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Christian Cottard – a pâtissier with conviction

(Français) Pâtissier-chocolatier Sébastien Bouillet parle des affaires internationales

Hervé Mons – fromager with a global vision

on 23 SEPTEMBER 2011 · [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



It was the famous chocolatier Philippe Bernachon in Lyon who recommended me to visit Hervé Mons, a Meilleur Ouvrier de France cheese maker. The chocolatier had told me he had recently visited a train tunnel that had been converted into a cave to age cheeses.

Before the interview, I did my usual internet check. I found numerous activities being undertaken by the MONS enterprise that I made an assumption that Hervé Mons must be an elderly Frenchman. I was a bit intimidated to contact him. Quite contrary to my expectation, Hervé Mons is a charming, incredibly welcoming and energetic man of 50 who would easily pass for 35.

So here we are, at the tunnel. Can you explain a little bit about this place?

It's been 60 years that no train has passed through here. It was abandoned for a long time. The trains that passed here were small, and it was bad business, so it stopped running in 1940. And after the War it was abandoned. We found it and experimented with the cheese. We saw that it worked well, so then we changed everything inside and turned it into a cave for the cheese.

The train was going from where to where?

It starts from the village we are in. The tunnel is very short, and it goes out to the countryside. Come and look inside. There are cheeses inside.

How big is this place?

200 square meters.

And how many types of cheese are maintained here?

Our company has many varieties, but here we have less. The cheeses we maintain here are kept here for a long time, 1 year, 1 and ½ years, 2 years ... so it's more of a place where we age hard cheeses. We stock the cheeses that arrive quite young, and we age them; in other words we scrub, turn, and take care of the cheeses in order to age them properly.

And the cheeses, they arrive from all regions in France?

They come essentially from Auvergne, Savoy and Jura. There are many different kinds of products. They arrive really young, when they are about 5 – 6 days old. And little by little, they

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transform like this. The mold develops on the rind, and at the same time, the interior absorbs the aroma and the taste. That is what is called aging.

For instance, here you have a cheese that just arrived, really young, last week. And here is what arrived the week before, and these are in the 3rd week. Little by little, you see the difference between the new and the older.



The older ones look smaller too?

Exactly. They become smaller.

Your employees are all French?

No, they come from the States, the UK, Israel, Italy, Japan ... they come from everywhere.



And they all want to become cheese makers?

Certain ones, yes, but different types. Some want to work in the store, some want to become a producer, some want to become an affineur (someone who ages the cheese), others are working at a hotel or a restaurant and want to serve cheese to the clients. People can come here to train for all types of positions within the system.

Today, we communicate rather quietly about the trainings we do because we have too much work still here.

Well, I'm going to mention it in my article tomorrow!

It's for that that we are in the process of constructing our site. Next year, when we are finished with our work here, we will send out a public announcement. But our training school is already 90% full for the next 4 years. The training can be from 4 weeks to 1 or 2 years. You can come to study for 3 days if you want. All you have to do is tell us what you want to learn, what interests you, and we will propose you something.



What is the cost for training?

It depends. For example, for someone who wants to become an affineur and not a producer, the training would cost around 15,000 euros. 50% of the time would be spent working and 50% on theory and explanations.

Accommodation is included?

Yes.

It's not bad.

Yes, it's not bad. It's not too expensive, and at the same time, you get involved with the real work in the company.

Who are the professors?

We have 4 trainers, and we are expecting another who speaks English, Spanish, Italian and French ... but not Japanese. However, Akiko, the person who is in charge of our business in Japan is also a professor to instruct in Japanese. We are in the process of organizing all of that.

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It's a large enterprise?

We are 40. It's not really that large, but for an artisan, it's already not bad.

It's you who built the company?

Yes, with my brother. I'm in charge of the training. We used to do it together, but now we have 2 boutiques. We have very little time for the training.

And your family?



My father and mother had started the business, but it was really a small stand in the market. They only sold 10 kinds of cheeses.

So you expanded the business.

Yes. I was born next to the mountains in Auvergne. All of my grand parents, and my cousins were peasants and made cheeses. So we knew a little.

Today we have about 250 different types of cheeses, and we purchase mostly within France. We work with producers all over France so we know many small parts of the countryside in France. The products arrive here to be aged. We then sell them in our boutique or export them.

