

SWISS AFFINEURS

GOURMINO : EMMENTALER IN HUMID CAVES

By Débora Pereira | Translated by Susan Sturman

Specialist in this Swiss AOP, Gourmino affinage company offers a table cheese with a very mild and balanced profile, and without the bite that is common to Emmentaler.



At the end of a winding road that rolls along the Kiene, a small river in the Bernese Oberland hides the cheese sanctuary of the affineur Gourmino. The wood boards drying in the sun hint at the cheese work happening in the heart of the mountain. It was the Swiss army that originally excavated the space to use as bunkers and storage space for munitions. The army abandoned the site in the 1950s.

When five producers of Swiss Emmentaler AOP decided to band together to mature their own cheeses, creating a business entity called Gourmino in 2001, they started by acquiring a cave in Lagnau im Emmental, before shifting their sights to the fort in 2015.

“Today, we are a public limited company (LLC) that belongs to the cheesemakers, with some of the shares allocated to management,” explains Roland Sahli, 55, site manager, who heads up a team of some twenty affineurs across the two sites. “We age cheese coming from ten Emmentaler producers and four Gruyère producers. We also offer an affinage service to other hard paste producers.”

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The special feature of Emmentalers aged by Gourmino is that they are matured in humid caves. “In the village creameries, the cheeses are held for the first three months at the producers’, in warm caves. At four months the AOP’s consortium begins to tax the cheeses and we can begin affinage. Our method is different : while 75% of Emmenthaler cheese is currently aged in ‘dry’ caves, at 75% humidity, we keep ours in 95% humidity. This completely changes the character of the cheese. The rind is finer, new aromas and flavors develop. Before, there was no such thing as humid caves for these cheeses,” he recounts. ■

200 METERS UNDERGROUND

“The fort plunges 250 meters into the mountain and 200 meters below the pastures,” details Roland Sahli. It occupies 2700 m², can hold 1,800 tonnes of cheeses, distributed among immense rooms, “the bunkers”.

“We have four of them. The two main ones, in the middle, are dedicated to Emmentaler, about 800 tonnes. The bunker on the left is shared by Gruyères and semi-hard cheeses like raclette, that we also ripen in the right-hand cave,” explains the affineur. The stacks rise up to 12 rows of boards.” ■

Cold by induction



Gourmino chose a system using cold by induction ([cf PF #9](#)), widely used in Switzerland. “It’s a static cold system that allows us to heat or cool, dry or humidify. We measured the temperatures at the fort over two years, and noted that they remain constant between 8°C and 10°C. But we also had to take into account the cheese in the caves and the type of cheeses, which will change the temperature as they generate heat. We sometimes need to cool the caves down. It requires a significant air renewal rate whose circulation is optimized by the vaulted ceilings. The humidified air is distributed thoroughly and slowly. Everything is homogenized, we don’t need to move the cheeses around to different heights in the cave.”

The basic investment was similar to that of a standard cave, but with a greater potential for energy savings. "In summer, the morning air comes in at about 15°C or 16°C, In the winter, it can be as low as -20°C. The fresh air is filtered, pre-conditioned if necessary, as the equipment can add moisture. With a heat exchanger, we can recuperate 20%-30% of the energy consumed by the equipment. It's a sustainable project."

Roland Sahli enters one of the Emmentaler caves. "The cheese arrives from the producer's warm cave where the humidity was 75%. Here it goes into 90% humidity. The color of the rind progressively shifts to yellow then darkens. For us, the best Emmentaler should meet four criteria. The two most important are the flavor and the paste's texture. The flavor should be mild, not too pronounced. We are looking for a smooth, supple paste. Cheeses made from summer milk take on yellow hues, depending on the pasturage. In the winter, they are ivory. The openings are a third criteria, though less important : our Swiss Emmentaler does not swell up as much as Emmental from the Savoie." According to the specifications in the AOP, the eyes should be mainly between 2 and 4 cm in diameter.

"The final criteria," he continues, "concerns the quality of the affinage on long-aged cheeses. After 12, 18 and 24 months, the flavor should be pronounced but never piquant."

The affinage tasks consist of turning and rubbing, which are performed by a robot on a weekly basis. "All the cheeses are rubbed with water and salt, no cultures are added, all the surface flora are present in the cave's ecosystem. We had introduced 200 well-aged wheels to provide the initial microbial ambiance," he explains.

The wheels are held for up to two years. "Gourmino belongs to the cheesemakers, we keep an open book with the make notes and the quality of the cheese, accessible to the affineurs. All our Emmentaler producers transform raw milk in the first 24 hours after milking, as the AOP specifications require. The milk must be prematured in copper cauldrons, at a temperature that ranges between 8°C and 12°C, which is adjusted according to the season. The propionics are reduced by the copper. The cheesemakers let us know which batches they expect to be more apt for long affinage, then, our collaborators observe them and complete the selection of which will be taken out to 24 months. Among the 95 Emmentaler makers, only 25 are capable of producing the best quality for affinage in humid caves," judges the affineur. ■

WHEEL-BY-WHEEL TRACEABILITY



All the lavish care provided by the robots is automatically recorded on a central computer, thanks to software developed by the Austrian company Parley, which developed a customized package for the affineur. “Each cheese that enters the cave is identified in the system. In the case of Emmentaler and Gruyère,” explains Roland Salhi as he points out on the computer, “each location shown on the screen corresponds to a specific wheel. For the smaller cheeses like raclettes, which are aged three to a board, the location therefore corresponds to three cheeses. That’s how we can manage our quality control.” ■

Microclimates

Between the stacks, more or less intense aromas can be smelled in the air. The great stainless-steel doors serve as barriers to help manage these controlled microclimates. “The Gruyère caves are held at 12°C, as required by the AOP. The ammoniac odor is more pronounced there,” the affineur explains, “the aromas are milder in the Emmentaler caves, which are cooler.” All the cheeses are aged on spruce boards. “We chose a conifer that doesn’t grow too fast, it’s the most stable wood ; the boards will be used for at least 25 years. The boards are changed when they become too wet.”

The ten creameries that make Emmentaler for Gourmino are small, like that of Bernhard Meier, a farmstead producer who uses whey from prior makes to propagate his cultures, and whose Gotthelf Emmentaler, his flagship product, is protected by a Slow Food Sentinel. “Our producers all make between two and eight cheeses per day,” he adds. This last June, the bunkers were starting also to fill with raclettes for the winter, entrusted to Gourmino by outside producers. ■

For more information : www.gourmino.ch

A CHOICE OF 4 EMMENTALERS



"More than 50% of our cheeses are aged at least 12 months. Most of our clients select the 12-15 month cheeses. Only 3% take the 24 months. Our French wholesale clients look for different degrees of maturation and generally select a mild and a reserve. 90% of the cheeses aged here are already reserved." ■

In Switzerland, only Gourmino and Emmi age their Emmentalers in humid caves, the latter in its natural caves in Kaltbach, in the Swiss canton of Lucerne.
