

In the kitchen



This month
Paola Westbeek
is feeling blue...

I will never forget that dinner at Le Pré Fillet in Les Molunes, a typical mountain village in the heart of Haut-Jura. After a meal of local fare, including delicate slices of smoked tongue and turkey in a morel cream sauce, they rolled out an impressive *plateau de fromages*. Choosing is never easy, but if I spot a cheese I've yet to try, I'll definitely ask for it. And that's how I discovered Bleu de Gex.

I noticed herbal aromas reminiscent of tarragon, delicate grassy notes, a hint of mushrooms and the smokiness of freshly roasted nuts. A hearty yet mild cheese. Rustic yet elegant. In short, a cheese with plenty of complexity. From that very first taste, it became my favourite blue. *Désolé*, Bleu d'Auvergne!

Bleu de Gex was first made in the 14th century by monks at the Abbey of St-Claude. The cheese received AOC certification in 1977, and production is now in the hands of only two artisan cheesemakers and two cooperatives in the departments of Jura and Ain. Only milk from Montbéliarde and Simmental cows is used to make the cheese. These rugged and robust beasts indulge in grass, flowers and herbs growing abundantly in the lush, fertile fields of Jura - a diet reflected in the cheese's incredible taste.

Days after that memorable meal, I spent a morning at L'Abbaye in Chezery-Forens, one of the remaining Bleu de Gex *fromageries* in the region. Witnessing its production added a whole new dimension to my appreciation of the cheese. Rennet



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and *penicillium roqueforti* (a fungus) are stirred into the freshly delivered milk until curds form. They are then poured into round moulds covered with a layer of cheesecloth. As soon as the wheels take on a compact shape, they are turned over several times to release excess moisture. Once unmoulded, the young cheese is lightly salted and enters a cool cellar to mature for at least three to five weeks. During the ageing, the cheese is pricked with pins, promoting air flow and encouraging a nice even marbling of characteristic blue-green veins. The colour of the cheese varies from ivory to buttery yellow.

If serving the cheese before dessert (*comme il faut*), a good accompaniment would be walnut bread and a ripe pear. It's also wonderful in an autumnal gratin. For four people, sauté a large chopped onion, add 500g diced butternut squash, 200g uncooked basmati rice (rinsed), three tablespoons crème fraîche and 600ml hot chicken stock. Briefly bring to the boil, take the pan off the heat, stir in a few handfuls of grated cheese, transfer to a greased oven dish and bake for 35 minutes at 180°C. Comfort food at its best.

serve with...

Vin Jaune pairs well with the gratin. If serving the cheese solo, you could also try a sweet wine such as Monbazillac or Banyuls.