Mr. Bernachon, who recommended me to come visit here, told me you export almost 60% of your cheeses.

70%.

Are you the largest exporter of cheeses in France?

Among the artisans, I think so.

Most of them are shipped where?

To the States.

But how is that possible? I lived for a long time in the States, and it's impossible to buy French cheese.

Things have changed a little. It's true that the cheeses we sell in the US are hard cheeses because the soft cheeses are required to be pasteurized. Hard cheeses can be sold even when they are made with raw milk. We sell around 25 kinds of cheeses compared with 250 here. But they are 25 cheeses with raw milk with the authorization to sell on the American market. It doesn't make up a large assortment, but the sales volume is large.

We work a lot with Whole Foods Market. We have an exclusive arrangement with them because the US is an interesting market for us. We work a lot also with Northern Europe, all of Scandinavia: Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark ... We also have a small company in England on the Borough Market next to the London Bridge. We also work in Spain, in Italy, with all of Europe. And now we are beginning to work with the Middle East: Dubai, Abu Dhabi ... We started working with Singapore, a little with China in Shanghai, and in Tokyo. Soon we will begin entering the South American market.

The cheeses in these countries would be a bit expensive?

No, it's ok.

I heard that in the States, you can buy unpasteurized cheeses, but they are expensive because of the tariff rates.

Yes, in fact there are different prices between industrial and artisanal products. The difference is really not between raw milk and pasteurized milk. It mostly depends on the size of the

production. When the production is small, they tend to be artisanal. It demands a lot of manual labor, more work, so they are more expensive. Pasteurized products are industrial products, made with machines. They are completely different systems from economic point of view, so the prices are different.

But it's surprising because sometimes there is not real noticeable difference in prices. Artisanal products cost more to produce, but they don't require marketing, while industrial products don't cost much, but a lot of money is spent on marketing and merchandizing. So sometimes the prices become high.

But in the States, there is a real trend for organic food, which started about 10, 15 years ago. And now, it's become very important. There are many small producers who have started to make cheeses now. For example, I started in the US about 15 years ago. The first association I found had 50 cheese producers. The same association last year had 1,200! That's the US (lol). It's big, there are lots of projects, lots of people who do a lot of things.

In the States, do you work a lot with French chefs?

Yes, with quite a few. Daniel Boulud, for instance, he is a really good friend. We work well together, and he is a good ambassador. There is also Thomas Keller, who has 3 restaurants, and he is a good client. There are many others but I don't have them in my head. But the chef who really helped us in the business was Michel Troisgros in Roanne. He is a very important chef and a good friend. His son is the same age as me. Before that, there were Chef Pierre and Chef Jean who were his father and uncle, and before that there was Jean-Baptiste, his grand father. 3 generations of chefs.

Did you visit Vermont?

Yes, I work in collaboration with the Keller brothers – Andy and Matteo – who have a farm called Jasper Hill above Burlington in Vermont. We help them create the caves to age the cheeses in the mountains. If you go to our site to the news, you will find a film clip. American and French televisions did a report on everything we did with them. I started working with them 4 years ago, and now it's working well.

The project is almost finished. It's a project that's doing well. Now the projects are here in France, restructuring the company, constructing the new caves, the development. We have located our clients, so now we need to work on stocking and the cheeses.

Transforming a tunnel into a cave, was that an original idea or did it already exist before?

It existed long time ago in Auvergne, where I come from, because there were a lot of trains that passed through the mountains. The trains went out of business. The economic system changed. And there were certain number of cheese makers who thought of converting the tunnels into caves. The problem was that the tunnels were often deep in the mountains and it was difficult to access them, to transport, stock, and pick up the cheese. Many were abandoned as a result. Here, the tunnel is just at the end of a road. It's 4 minutes from our headquarters. So it's really great. We are very lucky!

Are there any problems in using the tunnel for cheese?

We did a lot of work for sanitary inspection. You saw the tunnel, it's clean! The system is in order. It demands indeed a lot of work to guarantee good quality and food security. We had to redo a little bit of the roof of the tunnel, the walls, ... but still it was interesting.

So now it's finished.

Yes, we just need to finish the access for the tourists.

It's been how long now that you've been working on it?

2 years.

And how much did it cost?

Not bad (lol)!

In other words, it was quite an investment for the firm.

It was a significant investment. But the investments we are going to make next year in the other caves are more significant. We want to enlarge the facility where we met this morning. It's too small. Here, we are constantly working.

