

# STRIKING GOLD AT OLYMPICS OF CHEESE

*Irish Farmers Journal's* France correspondent Thomas Hubert looks at a group of Irish farmhouse cheese producers making a stir in France



Selling Irish cheese to the French may sound like a tall order, but a group of farmhouse producers rose to the challenge at the Salon du Fromage in Paris in the past week – a trade fair one of the Irish exhibitors described as “the Olympics of cheese”.

“I’ve already had orders of 28 wheels of cheese to be delivered to Paris next Thursday,” said Conor Mulhall, general manager of the Little Milk Company, midway through the show.

Many of the 14 Irish farmhouse cheese producers present reported direct sales to new and existing buyers and a general rising profile of their products at the trade-only event attached to the massive Paris International Agricultural Show.

“We’ve met approximately 50 new leads every day from countries including France,

the US, the UK and the Netherlands,” said Noreen Lanihan, head of Bord Bia for France and Belgium, who organised the exhibition space for Irish cheesemakers. She estimated that while only 2t of Irish farmhouse cheese made it to France last year, this will double this year and many in the industry expect it could quickly reach 30t.

While a number of Irish farmhouse producers already export, mostly to the US and Britain, cracking the French market takes a lot more time and effort.

Bord Bia’s first participation in the bi-annual Salon du Fromage was an attempt to establish producers who began to export here in the past five years.

#### Porter cheese

“France is a new market for us – we’ve been exporting here for two or three years,” said Sarah Gorman of Cooleeney Farm.

The company makes cheese with the milk from Breda and Jim Maher’s 200 cows near Thurles and exports to a typical mix of US and UK outlets, with

smaller amounts shipping to the Emirates and southern Europe.

“France is a harder market, with more competition, but more and more open to trying different things. We have a base here that we want to expand,” said Sarah. Although their prod-

ucts are derived from Brie, Camembert or other recipes close to French cheeses, Irish cheesemakers have been attracting French buyers’ attention by offering something different: creamier, richer milk from Ireland’s grass-based system, smoked cheeses or daring flavours.

“We came up first with the idea of Irish porter cheese, which is different from other products sold in France,” said Helen Cahill, a member of the Cahill farm family from Newcastle West whose

**“I want to know if it will make people dream, what the story is behind the cheese**

cheeses are hand-wrapped in eye-catching coloured wax.

#### Pooled shipping costs

In what they call co-operation, Cahill, Cooleney and other Irish farmhouse producers pool their exports at Cooleney farm and share transport costs from there.

In France, those shipments land in Tradext’s cold stores in Rouen, near Camembert town.

The company’s founder, Thereze O’hAodh-Leduc, an Irishwoman established in the French import-export sector for 20 years, has been the driving force behind Irish artisan cheese sales in France.

In the past three years, Tradext has expanded from “a Fedex box in my fridge to palettes coming out of Ireland” according to Thereze – not to mention partner traders at the huge Rungis wholesale market near Paris.

“And it’s only the beginning of the story, because it’s a hard market to break into, but once you’re in, it’s for the long-term.”

One French buyer who did not wait for this show to discover Irish cheese is Jean-Marie Estrade of Delon, a Rungis-based wholesaler.

“I first taste the cheese, and then decide whether there’s something new that could find its place,” he said.

“I want to know if it will make people dream, what the story is behind the cheese. I never start by looking at figures such as the weight or the cost.”

Delon now imports Cashel’s blue cheeses into France, for sale at speciality cheese shops in Paris and food markets around the region.

Jean-Marie confirmed that differentiation, rather than head-on competition, is the way to sell Irish cheese in France.

A major importer of Cashel’s sheepmilk Crozier blue, he said: “I’m not trying to fool anyone by saying this is Roquefort.”

According to him and other industry sources, Ireland’s green image of grass-based, pollution-free production is

crucial in gaining the key ingredient of sustainable cheese sales here: confidence.

Retailers, in turn, trust him from long-term business relationships. “I’d rather sell five cheeses to someone who will come back for more than 50 and never get feedback,” he said.

Sarah Furno, a director of the Jane and Louis Grubb farm family business behind the Cashel brand, agrees.

And while France currently absorbs only 5% of Cashel cheeses, she says coming here has added value: “Building respect among the fromagers of Paris is very exciting. It gives you inspiration and drive to keep up your quality.”

Cashel is also looking at France as a potential export hub for other destinations.

“Grouping here for exports out of the eurozone is very interesting – for example, Australians like to group their European imports out of France,” said Sarah. At the Paris show, she met buyers from as far away as Japan and California.

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