

THE NAPOLEÓN OF CHEESE

Roland Barthélemy is a force to be reckoned with

BY SUSAN STURMAN

Roland Barthélemy is a force of nature, a man of boundless energy, a storyteller of passion expressed in vaunted language. Diminutive in stature, humble in origin, dynamic and bold in vision, he may be considered the Napoléon of cheese. But unlike the original, his aim is not so much to conquer the world as to unite it...with cheese.

While Barthélemy claims residence in Carpentras in the south of France, it's difficult to imagine he alights anywhere for long. On his website (www.rolandbarthelemy.com) he refers to himself as "*Maître Fromager-cum-globetrotter*." He responds to emails from trains, planes and other vehicles, and any given day might find him in France, Germany, the U.S., Australia, Japan or any place his many interests take him. Author of several books, he has also developed a line of cheese products for the French cheesemaker Boursault. He has worked with Laguiole to create a line of cheese knives for home use and is working on a set of professional cheese tools. He is asked to judge at competitions all over the world and is the presiding judge for the fromager class of the prestigious *Meilleur Ouvrier de France* (Best Craftsman of France) competition. He is also president of the *Guilde Internationale des Fromagers*.



9-year-old Roland and his father choosing Camembert at Les Halles Paris cheese market in 1958

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROLAND BARTHÉLEMY

Barthélemy has two passions that guide all he does. He relentlessly champions high-quality raw-milk cheeses, so fundamental to France's culinary heritage and so key to maintaining working landscapes around the world. And, as he explains, "For more than twenty years I've had an ambition to rehabilitate our métier [profession] and to inspire this vocation in the younger generation." He has achieved much in both spheres.

a pivotal moment

In his youth, small *crémiers-glaciers* — at least one on every city block in Paris — sold all manner of products. Prior to refrigeration, such shops received daily deliveries of milk, eggs, cheese and huge blocks of ice. The term *crémier-glacier* means cream and ice, not cream and ice cream. Customers brought their milk cans to fill from the shop's large basin of milk. They would also take home chippings from the ice block to keep the products fresh. Most home kitchens contained a *garde-manger*, usually a simple cabinet in an exterior kitchen wall. Electrical appliances, including refrigerators, didn't become prevalent in

Paris until the late 1960s/early 1970s.

Barthélemy's parents had one such shop on the hill of Montmartre in the north of Paris. In 1960 Barthélemy *pere* sold 1000 liters of milk per day, every day that year. And the other three shops in the neighborhood did the same kind of volume.

By the time Roland was in his teens, his father had set him up as an apprentice, which was very much the model at the time: The work was passed from one generation to another. Professional training programs such as the CQP — *Certificat de Qualification Professionnelle* — were not initiated until the 1980s in France.

As the son of fromagers, Roland might have been expected as a matter of course to continue his father's business. However, like many of his peers in the mid-20th century, he had other ideas. A passionate skier from the age of five, he wanted to be a ski instructor.

After spending his childhood at his parents' shop, Roland spent the '60s working in the old Les Halles central market in the heart of Paris as a *mousse*, the lowest rank in the market's hierarchy. In descending order, that

would be *chef* (boss), *vendeur* (salesperson), *commis* (assistant) and finally *mousse* (go-fer, delivery person). His day, which consisted of loading trucks and making deliveries, lasted from 4 AM to 3 PM.

From September 1 through December 31, Roland worked at the Fromagerie au Halles. Then around first of the year, he'd head for the hills to the ski resort and school at St. Gervais les Bains near Mont Blanc. He'd spend the morning in ski instructors' school, then head over to a hotel at Mont d'Arbois in nearby Megève at noon to serve as a barman, then back for the afternoon session on the slopes, then back again to the hotel to serve till it was time to sleep. The barman job provided lodging, meals, and clean linens while he trained for his instructor license. This grueling schedule took him through the end of April.

Spring through early fall would find the young Roland in Cantal and Savoie on small farms, learning the technology of cheesemaking by working the vats alongside the makers of Salers cheese.

He kept up this intense regime for four years. Then, in 1969 a friend said to him, "*Voilà*, you can continue to bust



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your butt skiing for tips, or I can help set you up with a fromagerie, and with the money you make selling cheese, you'll be able to ski for pleasure." And so it was. On May 1, 1971, the 22-year-old Barthélemy bought his own *crèmerie* on the rue de Grenelle, opening shop with about 100 francs in his pocket.

the fromagerie's beginnings

At that point little Parisian *crèmeries* were starting to disappear. Although electrical refrigeration hadn't yet taken hold, many of those still hauling ice from Les Halles for their *crèmeries* were growing old. The *coup de grâce* came in 1969: The markets at Les Halles were moved from the center of Paris to new, modern, and entirely electrically refrigerated depots at Rungis. The small business owners had no cars — certainly no refrigerated vans — and could not travel out to Rungis, a distance of nearly 10 kilometers (6 miles), to get product.

Meanwhile, American-style

fromager. He was one of the first to bring together a wide selection of cheeses from all over France in his shop. As early as the 1930s, the house of Androuët was the first to sell only cheese, to introduce *caves d'affinage* in his shop, and to create a restaurant devoted to cheese, beginning the practice of pairing wines and cheeses. This concept was an immediate success, attracting the *crème de la crème* of Parisian society.