At what age did you begin?

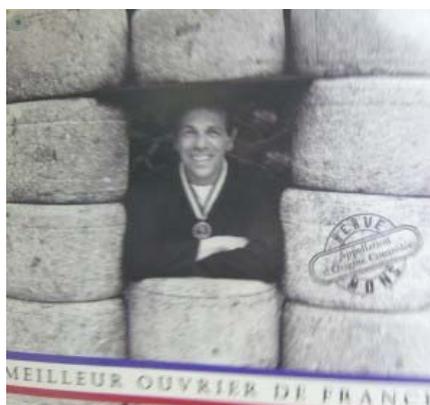
When I started there was nothing before. It was a small firm, just 3 people. I took it over in 1997, but I've worked in this sector since I was 20. I've been working now already for 30 years.

I saw your diploma. Did you study a lot?

A little, yes. I studied the cheese, and I also own the title of Meilleur Ouvrier de France.

Can you tell me more about that? In your business, I understand there are three functions: production, aging, and commercialization. So how does the Meilleur Ouvrier de France competition assess cheese makers?

Essentially, we can be doing 3 things at the same time, or just one to do the competition. You can choose whatever you want; you can be a producer, affineur, or a reseller. Personally, we are mostly in the area of aging and commercialization, but we also have a small company in the mountain where we produce cheeses. We are very particular, that is to say we are an interesting company. We decided to work on all three areas.



I work with between 130 to 140 small producers all over France. I also own a fromagerie that produces a small amount of cheeses which are aged here in the tunnel, such as Lavort, tome des Monts de la Madeleine, tome des bois noirs ...

So people who come to our training center are given an opportunity to produce, age and commercialize. For us, it's also interesting to have a training center because it allows us to train our own team. That was our original purpose in fact.

In the area of aging, what distinguishes your facility from the others? In other words in order to become the Meilleur, what do you need to do?

You have to buy the best cheeses! (lol) The Meilleur Ouvrier de France competition first and foremost requires mastery of the subject matter, that is to say, the capacity to present the cheeses in an excellent quality. You also have to be able to slice the cheese correctly, in an artistic presentation to sell to the client. It's also the mastering of wrapping the cheese, mastering of commercialization. There is also blind tasting, like wine. You have to taste the cheese without knowing what it is. You also have to present a combination of bread, wine and cheese. And there is also a small portion of preparation for cooking with cheese. For the title, you have to know how to do all of that.

Do you consider that what you do here is better than what others are doing?

I would say that we try not to compare ourselves to others. What interests us are our clients. And if they are happy with our cheeses, if our products give them pleasure, and if that makes them want to continue to buy our cheeses, that is a good way. But it's also interesting to compete a little with the others, to see who is better using the same cheese.

What is your favorite cheese?

Salers. It's a bit particular, I will show you. I also love goat cheese very much. Otherwise, everything that is available at the moment. There is not one but many because a cheese may

have an exceptional quality at the moment and another at another moment. It changes.

Do new products arrive from time to time?

Yes, but what do you mean by new? The shape, the color? But is the taste something new? We prefer to have a producer who makes a really good quality cheese that he or she has mastered rather than to change the color and shape every two years. It's not a car. It's cheese! It must remain always top quality. And we find something that is good quality, we don't change all the time.

I hear that the number of small producers is declining.

It depends. A little, sometimes.

Is that a problem for certain cheeses?

Yes. But this is why we work an enormous amount. Why have we developed our business in the way we have and want to have an aging cave and the production? It's because we immediately understood that there was a problem with producers that might stop working.

When our relationship with one producer works well, it gives a good motivation for other producers to work in the same way. So little by little, we are creating a network of producers. That's really going to become 100% of my work in the future. Before I traveled to find clients, and now, we will begin working for the producers. That's more complicated. It's about finding good quality products. It's no longer the clients that are difficult to find, it's the products.

It is said that in France there is a lot of agricultural subsidies. Is it the farms that receive these subsidies?

Yes.

And that's not sufficient for them to continue the work?

It's not a good economic system, and most of all it's a very bad system in terms of motivation and quality because people will automatically change the system they have in place in order to receive the subsidy. What is stupid about the system, for instance, is that one year, they will subsidize production of wheat, and the second year of corn. Two years later, it's for something else. So it obligates them to engage in intensive agriculture.

