

# Revering ROQUEFORT

## A Little Info on the King of Cheeses

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It may be a bit smelly and look mouldy, but according to myth, Casanova, the legendary lover, considered it an aphrodisiac when accompanied by a glass of Chambertin (a red wine from Bordeaux). And since Casanova always got his women, he may have been on to something.

The aphrodisiac in question is *Roquefort* cheese, one of the most distinctive and expensive of the French cheeses. Its characteristic blue-veined creaminess and rich flavour are a product of natural geographic forces: a hungry microscopic mushroom, ewe's milk and a little human intervention and refinement.

Ever since I first tasted Roquefort as a child, it has been my favourite. While spending some time living in the Languedoc-Roussillon region of France (two hours from the town of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon), I felt I had to make the pilgrimage to see just how the "king of cheeses" is created.

To my surprise it indeed turned out to be a pilgrimage of the original kind – one made on foot since no local bus goes directly to Roquefort. I was dropped off at the junction and walked the winding road towards the town. Roquefort is nestled on the Combalou plateau located at the foothills of the Grand Causses mountain range. In the fresh mountain air I caught a whiff of the cheese as it fermented in the natural underground caves.

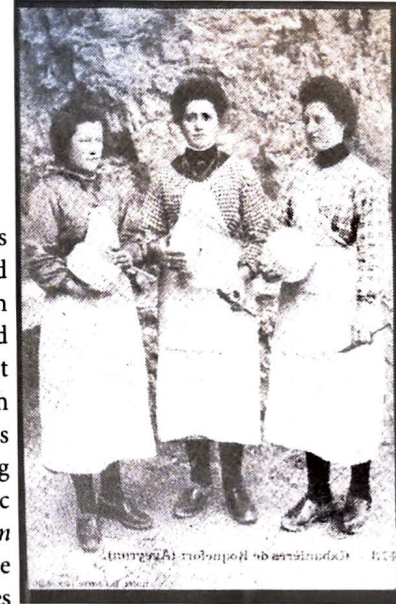
I took the tour provided by Société, the biggest of the six producers of Roquefort. Descending into the caves I saw the huge rounds of cheese lined up on shelves and caught the potent scent of the *penicillium roqueforti* at work. Just what is *penicillium roqueforti* you ask?

During prehistoric times the mountain collapsed to form the caves which are naturally ventilated and remain at a constant temperature of 40°F in both summer and winter. This is an ideal condition for curing the cheese. A microscopic mushroom called *penicillium roqueforti* (no relation to the antibiotic) grows on the sides of the caves. This *penicillium* is the essential ingredient that gives Roquefort its special taste and aroma. It is distilled into a powder form which is then added to the ewe's milk during the curing process.

A methodical and centuries old three-month-long process creates the perfect Roquefort. At each stage the *Maitre Affineur* (Master Ripener) oversees the development. It's a serious business! So serious, that as far back as 1407, the King of France granted the inhabitants of Roquefort the exclusive rights to ripen the cheese. In the 16th and 17th centuries the court of the parliament of Toulouse pronounced heavy penalties against anyone trying to sell a *faux* Roquefort. Today, Roquefort cheese is an internationally patented and protected entity. Each package bears the seal guaranteeing product quality and origin.

In 1990, 20,000 tonnes of Roquefort was exported with 15% representing foreign sales to countries like the U.S.A, Canada, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland.

*Long live the "king of cheeses"!*



### CONSERVING ROQUEFORT CHEESE

To decrease dehydration, thereby maintaining all its flavour, Roquefort cheese should always be protected from the open air, either in its original wrapping or aluminium foil. Store the cheese in the lower part of the fridge and avoid sudden temperature changes.

### SERVING ROQUEFORT CHEESE

Cut only the amount of Roquefort you will need. Let it breathe at room temperature for between 20 to 30 minutes before serving.

## ROQUEFORT RECIPES