Roland saw what was happening at *chez Androuët*, and it inspired him. At Fromagerie Barthélemy he started to shed the traditional wide range of products to concentrate on cheese, travelled throughout France to source the products himself, and began *affinage* on premises. Gradually, the little Barthélemy shop became a brand in itself.

During his 31 years on the rue de Grenelle, Roland travelled the back roads of France, toting up 50,000 kilometers per year in search of fine

chef Paul Bocuse was at the height of his fame. Roland was asked to supply the cheeses for a dinner for Bocuse given by the renowned French publisher M. Flammarion. Bocuse had been awarded the title *Un Des Meilleurs Ouvriers de France* (MOF). Bocuse's celebrity, stature and MOF status so impressed Roland that he dedicated himself for the next 20+ years to establishing fromager as an MOF category. The first class of MOF fromagers in 2000 marked a turning point in the professionalization of cheesemongering in France. Barthélemy was designated *Président du Jury de la classe Fromager* for the MOF competition, serving to this day as chief judge.

For his tireless dedication to his profession, the French government has recognized him with some of its highest national honors:

Officier de l'Ordre National du Mérite
Commandeur du Mérite Agricole. The National Order of Agricultural Merit was established in France on July 7, 1883, by Minister of Agriculture Jules



PHOTOS BY LEE SMITH



supermarkets were being introduced, thanks to large-scale refrigeration and a vastly improved commercial infrastructure to move goods long distances. Women began to work outside the home, and in the countryside traditional agricultural practices were giving way to industrialization, with an emphasis on standardizing many traditionally farmstead products.

At the same time, fundamental changes were happening at the shop level. A man named Henri Androuët had opened the way to transforming the generalist *crémier* into a specialist

cheeses. His passion goes deep: Curiosity, tenacity, and a sincere, abiding love and respect for cheese drive everything he does. He was the force behind the resurrection of a local cheese that had disappeared in the 1970s — Brie Cendré de Ville-Saint-Jacques. The cheese was created in the 19th century in a format small enough so field workers could carry it with them for lunch; its ash coating kept the flies off. "Our work is alive. Every day brings its satisfaction and its surprise," he notes.

the honors pour in

In 1972, the preeminent Lyonnaise

Méline to reward services to agriculture. There are only about 400 living *Commandeurs*, the highest level of the Order.

Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur. The Legion of Honor, or in full the National Order of the Legion of Honor, is a French order established by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802. The Order is the highest decoration in France, and is awarded for "eminent merit" in military or civilian life.

Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres. In recognition of Barthélemy's work to raise the profession of fromager to that of an art, the Ministry of Culture

elevated him to the status of Knight of Arts and Letters.

A parallel can be drawn between the work and vision of the great chef Auguste Escoffier and Roland Barthélemy in their individual domains. Before Escoffier's time, cooks occupied a very low rung on the social ladder, worked in hellish conditions, and were treated harshly. At the London Savoy and the Paris Ritz, Escoffier reorganized the professional kitchen staff, insisted on humane working conditions, and required all his staff to wear a suit to work and change into their working clothes on the job. This granted cooks a level of respectability that eventually led to the current celebrity status the profession enjoys today. Barthélemy, has elevated the occupation of *fromager/crémier/affineur* to that of respected professional with deep expertise, and even star status.

gilde internationale des fromagers

In 1969 Pierre Androuët founded the *Gilde Internationale des Fromagers*. Barthélemy was inducted in 1973 and became its president in 1992.

The *Gilde* has its roots in the ancient guild system of the Middle Ages. The purpose of a craft guild, then as now, was to ensure the specialized knowledge of a craft is passed on. The guilds supported the next generation through apprenticeships, then aid to journeymen workers, and finally by recognizing Master status.

This is very much the mission of the *Gilde Internationale des Fromagers*. However, where the ancient guilds were all about secrecy and exclusionism, guarding trade secrets closely and giving access to only the accepted few, Barthélemy's vision is quite the contrary. He wants to share knowledge and expertise across barriers of geography, language, and culture, so that high-quality cheese can be made and enjoyed by all.

In fact, his obsession is the transmission of knowledge. He describes the *Gilde* as "a movement of excellence and solidarity," and is "deeply proud that our industry is the only industry to have such an international organization, dedicated to shared knowledge, connections, and honoring professional achievement and contribution."

At the beginning of 2012 Roland presided over the official creation of the New World Chapter of the *Gilde*, which unites North America and Australia. Barthélemy explains that the geographical distance is trumped by the similarity in character of the two continents: Beyond a shared language, both are marked by "the great magic of being able to travel and learn, and then bring that knowledge home and adapt it to their country and make the most of it."

According to Cathy Strange, cheese buyer for Whole Foods and president of the New World Chapter, the aim of this new chapter is to honor and respect the tradition and history of the European intellectual approach to cheese, while evolving a mission to grow pride and sharing technological knowledge and expertise. She envisions a chapter that includes the entire North American continent and that might eventually expand to include South America as well. Plans are currently being formulated to define specific activities, all of which will aim to motivate and inspire, and to celebrate cheese internationally. CC



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