



Saint-Raymond de
Portneuf, Quebec

MADE IN CANADA

BIG CHEESE

Quebec's Alexis de Portneuf makes some of the world's best cheese, and there's plenty to go round.

BY VALERIE HOWES



The blue veins of *Penicillium roqueforti* in La Roche Noire.



Photography, courtesy of Alexis de Portneuf (La Roche Noire, inset); iStockphoto.com (map, pushpin).



Beautiful on the inside.



The famous Cendrillon.

I'm in the boutique—La Fromagerie—at Alexis de Portneuf, one of four destinations on the Portneuf stretch of the Quebec Cheese Route, a trail that links 104 producers that make an impressive three-quarters of the cheese in Canada. I slide my knife into Le Cendrillon, a goat cheese named after Cinderella. I slather a piece onto a sliver of baguette and take a bite. The burst of ripe earthy flavour startles—you don't expect it from such a demure-looking soft snowy centre.

Just like its fairy-tale namesake, Le Cendrillon's milky whiteness is concealed under a fine layer of ash, though in this case, it's an edible vegetable ash. With its smudged and wrinkled skin, it's not in line to win any beauty contests, but in 2009, the long flat-topped pyramid was named grand winner at the World Cheese Awards. After just one bite, I'm curious to find out what it takes to make the world's best cheese.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Saint-Raymond de Portneuf lies between Quebec City and Trois Rivières. To get there, you drive along the bank of the St. Lawrence River, following a gently winding road past grazing cattle, white cottages with red ski-slope roofs, and valleys and hills that rise and fall in gentle ripples.

Alexis Cayer was one of four men who cleared the land where Saint-Raymond was built in the 1830s; he became the town's first mayor. Over the next few decades, French,

Irish and Scottish newcomers settled in the region, working in logging and becoming subsistence farmers who would use some of the milk stored in their milk houses to make cheese on their own properties, often keeping it refrigerated in ice houses packed with frozen blocks pulled from the St. Lawrence.

In 1946, Henri Cayer—Alexis's great-great-grandson—founded a dairy in that town. On his first day, he went door-to-door with six bottles of milk and sold only one, but he persisted and the company took off, eventually producing fine cheeses under the brand Alexis de Portneuf, in honour of Cayer's forebear.

In a field just beyond the village sits a small collection of aluminum-walled factories. Decidedly, the Alexis de Portneuf facilities lack bells and whistles. The only whimsy here: a couple of weather vanes topped with cows in place of roosters. It doesn't look like the kind of rustic artisanal outfit you'd picture beating 2,440 contenders in an international fine-cheese contest.

In 2000, Cayer sold his company to Canada's largest cheese producer, Saputo Group Inc.—an international player founded in 1954 by master cheese maker and Sicilian immigrant to Montreal Giuseppe Saputo. While the scale of production now makes it possible to supply grocery stores across North America, the original values and methods are still in place.

THE PERSONAL TOUCH

Strict federal laws and laboratory testing ensure that Canadian milk is supplied to cheese makers fresh, clean and antibiotic-free. The Alexis de Portneuf team also offers a second layer of quality control when it comes to specialty goat-, sheep- and water-buffalo-milk products: "We visit the farms and make sure

Step inside and see people brushing rinds, hand-wrapping cheese and dipping logs of it in liquid ash.



(Clockwise from top left) A field near Saint-Raymond de Portneuf; buying cheese at La Fromagerie; big sky over the Alexis de Portneuf factory.

Your Dairy Dose

Cheese is higher in fat than other milk products, so it should be eaten in moderation for its health benefits. Loaded with calcium, it helps keep your bones and teeth strong. Its vitamin A also plays that role, as well as improving night vision and skin health. The niacin obtained from cheese contributes to normal growth and helps our bodies convert food into energy, and vitamin B₁₂ promotes red-blood-cell formation.

ALEXIS DE PORTNEUF'S ultimate platter



the herds are healthy," says La Fromagerie's regional vice-president, Éric Gagnon.

ALL HANDS ONBOARD

Step inside the Alexis de Portneuf factory buildings and you'll see people brushing rinds, hand-wrapping cheese and dipping individual logs of Le Cendrillon in liquid ash. Of the 150 workers here, many have decades of experience under their belts.

