



MUNSTER

MASH

STORY BY ROBERTA MUIR

For many cheese lovers, the smell of a mature washed-rind cheese is about as sensual as it gets; those who are less enamoured of such cheese compare its aroma to stale socks or a sweaty locker room. But that pheromone-like, locker room scent is what puts fromage aficionados in rapture.

Munster is a French, washed-rind, cows' milk cheese from Alsace. A few farmhouse producers still make it from unpasteurised milk, although it is more frequently made from pasteurised milk these days. The disc-shaped cheeses are 7-19cm in diameter, 2.5-8cm thick and weigh at least 450 grammes. The moist rind is orange to red in colour and encloses a supple, creamy, pale-yellow centre that, properly matured, has the texture of melting chocolate. The rind has a strong, penetrating aroma, which its fans love and its detractors hate.

The creamy centre is less pungent and the rind can be removed before eating. The rind has a slightly salty, rustic, lightly acidic flavour that becomes tangier as it matures; the centre is slightly sweet with a rich lactic flavour.

History

In the 7th century AD, Irish Benedictine monks established an abbey in the Vosges mountains of France. The village that quickly grew up around the abbey became known as Munster (from *monasterium*, the Latin word for monastery). The monks started making cheese to preserve the milk from their dairy herd and later taught the peasants their technique.

By the Middle Ages, the village had grown, freed itself from the authority of the abbey and formed alliances with neighbouring settlements including Sancti Gerardi Mare (later known as Gérardmer) across the Fecht Valley to the west (in what is now the region of Lorraine). The production of munster cheese spread throughout the region, which gradually became an important business centre.

Munster was granted Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) status in 1969. In 1978, the name was revised to Munster-Géromé to include the géromé cheese made in Gérardmer (Géromé means 'from Gérardmer' in the local dialect).

Production

Only milk from Vosgienne cows (a breed introduced from Scandinavia in the 18th century) is now used to make authentic munster. The morning milk is mixed with milk from the previous evening and slowly heated. Rennet and lactic bacteria are added and the curds are cut into tiny cubes. The curds must not be washed or kneaded; they are placed with the whey into round moulds and left overnight to drain in a warm room. The next day, the young cheese is unmoulded, brushed with salt and stored in a humid cellar at 11-15 degrees Celsius for at least three weeks, although four to six weeks is typical for smaller cheeses and two to three months for the larger ones. During maturation (affinage), the cheeses are rubbed with a light brine and turned every two or three days. This added moisture aids the development of *Bacterium linens*, which gives washed-rind cheeses their distinctive taste and colour.

It is a requirement of the AOC that the cheeses be matured within the regions of Alsace, Lorraine or Franche-Comté. If they are matured in a region other than that of production, the label must state the place of production and of affinage.

Types

Munster is produced on farms, by cooperatives, and at industrial sites. The best unpasteurised munster is made in the Haute Vallée de Munster, where cows still wander the granite soils of the upper pastures of the Vosges mountains. But good farmhouse munster is also made in nearby villages such as Lapoutroie, Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines and Villé.

The Ermitage Cooperative was founded in 1931 and has more than 1,000 members. It is a leading producer of pasteurised munster and, under its Rémy Rudler label, of unpasteurised munster, which is made on local farms and aged in the Ermitage cellars at Rochesson. Munster that is produced in factories is still covered by the AOC as long as it meets the regulatory specifications.



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Petit Munster, a smaller version, is 2-6 centimetres in diameter and weighs at least 120 grammes; it is aged for a minimum of two weeks.

Munster is also produced with the popular accompaniment of caraway seeds already mixed through the paste.

Géromé is the name for munster produced in the region of Lorraine (west of Alsace) and, since 1978, covered by the expanded AOC of Munster-Géromé.

A similar cheese, Münster Käse, is produced in the German town of Münster. However, Munster-Géromé has been granted PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) status by the European Union and Germany has had to agree to stop using the name by 2019.

Buying

The best munster is produced with summer and autumn milk from cows that graze on pastures that have been mown for midsummer hay. Mature munster should have a slick and shiny brick-coloured rind, a semi-soft body, a very strong and penetrating aroma, and a rather strong flavour. If it is insufficiently mature (or has been poorly aged), the body may be crumbly or the rind broken. Although it should have a slightly salty flavour, it should not taste overpoweringly salty.

Eating

In Alsace, munster is often eaten with potatoes boiled in their skins and a sprinkling of caraway seeds. It is popular as a cheese course, especially after a meal based on choucroute (Alsatian sauerkraut), as well as being used in quiches and salads. It is particularly good accompanied by an Alsatian gewurztraminer or pinot gris.



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Munster & Leek Vol-au-vent`

Serves 6 as an entrée

300g munster, rind discarded, paste chopped into 1cm dice

2 large leeks (white part only, chopped, washed and drained well)

18 small vol-au-vent cases (about 8cm long)

100g salted butter

2 tsp caraway seeds

2 tbsp plain flour

80ml white wine

160ml milk

2 tbsp snipped chives

salt flakes, to taste

freshly ground white pepper

tomato chutney, to serve

extra chives, to serve

1. Preheat oven to 180°C.
2. Melt the butter over medium heat, add the caraway seeds and fry for a minute.
3. Add leeks and salt, stir well to combine. Reduce heat and cover. Cook leeks, without browning, for about 20 minutes, until very soft, stirring occasionally.
4. Add flour and cook for a few minutes.
5. Add wine and stir constantly for a couple of minutes.
6. Add milk and stir constantly over medium heat until the mixture comes to a boil. Remove from heat, stir in snipped chives. Taste and add pepper and more salt if needed (remember the cheese is slightly salty).
7. Place vol-au-vent cases on an oven tray. Divide cubes of cheese among the cases and top with leek mixture. Place in oven for 8-10 minutes, until mixture is bubbling and starting to colour on top.
8. Divide cases among serving plates and serve with a spoonful of tomato chutney on the side. Garnish with chives.