Smugglers shouldn’t be users. I knew this narcotics-trafficking truism from the crime movies I’ve imbibed over the years, movies in which an imposing drug lord or cartel jefe has to clean up after some toady who should have delivered three keys of coke but hasn’t because, as the squirming toady eventually confesses, “I had to have a taste!” The cleanup usually involves the toady’s skull spattering on a white wall. These scenes always struck me as forced, even for Hollywood. Surely a real trafficker would never let his desire so grossly skewer his judgment. Surely he’d know how it—and he—would end.

Yet, as I walked toward the U.S. Customs Inspectors, with a huge scarlet “A” (for “Animal Products”) scrawled on my declaration form and six shrink-wrapped bundles of illegal cheese stuffed in my suitcase, I understood the toady. I didn’t care about the inspectors glowering at me above their mustaches or the consequences of breaking a federal law. I cared about the cheese. What if they opened it and spoiled it? What if they took it? Would I have time to jam any of it into my mouth? I had come too far with it, waited too long. I had to have a taste.

How did this happen? How did I devolve into a lawless, heedless, lacto-obsessed cheese smuggler?

The immediate answer is that I was returning from Paris, where cheese isn’t caught in the stranglehold of murderous laws. I mean this literally. The Brie or Camembert you buy here has been murdered.

Let me explain. Cheese, as you know, comes from milk, and milk from cows, goats, sheep, and the odd buffalo. Now if this milk isn’t extracted by a machine out of the abused udders of animals that are caged in steel stalls, injected with hormones, and fed on bioengineered fodder but, for example, hand-milked from Alpine or Saanen goats by farmers who have raised them for generations and herded them through the Loire Valley’s rich pastures all spring and summer so the goats could munch on lush grass, clover, wildflowers, and herbs, then this milk will have a flavor unlike any other in the world. It will express the whole of its creation—the land on which it’s made, the animals from which it’s made, and people who make it. In its terroir, cheese is like wine, as bound to the land as the vines that yield Sancerre or Saumur-Champigny. Think of goats as big, fluffy grapes.

Here’s the problem: the delicacy and nuance of flavor that make cheese a supreme expression of place come from microorganisms that live in the milk, and it’s these miniscule flavor-makers that the Food and Drug Administration demands farmers kill. You might not be a fan of bacteria. You might consider Louis Pasteur a hero. But when milk gets pasteurized, the bacteria and enzymes that were in the raw milk die and, with them, much of the milk’s flavor. The FDA would have you believe that raw-milk cheese can cause diseases such as listeriosis or salmonellosis, and if you’re pregnant, elderly, or have a bad immune system, this might be true. But in countries such as France, where these microorganisms aren’t heated out of existence or left to die over a span of sixty days as U.S. law requires, most of the cases of food poisoning that do involve cheese are the result of pasteurized cheeses. Sure, there are bad bacteria, but cheese makers can avoid them without murdering their milk. They’ve done so for centuries in the Pyrénées mountains and the hamlets of Provence.

Of course, if you don’t care about the rare flavors that milk can create or if you need to ship your milk to a factory, pasteurization is great. Extending milk’s shelf life allows you to make cheese en masse, like the monstrous Kraft Foods. (In fact, Kraft makes the pasteurized, processed, cheese-food-but-not-really-cheese product for which we’re known: American cheese.) Pasteurization also makes your milk consistent. As the legendary fromager Pierre Androuët explains, “All pasteurized-milk cheeses of whatever sort, mild or strong, have one point in common with respect to their flavor: their blandness.”

Androuët is kind. More often than not, when artisan cheese makers, mongers, and enthusiasts taste a cheese that’s been cleansed of its living, taste-giving microorganisms, they’ll say it’s “dead.”
“This cheese is like—‘Fuck off.’”

It’s a challenge to describe the flavor of an excellent French cheese. My love and I had come to Paris in search of the mythic cheeses said to thrive an ocean away from the FDA. At longing last, we were in our tiny rental in the Marais, hovered over a single plate, tasting a Langres. This cheese, as it’s described in one rather bland guide, originates from the high plains of Langres in Champagne. It is shaped like a cylinder and has a deep well on top called a fontaine, a kind of basin into which Champagne or marc may be poured. This is a pleasant way to eat this cheese, and is characteristic of wine-producing regions.

We didn’t have the funds for Champagne on this evening, but we had managed to get tipsy on a serviceable vin de pays, which is also a pleasant way to eat a Langres.

“It doesn’t play well with others,” she continued, the thick smack of pâté slowing her speech. “It doesn’t respect lesser cheese.”

“It’s like a road trip through Arizona in an old Buick,” I offered.

“It’s like Charlus, but early in Proust.”

“It has a half-life inside your teeth.”

“It has ideas.”

“It gradually peels off the skin on the roof of your mouth.”

“It attains absolute crustiness and absolute creaminess.”

