

## *Quel Fromage*

COCKNEY Corner is gradually going the way of most street markets--less food, more dodgy items suggesting that lorry drivers are careless about closing their tailgates. And so it was a major event when a young French couple took over the space vacated by a kindly old gent who had just retired at seventy-five. On their first day his wife, dressed up as if for a royal tea party, came around to visit with her old friends.

"A nice young couple they are," she said. "Froggies. They're going to sell cheese. Bringing it all the way from Normandy, they are. As if we didn't have enough of it right here! Still, the neighborhood's changing. There's that stall across the street selling Thai food--all them little bits on skewers."

The new stall was straight out of a French market: neatly arranged little asymmetrical towers of cheese with ornate hand-lettered signs, set out on straw mats, and a decorative fringe around the awning. Where was I? Everyone was speaking French! The lovely girl behind the barrow--wasn't that Leslie Caron? Here in the east end of London, I was transported.

The stall specialized in cheeses from Normandy: *Camembert*, *Pont-l'Évêque*, various *chèvres*, together with a few plump little *saucissons*. A small round cheese in an open cellophane-wrapped box caught my eye. It looked like an ancient, wizened *Epoisse*. On the bottom a printed label informed me that it was a *gargantin*, a half pound of rich soft cheese, 50% fat. I'd never heard of it.

The girl saw me looking at it and explained, "You put it in a bowl. You make a--what do you say?--a hole in the top, a well. You pour in some white wine--perhaps a *sancerre*? You melt it in the oven. You mix with some potato--*délicieux*!"

I was hooked. I'm a sucker for strong flavors of all sorts whipped into mashed potatoes, such as *brandade de morou* and *aligot*. This mixture sounded rather like the latter, an Auvergne specialty: potato, cream, butter, crushed garlic and *cantal* (a cheese very like a mature farmhouse cheddar), whipped to within an inch of their lives. I was cooking dinner for Mary that night. Time for another of my dreaded Frankenfood experiments!

The dish had to be ready when Mary walked in the door, so I speeded it up. The cheese was to be merely melted, not cooked, so I put the bowl with the cheese and wine--a bone-dry *aligoté* (an appropriate homonym)--in the microwave for a couple of minutes. A pound of small potatoes, boiled in their skins, was processed along with a glug of olive oil, a generous splash of the same wine and some salt and pepper; then the melted cheese and wine went into the mixture and the whole was further processed to a creamy calorific smoothness. *Quelle richesse!*

It had to stay warm for Mary's arrival, so it went into a small covered casserole and then into the bottom of a moderate oven with the rest of the dinner. When I took the lid off an hour later the mixture had risen to it and had become surprisingly light and airy. It must have been the air I'd beaten into it, expanding like a soufflé. This was worth exploring.

THE following Friday I was back at the cheese stall. A single odor emerged from the collective aroma and drew me, like a siren's song, to an innocent-looking pile of small cling-wrapped soft yellow cheeses. *Maudit*, read the label, in a curiously Gothic script. I picked one up; it seemed to speak to me. It brought back the Limburgers my father used to buy cheap from the German grocer in Fall River--the ones that had gone so ripe that the Krauts wouldn't touch them. "It's mellow," Dad used to say, "once you get it past your nose." Ignoring the

curious glance of the salesgirl I made my purchase and slipped the odoriferous cylinder into my carrier bag. It would serve admirably for the definitive experiment.

The next day I was cooking dinner again. This time I would bake the mixture open and try for a bit more elevation. The straight-sided soufflé dish, filled up to near the top, went into a medium oven with a steel tray underneath for bottom heat. We'd see if it might rise and brown a bit. The aroma was sublime. That cheese must have been to hell and back, picking up a bit of local atmosphere at every stage of the journey.

For half an hour it gave up its amazing secrets. It was ready just as Mary arrived home. Not much of a rising, only just above the edge, but a satisfyingly brown surface. As a soufflé manqué, it would do nicely.

As soon as she was through the door Mary began to sniff. "What's that awful smell? Are you still wearing that old sweater? . . . No, that's not it." And then, as she entered the kitchen, a look of horror. "Surely it's not our dinner!"

I knew I would get the lion's share of it, but I tried to sound grieved. "It's my latest creation," I said indignantly, "a soufflé aligoté. It will go down in history."

"Well, it's not going down my throat. Just try not to breathe while I'm in the room. You can scoff the lot."

AND I did. It's after midnight and Mary has gone to bed. I'm sitting upstairs in the study, at the computer. A strange uneasy feeling, a heightened sensitivity, is spreading out to the nerve endings at my fingertips. A force has invaded my body like a genetically modified computer virus, eating away at my thoughts, even my memories, and subtly transforming them.

What GMO abomination have I eaten? Whence did it come? Tiny hairs are growing on the palms of my hands. I dare not look in a mirror. A cry is forming in my brain, a call of tribute and submission.

The hitherto nameless terror, the primordial spawn of hell from outer space, before whom even the dreaded Cthulhu prostrates himself, is forcing his name from my throat. The prophecies of the accursed *Necronomicon*, from the loathsome hand of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, approach their apotheosis--through me! My lips form the shapes against my will and I cry out with a shriek that tears itself from my wracked lungs:

*N'gai, n'gha'ghaa! Iä, Shub-Nuggurath! Yog Sothoth! Monnnnn-saaannn-toooooo. . .*

©1999 John Whiting

*The cheese stall is for real. It's in the Chapel Street Market, Islington, which I changed because of my fictional slur on its honesty, and because I caricatured the lovely old couple that had given up the stall. (Writers of fiction are nasty people.) The cheese merchant's home base is Au Pot au Lait, Crèmerie/Fromagerie, 17, Place de la République, 14100 Lisieux, Tel 31.61.04.03. They are in Chapel Street several days a week; the exact days are in the process of settling down. (I've always found them there on a Friday.) The two cheeses are real, though I can't remember what "Maudit" was actually called. Everything else is also real (including Mary's response to the pong), up to, but not including, the hairy palms. Still, if you attempt the Full Monty, you might consider keeping a razor handy.*