-rind cheese, slightly larger than most goats' cheeses. They named it Gour Noir, after the forest they had squatted in twenty years earlier. Around the same time, they co-founded a co-op with the five remaining cheesemakers in the area, to share land but also to increase their capacity; each would make their own individual style of cheese most of the week, while they would all produce one cheese in common, creating the teardrop-shaped and creamy white Feuille du Limousin, the ‘leaf of Limousin’. The leaf became a product that enabled the co-op to deal with larger distributors and shops, to deal in quantities that meant economic survival, while still letting each turn up at the market in Egletons with their distinct forms and favourites.

Goats' cheese is, as I still see it, cheese making at its simplest and most direct. Made where the animals are milked,

a bit of calf stomach rennet and the suspension's own process of acidification turn it by the next day into a semi-solid mass that can be scooped into moulds and left to drain slowly. By the next day they're on a drying rack, on the way to cultivating a few wrinkles and furry blooms on their shiny backsides. Compared to other cheese processes, which require more heat, pressure, or rennet, the soft bloom of a goats cheese bears through so many parts of what went into making it: a faint sweetness of grasses, the funk of goat fur, the unmistakable fug of the humid cheese room. What you end up with, in the case of Gour Noir, is a pudgy body that is chalky and thick in the middle, a savoury gooeyness developing just under the furrowed dark skin after a few weeks. Sometimes under the wide, warm creaminess there is a hint of vegetation, something like spinach or asparagus, or maybe a suggestion of a lichen-filled forest with a ramshackle house folded in its depths.

I lasted four days with the Arnauuds; after three mornings botching several batches and long, quiet evenings, I felt I was costing them more than their hard-won lifestyle warranted from a wide-eyed foreigner. It felt right to acknowledge my limits, but also to acknowledge that my own 'tour de la question' was located more somewhere between the farm, the factory and the table. It was only two years later, when eating not-stringy cheese-topped cannelloni in a gymnasium in the suburbs of St. Louis that my

Limousin trip returned to me in a particular way, in the way ingredients carry much more than their parts.

The biggest triumph of the industrial age might be acceptance of the obscuring of process, in its basic sense: the willing occlusion of knowing how something has come to arrive in front of us, allowing parts of food to be delivered as a static, finished object. Working as a cheesemonger, I'd gotten used to narrating small cheese productions, detailing mountain-top scenes and dank huts to London shoppers, but I always felt a certain displacement and idealisation would slip in, somewhere between my mouth and theirs. As if these stories were a balm for our other collective ignorances and black holes in our complex food chain.

It's murky water moralising about food—while there are often clear choices to be made in terms of environmental and health effects of which methods of labour we support in producing what we eat, our brains, bellies and wallets often dictate otherwise. But taste, where we find nourishment, delight or comfort, is a wildfire, sometimes kindled by the things we were forced to eat, or even denied, or just what could be afforded; it's uncontrollable. Strands of Provel carry the taste of their origin and the rooms they were made in, just as much as any clump of Gour Noir—both are equal vessels of that rampant emotional spark. Being a cheese-loving suburbanite, my life is between the two contradictory poles that these cheeses embody, which might be opposites but aren't mutually exclusive. Both are the wayward, slow-burning

outcomes of different revolutions; however disparately conceived and produced, they share an impulse for placement, for belonging, a desire for independence and a better life. And what I found that day in white wads of Provel was suddenly how it could become a carrier of that hazy, indefinable feeling of home, and of family.

- i. See http://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/food-and-cooking/provelology-the-study-of-a-made-up-cheese-with-a/article_d033b816-b856-5d5c-a8ca-a3c6592db4f0.html and Mark Veety's earlier archived blog piece: <http://archive.is/dGmZg>
- ii. The J.S. Hoffman Co.'s New York branch general manager at the time was a rabbi, Sol Salinger; when his son dropped out of NYU in 1937, Sol had tried steering him towards a career in meat and cheese importing. Jerry D. Salinger had other ideas. You can imagine Salinger being sent a sample of his company's new product, maybe even testing it on his family, to decide it just wasn't for New Yorkers—too gummy, or even just too familiar to ever take off there.
- iii. For slightly more appraisal of the North American part of this journey, check out Gordon Edgar's *Cheddar* (2015).

With thanks to Delfina Foundation and CIAP Île de Vassivière.

Acción Cultural Español (AC/E), Al Serkal Avenue, Arts Council England, Charles Wallace India Trust, Cockayne – Grants for the Arts and the London Community Foundation, Hybrid Platform Berlin, Icelandic Arts Fund, Icelandic Academy of The Arts, Inlaks Shivdasani Foundation, The Keir Foundation, Kingston University, Nicoletta Fiorucci, Outset, Stanley Picker Gallery, Walton Family Foundation and Delfina Foundation's family of individual supporters.