The problem with most descriptions of cheese, the sort you find in guides, is that they’re reductive. Officially, the Langres is sticky, wet, shiny, firm, and supple, “melts in the mouth,” and has “a complex mixture of aromas.” Such descriptions convey, at best, a blueprint of the tasting experience, like a score does a symphony. They’re useful, I suppose, in their reliability. Anyone can read that a salt-washed Langres is “salty,” then taste its saltiness, but not everyone will taste in it the brilliant and irascible character of Proust’s Baron Palamède de Charlus. Yet these more personal descriptions capture the experience of a Langres. It sparks associative leaps, unforeseen flashbacks, inspired flights of poetry and desire. Its riches reveal your own. W.H. Auden once remarked that when you read a book, the book also reads you. The same holds true for cheese: it tastes you.

On the whole, the cheeses we met in Paris found us tolerable. A Signal Savoyard that cracked in our mouth like a mudcake appreciated our humility. It had seen more of the world than we had, and we deferred to it. A Rocamadour saw that, although we were Americans, we could appreciate...
the fleshier, creamier forms that fill the canvases of Rubens and Fragonard. “It responds like chub,” observed my perfectly tummyied love. We were plucky enough for a Tomme de Brebis, which tried to toughen us up with sharp punches to the pallet. And a floral Pélardon believed that our urban lives hadn’t ruined us for country pleasures, that we could still respond to the idyllic. “This,” said my love, “is what milkmaid’s cheeks should taste like.”

Why is cheese so delicious?

You’ll find a few answers out there, but none of them are entirely satisfying. There’s an appeal to history: since humans first cultivated goats and sheep, about ten thousand years ago (give or take a few millennia), they’ve made cheese. As evidence, you can cite a Sumerian frieze from around 3000 B.C.E. that refers to cheese, and cheese making is portrayed on a mural in an Egyptian tomb that’s roughly the same age. There’s also the cyclops in Homer’s Odyssey. He has a cave full of homemade cheese and keeps his one eye on the goats and ewes he milks to make it. By the rise of classical Rome, cheese making was an art. In his Natural History Pliny catalogs the variety of cheeses that Romans eat, and in De Re Rustica Columella describes a process of cheese making not so different from some used today. Cheese has been around a long time.

Still, that doesn’t explain why it’s good. At best, the history of cheese, as well as its presence throughout much of the world, proves it’s a survivor. No dodo of gastronomical Darwinism, cheese thrives in cultures and climes as diverse as Canada and India. It can even come back from extinction, as did the wonderful Spanish Queso de la Garrotxa. Yet cheese has survived in part because it’s good; it isn’t good because it survived. To say it another way, cheese isn’t delicious just because it’s nutritious, either. That’s another answer that you’ll find: cheese has protein, vitamins, calcium, phosphorus, and may even prevent tooth decay. I suppose cheese makers need to woo the huge demographic of Americans watching their saturated fat and waistlines, but ugh. Who’d want to eat with them? Pleasure doesn’t matter when you see food only as chemistry, and “deliciousness” doesn’t appear under the “Nutritional Facts” on food labels. Let the inch-pinchers and heart healthies know: cheese can’t be reduced to mere fact. It teems with too much life.

This liveliness may be the very reason cheese is delicious. Max McCalman, the maître fromager at Artisanal, sees the link between cheese and life. Cheese, he says, is “the ancient, venerable method of preserving the precious, sustaining fluid of the mother animal.” He’s talking about milk, that very first taste which ewes, kids, and calves experience. I’d add us. We’re another mothered animal, and for those of us who didn’t go straight to some Kraft-like formula, milk is our original flavor, the primordial way we’re given life. Milk is what we’re fixated on before we can focus, when we’re little more than pudgy mouths at the nipple. Indeed, the psychoanalyst (and Frenchman) Jacques Lacan famously claimed that these milky moments, before we’re aware of the world beyond ourselves or even that we have selves distinct and tragically cut off from the warm breast that feeds us, are as close as we ever come to paradise. In milk, we taste Eden.

And cheese is condensed milk. It’s milk in its most concentrated form. (According to McCalman, you need about ten pounds of cow’s milk to make one pound of cheese.) When you eat cheese, you mainline the uncut elixir of life.

No wonder I’d break laws for it.

Yet if milk’s prelapsarian flavor is an answer, it’s only half an answer. The other half lies in a cheese called Livarot, which we discovered when we chanced on perhaps the finest fromager in Paris, Pascal Trotte.

The shop is a modest one on the Rue Saint-Antoine, a few blocks west of the Bastille. Outside, a chalkboard describes the current state of the cheeses, which when we arrived were benefiting from the fresh spring grasses. Inside, it’s a gauntlet. Rows of cheese flank you, and though there aren’t many, each has a place and a placard. The smaller cheeses are piled in pyramids or baskets, and the larger ones subtly glow with more shades of butter and cream than you knew existed. If you linger around, you’ll see pictures of the caves where the cheeses are aged, for Pascal Trotte is also an affineur, which means he’s brought these cheeses to perfection.

But you probably won’t linger. The shop’s size, about the width of a grocery aisle, forces you onto one of the fromagers, who’s likely to gaze at you with that blank expectant look Parisians reserve for Americans: “I acknowledge you are human, but that is all I acknowledge.”

