



CHEESE MATTERS

Affinage

BY KRIS LLOYD

Affinage is a French term: put simply it is the maturation of cheese. The French verb 'affineur' comes from the Latin 'ad finis', meaning 'towards the limit'. Many European cheeses are managed by an affineur, an expert who matures or ages cheese.

So what could possibly be so difficult about maturing cheese you ask? There are many factors that must align to ensure that a great cheese is matured perfectly. In Australia we do not officially have affineurs, it is the cheesemakers who are responsible for maturing their cheese. Given most Australian cheesemakers make several styles of cheese there is a risk in providing the exact maturing conditions for each style. It is easy to see why handling this very specialised part of the process onto experts can have positive results.

The affineur must understand the condition that each cheese requires, generally the affineur will deal with one variety of cheese, which means their maturing rooms, or caves, are purpose built to suit the style of cheese they choose to age. Each cheese

style will require a particular level of humidity, temperature, time, handling, washing, scrubbing, turning and airing under the watchful eye and hand of the affineur. In the case where more than one style of cheese is matured several purpose built caves or rooms are built.

Maturing and aging cheese is not a precise science: the breed of animal, the region, the quality of the milk, the terroir and, indeed, the seasons will have an influence on the cheeses. The skill of the affineur comes with time and experience.

In many instances where cheesemakers have limited facilities to mature their cheeses, particularly if the cheese requires a lengthy aging period, the affineur will provide the answer. This explains why so many cheesemaking facilities I visited in Europe consisted of making rooms only; there was no need for any maturing rooms.

I remember visiting Giorgio Cravero, an affineur of Parmigiano Reggiano, in the North of Italy. The Cravero family has been affineurs since 1855 with knowledge that has been handed down from father to son for five generations. I had never seen so many wheels of cheese so neatly assembled on wooden shelving, around 12 or so shelves high (containing 5000 wheels each weighing close to 35kg with a consumer value of around \$8.5 million). The cheese matures naturally in a constant-temperature environment for a minimum of 24 months. The



scale of this operation was immense. When on my tour I met the robot who carefully pulled each cheese off the shelf, brushed it, turned it, and then repositioned it on the shelf. An obvious saving of hours of back breaking work. The cheese is tested using a cheese trier and by sound. An expert will tap the cheese several times and is trained to detect holes, cracks and faults in the cheese, all through sound. I found this fascinating. The Cravero operation is unique, only maturing cheese from two local dairies. There are much larger affineurs operating as co-operatives maturing cheeses from many dairies and regions.

I visited affineurs who matured delicate young goat cheeses that would not withstand the robotics the Parmigianino wheels are up to. In this case each cheese was turned by hand in an environment that was humid and temperature controlled. The continuous turning is critical due to the high moisture they contain which can result in soggy bottoms should they not be turned daily.

Many fine cheese shops around the world like Neal's Yard Dairy in Covent Garden in the UK combine retail and affinage. These stores have incredible visual appeal, with whole wheels of cheese in hundreds of shapes and sizes on show. They offer a service that allows the cheesemonger to choose cheese from the plentiful supply maturing in store that is guaranteed to be perfect for your cheese plate.



Giorgio's Affinage room

Recently I hosted a French cheese expert, Ivan Larcher, at my factory. Ivan spoke in depth regarding the importance of affinage and the need to provide the right conditions. "Correct affinage will make a good cheese great," he said. He also reminded me that affinage would not make a bad cheese good. I wouldn't be surprised if we see an increase in the number of specialised cheese shops in Australia over the coming years.

Although the purist will argue that the affinage has already been done, the cheesemonger is caring for a cheese that has already been carefully aged by the affineur.

• Kris Lloyd is Woodside Cheese Wright's
Head Cheesemaker

[woodsidedecheese.com.au](http://www.woodsidedecheese.com.au)