I meet one of the cheese makers as he's coming off an early shift. He has been with the company for 28 years and is part of a team of six cheese makers. "It's the experience we have here that matters," he says, grinning shyly when I bring up the international accolades. "You can get books on making cheese, but they can't always tell you what to do when you get down to the nitty-gritty; it takes a good 10 years before you really start to know what you're doing."

THE NEXT BIG THING

The cheese maker says there's an ongoing effort to keep refining bestsellers such as Le Cendrillon, La Sauvagine, blue-veined Bleubry and Le Double Joie. "We're always trying for creamier, smoother, more flavourful." The team also develops new products, using cow, goat, sheep and water-buffalo milk.

They meet regularly for tasting sessions, where they nibble cheese while brainstorming ideas. Later, they go off and try new things, adjusting variables such as temperature, humidity and ratio of salt to milk.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

The best new cheeses end up in the on-site

boutique. This means local customers and visitors get to try new and exclusive products first. The company pays attention to the ones that keep people coming back; if a new cheese does well in the boutique, the Alexis de Portneuf sales team will work to get it distributed through larger grocery stores across Canada and the United States.

Funnily enough, there were few national buyers interested in Le Cendrillon when it first launched. "They said it had too much flavour and wasn't so attractive," recalls Gagnon. It was a staff favourite nonetheless, so the team kept making it in small batches for local sales.

Then, after the prizes started coming in, so did the phone calls. "Oh, you won an award? We'd like to have some," the buyers would say. And so production was ramped up; today, Le Cendrillon is one of the company's biggest sellers. Talk about a Cinderella story.

TIP >> Taste in the order at right, from mildest to fullest bodied, and nibble on plain bread in between to clean your palate.

Chèvre des neiges (fig and orange)

Tasting notes: A soft goat-and-cow-milk blend; pleasingly mild gateway cheese for those dabbling in goat.

Big win: Gold in its category at 2012 World Championship Cheese Contest

Perfect pairing: Sauvignon Blanc

Brie de Portneuf Double Crème

Tasting notes: This nutty and creamy white-rind Brie melts in the mouth.

Big win: Third prize from American Cheese Society, 2011

Perfect pairing: Burgundy

La Sauvagine

Tasting notes: An Alexis de Portneuf favourite, the washed-rind cheese oozes buttery mushroom flavour. You don't have to eat the rind, but the cheese makers do: "We spent so long developing it!"

Big win: Super gold in its category at the 2010 World Cheese Awards

Perfect pairing: Cabernet Sauvignon

Le Cendrillon

Tasting notes: This ash-coated goat cheese with a marbled rind is acidic and has quite a powerful flavour, which deepens and becomes a little more bitter with age; it becomes deliciously runny as it ripens.

Big win: World champion, 2009 World Cheese Awards

Perfect pairing: A white Loire wine

La Roche Noire

Tasting notes: The firm yet creamy blue-veined cheese has a relatively subdued flavour similar to Roquefort.

Big win: Gold in its category at the 2009 World Cheese Awards

Perfect pairing: A dark strong Belgian ale

Photography, courtesy of Alexis de Portneuf (spire); Jean-Francois Frenette (three cheeses); Veer (cheese wedge).



There's a Wrong Way to Eat Cheese?

Not entirely, but when it comes to enjoying tasty bites from a cheese board, there are a few manners to keep in mind.

> Don't cut "the nose" off

In other words, the pointy end of a cheese wedge should stay intact. Why? The centre is the ripest, tastiest morsel of the cheese wheel. Slice away along the sides so the last person isn't left contemplating a rectangle of rind.

> Take the rind with you

Tempting as it may be to scoop out that oozing Brie, it forces the next person to mine a small cavern. Instead, cut yourself an intact wedge and leave the rind on your plate if you don't want to eat it.

> Paws off the cheese board

Go ahead, pop cheese into your mouth from your own plate, but use those pronged knives to transfer anything from the cheese board—even those little cubes (unless no one is looking).

—Colleen Fisher Tully