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WHERE'S MY CHEESE?
NEW ORLEANS

ROLAND BARTHÉLEMY

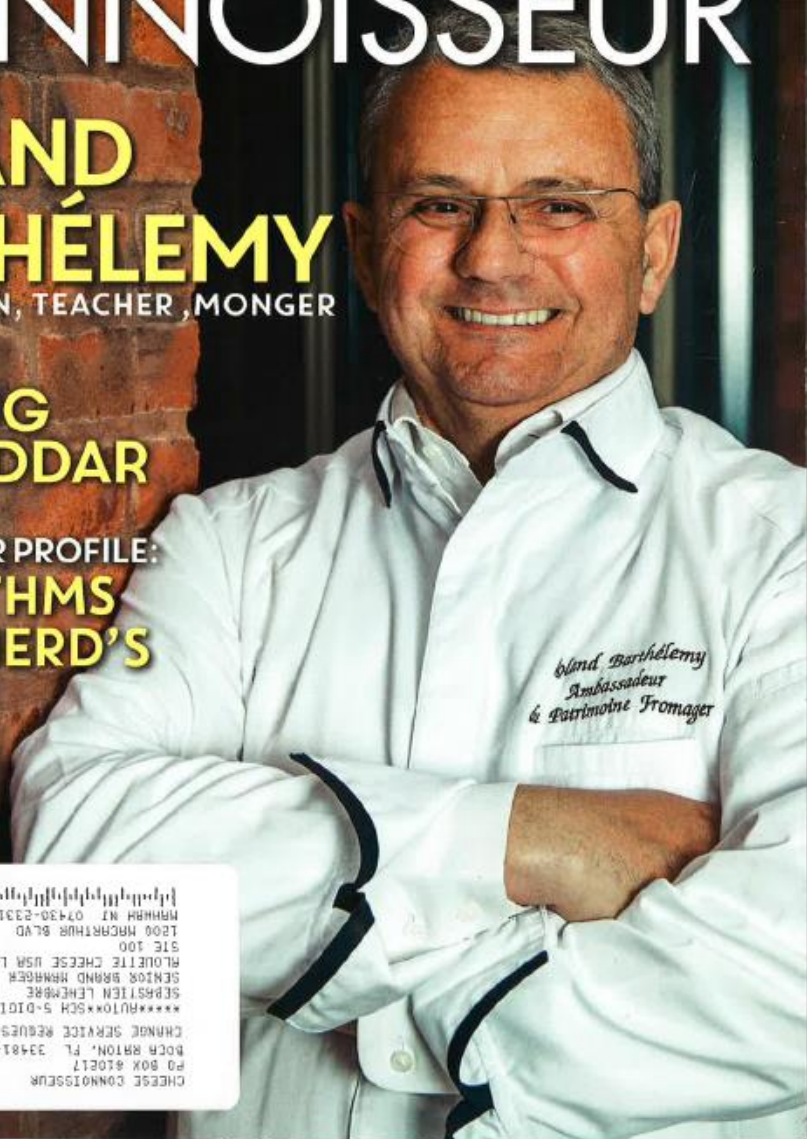
— GENTLEMAN, TEACHER, MONGER

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CHEESEMAKER PROFILE: THE RHYTHMS OF SHEPHERD'S WAY

ALL ABOUT APPENZELLER

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PHOTOS BY VLAD PUDOVIN





ROLAND BARTHÉLEMY

Gentleman, Teacher, Monger

AN INSIDE LOOK AT A MAN WITH
A PASSION FOR CHEESE

STORY BY LEE SMITH PHOTOS BY VLAD PUDOVKIN/#VPVISUALS

Editor's Note: One afternoon I received a call from Sébastien Lehembre, senior brand manager at Group Savencia (Alouette Brand) asking if I would like to spend a day with Roland Barthélemy "playing with cheese." To understand my delight, one must understand the respect Barthélemy holds in the international cheese community. Not only did I feel honored, but also surprised and slightly intimidated.

TO UNDERSTAND MY EXCITEMENT, ONE NEEDS SOME KNOWLEDGE OF THE MAN. A force majeure in the international cheese community, he is the consummate gentleman. He has spent his life as a cheese monger, a man who has a passion for cheese, someone dedicated to giving mongers respect and appreciation for a craft.

Much like Georges Auguste Escoffier gave France's chefs professional recognition, Barthélemy has changed the view of cheese counter staff from retail clerks to cheesemongers and fromagers. As provost of La Guilde Internationale des Fromagers - Confrérie de Saint-Uguzon, he has brought professionals together to celebrate their cheese companionship and to foster learning and recognition among their peers.

Today, the guild has more than 6,000 members in 35 countries, promoting men and women in the dairy industry and helping to maintain the know-how and respect for traditions in a modern world.

