

How an Englishman proved to be the big cheese when it comes to fromage



Cheese is embedded deeply in France's sense of national identity. Charles de Gaulle said that it was impossible to govern a country which had so many different kinds of cheese.

Imagine then the astonishment when a competition to choose France's most expert cheesemonger was won by... an English civil servant.

Matthew Feroze, 30, defeated 15 of the most talented cheese sellers in France at the bi-annual competition in Lyon this weekend. Mr Feroze, who is on a two-year sabbatical from his job as a government accountant in London, is the first foreigner to win the Concours National des Fromagers at the prestigious Salon Mondiale de Restauration et Hôtellerie.

"There was some surprise, certainly," Mr Feroze told *The Independent*. "But the members of the jury and the competitors were very encouraging and friendly. If there was any resentment, they did not show it."

There were several elements to the competition won by Mr Feroze. He had to blind-taste cheeses. He had to cut slices of cheese to specified weights. Most importantly, he had to present a cheese platter that he had selected and matured himself. Rather like in ice-skating contests, there were

"prescribed" and "freestyle" parts of the competition.

Ten types of cheese were offered by all competitors. Another 15 were open to individual choice. Despite his adoration of French cheese, Mr Feroze did include two English cheeses in his freestyle selection, a cheddar and a stilton. Catherine Bonnetaud, one of the organisers, said: "He was best, that's all you can say. He worked hard on his presentations, with great passion and knowledge."

What makes Mr Feroze's achievement all the more extraordinary is that he has only been a professional cheese refiner and seller for just over a year. He took a sabbatical from his London job in late 2011 to follow his passion for French culture and French cheese. He found a temporary job with one of the best known cheese shops in Lyon, the Fromagerie Mons-Etienne Boissy. They were so pleased with his work they offered him a full-time job and dispatched him on a training course. A couple of months ago, they entered him for the national championship.

"I fell in love with France, and French cheese, when I came to Lyon to learn French after university," Mr Feroze said. "There is something very deep and rich about cheese and about the people involved in cheese. You will never make your fortune out of cheese. It attracts people who have a real passion for what they do."

De Gaulle estimated that there were 265 different kinds of French cheese. The true number is much higher – over 1,000 according to some experts. "It all depends how you define what makes a variety of cheese," Mr Feroze said. "Every farm makes goat cheese a little differently." His own personal favourite is Beaufort Chalet d'Alpage, a cheese of the high Alpine pastures, made, he says "in picture-book farms from picture-book cows".

And what will Mr Feroze do when his sabbatical finishes? Will he go back to being an accountant? "In view of the way things are going," he said. "I am considering looking for a new career in cheese."