

Heavenly cheese from the Dordogne: Trappe d'Échourgnac

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Cheese is one of the most important pillars of the French culinary heritage. With about 1,200 different varieties, you can discover a new cheese in almost every corner of the country. And yet with some regions, you do not immediately think of cheese. Take, for example, the Dordogne (or the Périgord) in the southwest. Besides geese and ducks (the gastronomic icons), the region is mainly known for its walnuts, fragrant truffles and wines. But make no mistake, there is plenty to taste for cheese lovers, especially if they like goat cheese. The department has about 150 breeders and more than 20,000 goats that produce 14 million liters of milk each year, mainly used to make young raw-milk cheeses such as Cujassou and Cabécou du Périgord. However, the oldest cheese in the Dordogne, Trappe d'Échourgnac, is made from pasteurized cow's milk and refined by nuns in an abbey in the village of Échourgnac.

Intrigued by the history of this special cheese, I paid a visit to the Abbaye Notre Dame de Bonne-Espérance on a sunny August morning to meet Antoine Dumont. He and his wife Quitterie have been in charge of the abbey's cheese factory since September 2020. After leaving everything behind for an eventful 18-month journey through Africa with a 4x4, a tent and their three children, the young couple decided to look for a more meaningful existence and found it between the nuns and their cheeses. “We wanted to work in a natural environment, with a connection to our Catholic faith,” says Antoine, a sympathetic man who radiates peace and contentment.

We walk to the Domaine de Biscaye, a farmhouse dating back to the 16th century and constructed in a typical Perigordian architecture. It is the oldest building of the abbey. In 1868, Cistercian monks from the Abbaye Notre Dame de Port du Salut in the Mayenne settled here to drain the swampy area, develop the land and put an end to the malaria epidemic that killed many at the time. Using local clay bricks, they built three more wings of the abbey, stables for pigs and cows, and even set up a modern cheese factory to support themselves and continue their tradition. After the monks left in 1910 due to all sorts of misfortunes, cheese production stopped until the nuns who moved there in 1923 rediscovered the historic recipe. Today, there are 22 sisters between the ages of 28 and 97 who live a life of work and prayer under the motto "ora et labora", just like the Dumont family. “I've worked in management and business development for 15 years and my wife was a nurse,” says Antoine, “but managing a cheese factory is completely new to us. We are learning with the nuns and are very happy that we have taken this step.”

The abbey is located in the heart of the Forêt de la Double, a forest area of more than 50,000 hectares with lakes, hiking trails and a wealth of flora and fauna. We stop on a hill overlooking fields and forests and take in the natural beauty. There is an unmistakable sense of calm. Here you can easily distance yourself from the daily worries and come back to your senses. As we walk further on the grounds of the abbey, we are occasionally greeted by a sister. Annually, about 40,000 people find this haven of peace on the border of the Périgord Blanc and the Périgord Vert. It welcomes retreatants seeking spiritual reflection, volunteers who come to work for a few weeks for room and board (the so-called WWOOFers: Willing Worker on Organic Farms) and of course people who want to buy cheese.

Every year, 130 tons of cheese are refined in the cellars of the abbey. Although the cheese was originally made entirely on site, this turned out to be unprofitable due to increasing production and about thirty years ago the nuns started looking for milk farmers and a dairy that could expertly take over the first step of the process. They found it in Brittany where the milk is curdled and the uncooked curds pressed into moulds. After 24 hours, the fresh cheeses, called 'caillebottes', arrive at the abbey to be refined by the nuns for two to four weeks (depending on their size).

The monks' recipe – indeed, the historic recipe for the famous Port Salut, nowadays made by cheese company Bel Group – was renewed in 1998 by Sister Jeanne d'Arc. After experimenting with white wine from Bergerac and the sweet Monbazillac, she decided to wash the cheese with walnut liqueur from the Distillerie du Périgord in Sarlat. A smart move, because the cheese is now one of the most famous in the region.

Today the nuns refine three cheeses: La Trappe Nature made according to the recipe from 1868, Trappe au Vin de Noix and, since 2011, Le Brebis, a sheep's cheese made with milk from the Pyrenees. The Trappe cheeses are available in two sizes, small wheels of 300 grams and a larger wheel of 1.7 kilos.

When Antoine invites me for a tasting, I don't have to think twice. We walk back to the old building where the cheeses are waiting on a large wooden table. “You have to take them out of the fridge about an hour in advance so that all the aromas and flavors come into their own,” Antoine explains. Just like with all other cheeses.

The rind of the cheese washed in vin de noix is slightly moist and has a characteristic dark brown color. It has a smooth structure and is creamy yellow on the inside. The smoky smells remind me of a crackling fire or fried bacon. “It's delicious with fig jam,” Antoine advises me. Then we taste Le Brebis, a hard, cream-colored cheese with a light yellow crust and a nutty taste with a salty touch. It has matured for three months and that is quite young. “This cheese could be aged for six to nine months, but then the taste would be much too intense,” says Antoine. Both cheeses are delicious and seem excellent with a white, wood-aged Montravel, from the far west of the Bergerac wine region.

The nuns from Abbaye Notre Dame de Bonne-Espérance have not only become passionate and skilled cheese affineurs, they also make jams, pâtes de fruits (soft fruit candies) and herbal teas using ingredients from their own vegetable garden and sold in the local shop alongside religious articles and other products from French abbeys.

My visit ends in the church which underwent a complete renovation in 2018 and where prayers are held seven times a day. The interior is sober and simple. Antoine points to the floor. The light that comes through the windows reflects very colorfully. “The light of God,” he says with a gentle smile.

I say goodbye with an aromatic piece of cheese... and a very good feeling.