Within the subsidy scheme, the products are sold to the cooperatives and large industries. So the farmers may only raise crops or produce milk, but they don't transform the primary products into the finished products.

These subsidies only touch the farmers we work with by a very small amount. Why? Because they have the heard of animals who give the milk, and with the milk, they make the cheese. So they have an economic system that is completely independent. It's also for this reason that things are complicated. On the other hand, they are more secure because the farmers who work in this way are not dependent on the subsidies.

The problem with subsidies is that when the state runs out of money, the subsidies stop. And the farmers don't have any more money because they don't know how to work without the subsidies. This is a real problem in France and in Europe in general.

The greatest stupidity is that it's not the farmers who have mastered the production to feed the population, but the technocrats, the bureaucrats, the ministers who decide the economy of food. These are the most stupid people on the planet. It's not just the system of the laws of economics, it's not just about business, and the finance. That doesn't work with the ecology, the season, the planet, the earth and mankind. To manufacture cars, you can create large economic and political systems. But to make natural produces with soil, the seasons, the sky, the sun, the rain, the wind, it doesn't work. But the whole world believes that it works like this.

Aren't there lobbies or associations of cheese makers?

There are lobbies, for instance Slow Food in Italy that addresses a little bit of that. But there

doesn't exist anything significant. Maybe it will change. The consumers are changing so things will change.

It's my personal view on things. But I am persuaded that the consumers who truly understand the way they eat is important for their health and for their lives will begin to have interesting reactions to food and food products. Our work has always been to work with natural products, farm products, only the things that nature gives us, and to try to make good products. There is no artificial system involved, a system that allows us to make things whenever and however we want. It's not possible. It's for that that today, we know that our problem is not the clients. We know that our clients are interested in that. What we worry about is how the farm producers will fair, and how we will continue to produce the cheeses that we want to age and commercialize.

It's very interesting because in the world trade system, people argue that if you lift the agricultural subsidies in France, cheese production would disappear, for instance.

For instance. Not only that, there are other things that are stupid. If you look at the geopolitics, what actually happens on the planet, we, with the subsidies, produce and don't manage to consume everything we produce. In Africa, there are no subsidies, but there is no agriculture, no culture, and people are dying of hunger. The people who think about our economy for years, who go to the universities and obtain diplomas to explain economics, I think it would be better off if they started planting potatoes themselves because those people, they don't know how to do the economics of the planet.

But it's always the problem with the trusts that want to make money and the countries who want to become richer. It's always the money that's the problem. But like this, we try to do things a little differently.

It's very curious to me. How come cheese making is so developed in France?

France is an incredible country, because it's a group of small countries, but thanks to the landscape, to the geographic situation between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, between the north and the south, the east and the west, we have a diversity of regions, the climates, the terroirs. And in addition, there is the French spirit: if I make a cheese in my village, the village next to it would make another kind because they would do things differently. And that is what is incredible. The people here love to make recipes, love to produce things, but truly in a personal way that is never twice the same. It's that that equally gives the diversity, but also the climate the terroir that allows raising the animals, producing the milk, and making the cheese. Just like making wine. The two things that are incredible in France, it's the diversity of wine and cheese.

The French consume a lot of wine and cheese.

21 – 23 kilos per inhabitant per year for cheese.

It's not good for health?

It's very good for health. A proof. Look, we are in good shape! And we don't have problems with our bones. Our calcium is indeed very good.

I once wrote an article about milk in France. I noticed this because I come from the United States. Here in France, people consume UHT (ultra high temperature) milk. It's terrible.

It's really crap. It's the French paradox! (lol) What is terrible in France is the distribution system of supermarkets. They want to organize the commercialization of products, but without any professional competence. When they don't want to talk to the clients, to explain what is good, what is better, talk about the quality, make standardized products, put it in the system where each person serves themselves, that's self-service! But it's not about the quality. This system in France has developed in an incredible manner, and it invades 90% of the market.

It's become like that after the War, correct? It wasn't like that before.

No, absolutely not. It's the industrialization. But there is always a revolution. You always have to battle against the system. That also what I like in this field; with the cheeses, we are a bit of revolutionaries. We are with the raw milk, we want farm productions, we are artisans, we don't

want industrial or standardized systems.

J'aime

Inscription pour voir ce que vos amis aiment.

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