More than a messenger, Barthélemy started in the cheese business at the ripe old age of nine, helping his father select cheeses at the famous Les Halles Paris cheese market. Eventually, he opened his own shop/fromagerie in Paris. Fromagerie Barthélemy was one of the first shops to bring in cheeses from all over France, and he travelled throughout France looking for gems to sell in his store - a store that became a brand regarded as the best in Paris.

His accolades are too numerous to mention, but my excitement was rapidly building. We were to meet at the gorgeous L'École Valrhona in Brooklyn, also headquarters for the French chocolate company now owned by Group Savencia.



The day turned into a master's class of miniature cheese art, pairing flavors and textures to create tiny culinary masterpieces. Barthélemy's passion and patience, his skill and creativity made for a magical day. The photographs are from that same day. The following interview is also from the same day and the next morning. All cheeses were from Savencia and arrived in perfect condition.

LE SMITH: I'm sure the term cheese monger or fromager confuses many people. Can you explain?

ROLAND BARTHÉLEMY: The cheese monger is the last piece of the chain that brings cheese to the consumer. He or she understands the life cycle of cheese from the animal to the maker to affinage and finally to the public.



A monger must know the techniques of affinage – whether a cheese needs to be rubbed or washed in brine, maybe a few pats or a spritz of water – or how to bring the cheese to the ultimate stage of perfection. Temperature, humidity and time all work together. A monger accompanies a cheese throughout its life, allowing the personality of the cheese and its maker to shine.

LS: So, is a cheesemonger or fromager a cheesemaker? Maybe an affineur? Or a chef?

RB: Oh no, I am not a chef. I would never pretend to be a chef, and I do not like it when people refer to me as a chef. That is not my role. However, I do need to be able to guide people to offer them suggestions that would appeal to their minds, to what tastes good to them. So, I understand pairings.

I am also not a cheesemaker or an affineur, although I have done both. A cheese monger must understand how cheeses are made to understand their care. Mongers create an atmosphere for the cheese to flourish, to give it life. Each cheese is a living thing and its needs are different. This is part of the art and of skill.

LS: It is said that cheese begins with the milk, but what about the animals?

RB: Of course, different animals bring different qualities to the cheese, but I think the best cheeses are made from "happy animals." The healthier and more relaxed an animal is, the better the quality of the milk. This means thinking of the grass, the climate and other conditions. Right now, I am working with a dairy experimenting with milking cows three times a day, instead of the traditional two milkings. The cows seem under less stress and more comfortable. Everything must work together in harmony.

LS: You have many accomplishments, from owning a world famous cheese shop, to teaching and judging competitions around the world. You are the judges' judge. You are the provost of the La Guilde Internationale des Fromagers. You are also the founder of the Concours de Meilleur Ouvrier de France for cheesemongers, an intense

“MY LIFE HAS BEEN SPENT LEARNING AND TRANSMITTING KNOWLEDGE TO OTHERS. WE FORGET THAT PEOPLE NEED RECOGNITION, THEY NEED TO BE APPRECIATED.”

competition honoring the finest craftsmen and women in France. With so many accomplishments, how would you describe your life, your mission?

RB: My life has been spent learning and transmitting knowledge to others. We forget that people need recognition, they need to be appreciated. Anyone can ‘say’ they are a monger or affineur, which is why the need for recognition is so important. The *Guilde* is a way to give that recognition and it is a

way to transmit knowledge and tradition to the next generation. I am glad to see that professional recognition for mongers is growing in the United States.

LS: I’ve heard you talk about “cupboard cuisine,” which inspired our time yesterday playing with different cheeses and ingredients. Can you explain the technique in more detail?

RB: Well, first, it is not a technique; it is

much more of a concept. Cultural in many ways. Before almost everything, our grandparents had no supermarkets, no cars, no Whole Foods. Everything was local and it all had to be transformed. Everything was used – 100 percent. It was not an option to waste something edible. People used their imagination to make it interesting.

For example, two to three chickens would be running around at a house, but chickens do not produce eggs every



day or even all year round. So eggs were wrapped in newspaper, and they lasted a few months. Pears and apples were around for only a few months, so they were dried or made into something else to preserve them.

People recognized that food was cyclic and it needed to be preserved. This was the origin of cheese and many other foods.

Today, in what we call modern times, more than 30 percent of food produced is wasted. This should not happen. Today, we have too many tendencies to buy and not eat. It is too easy to throw away. This is a tragedy.

LS: So, what we did was take items found in the pantry and combine them to create perfect pairings? Although, I must make a comment -- I think your pantry is much more interesting than mine.

RB: (Smiling) This may be true. But, yes, it is what our grandparents did. Look around and see what you have and use your imagination to create tasty dishes. We make associations -- salty, sweet and savory, spicy, creamy, crunchy. Bring them together. Experiment. We do not have to win every time. Sometimes it will not work but it is okay. It is part of learning.

And, we need to bring our children into this. Let them build their own creations without criticism. They will learn. Give them the freedom to cook or prepare their own snacks. It will not always be good, but it will always be appealing. **CC**



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