That, at least, is how we interpreted the look of the striking corvine man in his late forties who may or may not have been Pascal Trotte.

My love is the one of us who has French, so she asked about the cheeses as I looked on with Pavlovian anticipation and feigned indifference. It didn’t go well. For the last few years she’d been reading Zola and Balzac, not confronting fromagers. After we left, she translated the exchange:

“Hello, sir.”

“My love,” said my love, “is what milkmaid’s cheeks should taste like.”
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ourselves. All our other transactions with the various fromagers who may or may not have been Pascal Trotte (we never got up the gumption to ask who was who in the store) resulted in superior cheeses. And even if this time he had—indeed, perhaps because he had—sold us a putrid Livarot, at least we’d learned its secret, which is a secret of all cheese: they taste of life, but they also taste of death.

“Cheese,” says McCalman, “is nothing but spoiled milk,” and Steven Jenkins, who wrote the massive Cheese Primer and helped bring artisan cheese to the U.S. through Dean & DeLuca, agrees with him, summing up the cheese-making process as “controlled spoilage.” Cheese, that is, attains its flavor as milk goes from its most lively and life-giving to its inevitable end as rot. Along the way and through the care of its makers, it develops its unique character and, somewhere between its creation and putrefaction, attains its peak. So that stinkiness, that funkiness, that earthy, ashy tang you taste in even slightly aged cheeses, that flavor sends a half-conscious shiver to the deepest part of your being: memento mori, remember you will die.

As you savor cheese, Eros and Thanatos dance on your tongue. And that’s why the Livarot loathed us as much as we loathed it. We were in love, as Americans in Paris should be, and couldn’t heed the tragic notes of any cheese, much less the requiem within the Livarot. We were too full of life and spent too much time luxuriating in the Tuileries and kissing on the Pont Neuf to fear the skull smiling at us through the spoiled milk. We courted Eros (and if you’ve caught the seminal whiff of a Saint-Marcellin or relished the cunnilingual mush of a Rocamadour, you know cheese celebrates Eros in all its meanings). The death-stung Livarot must have found us wretched in its own way, as unserious and airy as Champagne bubbles. Too airy, in fact, to take U.S. Customs seriously. At Logan Airport, as I stared at the mustaches in front of me, I tried to fathom how the cheeses in my bag could be illegal. The Comté, the Sainte-Maure, the Brique Ardéchoise—they were more alive than most people I knew. Could they really be confiscated? The thought of it made me hate every whisker before me, then made me snicker.

“French cheeses are an emotional experience,” my love had said when we were in the Marais, swooning over a Brie de Melun, and she’s right.

In Paris, love is always right.

The man remained stony faced. “That does not exist.”

“Huh?”

“Perhaps you mean goat?”

Love laughed, “Of course, yes.”

The man did not. “What are you looking for? What do you like?”

Love got flustered.

“Perhaps a soft cheese?”

“Yes. Or a hard one.”

“Maybe two?”

“That sounds good.”

The man selected a cheese and squeezed it.

“Oh,” said love.

He selected a second cheese.

“Is that one different from the other?”

“They’re completely different.”

They were completely different, but neither was a Livarot.

“Thank you so much. Looks great. Thank you for your help.”

At this point, my love went to pay the man who may or may not have been Pascal Trotte and almost set down her purse on his cutting board. This evoked his one facial expression. It wasn’t bonhomie. Its deadliness presaged the Livarot.

My love needed a few days. The mortification she felt over asking for horse cheese had to dwindle before she could go back to the shop, and she needed to go alone because, as she explained, my unalloyed Americaness put too much pressure on her French accent. When she finally returned, she had a crinkle in her nose and a Livarot.

Stinky is not the right word for it. Exhumed might be. I have never seen a dug-up corpse, but I could now recognize the smell.

“I don’t know if I can eat this,” said love, sinuses weeping.

Livarot, as far as I can tell, should be eaten in a windy, open field. It’s in the shape of a disc, about the size of a clutch purse when it’s cut in half, and it has a tacky, hatched skin that’s as thick as a wet suit and pale peach in color. Inside the rind, it’s globular and buttery. The French have nicknamed it “The Little Colonel” because it comes circled by thin strips of raffia, but after tasting it, we dubbed it “The Gérard Depardieu” because it posed for us an enigma similar to the one surrounding the actor: why do the French find so alluring what strikes us as raunchy, hulking, and nearly grotesque? The cheese tasted rotten, “really wretched.” We wondered if we’d gotten it past its prime.

And perhaps we had. Perhaps the man who may or may not have been Pascal Trotte had fobbed off a bad Livarot on an American who strolled into his shop and asked, with what might have struck him as contemptuous ignorance about his life’s work, for horse cheese. Still, we doubted ourselves. All our other transactions with the various fromagers who may or may not have been Pascal Trotte (we never got up the gumption to ask who was who in the store) resulted in superior cheeses. And even if this time he had—indeed, perhaps because he had—sold us a putrid Livarot, at least we’d learned its secret, which is a secret of all cheese: they taste of life, but they also taste of death.

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