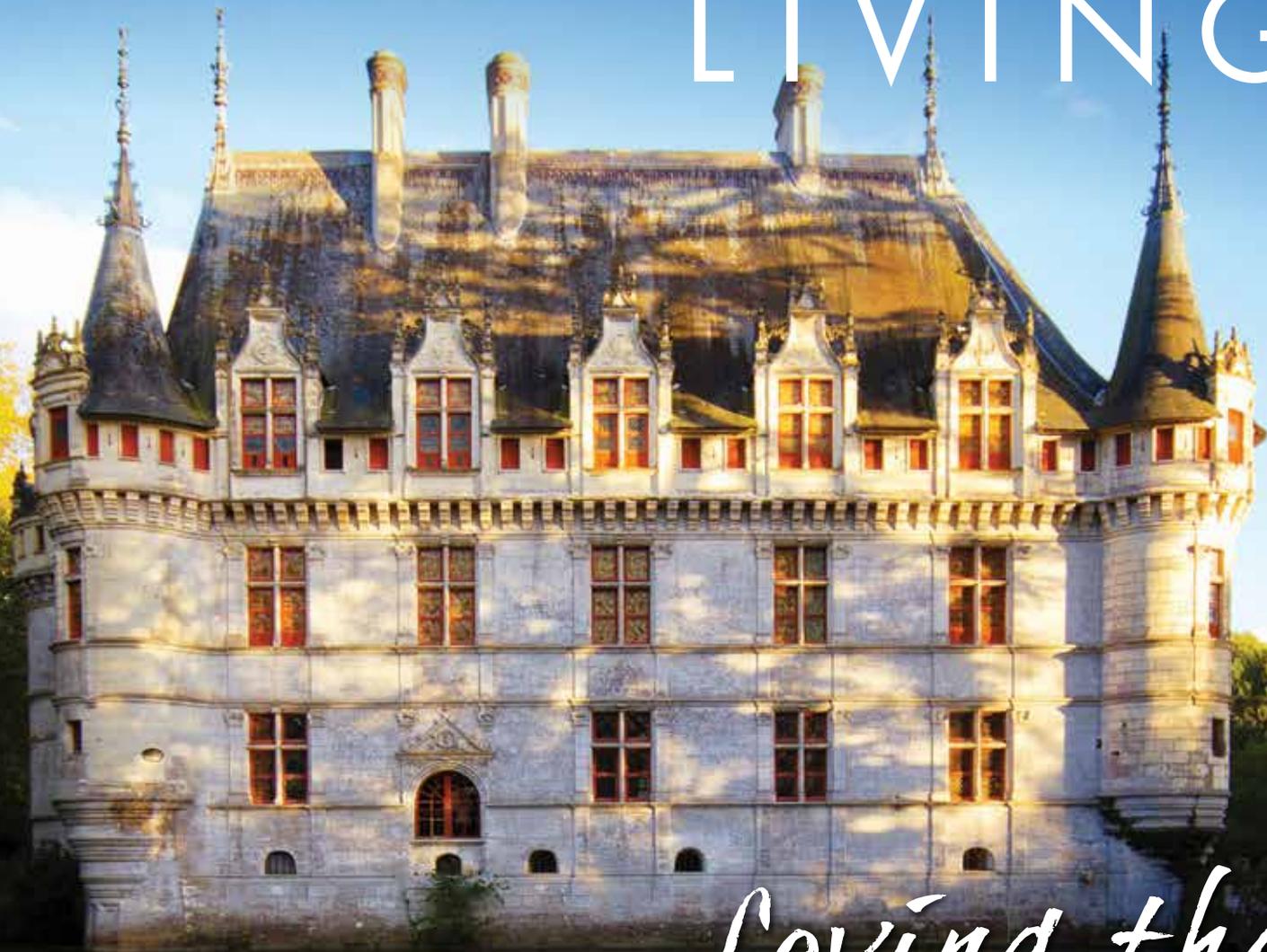


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A FAMILY AFFAIR:

# Mons Fromager -Affineur



LOUISE REYNOLDS meets one of the  
Mons brothers artisan *fromagers*.

**L** Laurent Mons never tires of tasting cheese. And that's just as well because he is head of training, distribution and marketing for his family's successful cheese business.

"I taste a lot of cheeses," Laurent says happily, surveying the products at Fromagerie Mons in Halles Diderot, Roanne. "I am very curious about cheese. For me tasting a cheese I don't know is an opportunity to discover something new; a new flavour or texture that I haven't experienced before."

He's not alone. As a student at Ecole des Trois Ponts, a residential French language and culture immersion school, I've been getting stuck into some fine cheeses myself. Cheese tasting, and a mini-lesson on ingredients and origins, is a highlight of the nightly meal. My own cheese curiosity aroused, I've come here to learn more about where those delicious cheeses come from.

I discover some are made by Laurent's brother Hervé, who is one of the country's top cheesemakers. In 2000 he was awarded the title of Meilleur Ouvrier de France (Best Artisan Craftsman of France), an award bestowed only on France's best exponents of their craft. Hervé became the first cheesemaker to earn the title and today remains one of only 25 cheesemakers to hold the honour. >>

The Mons brothers now front the successful family business that started back in the 1960s when their parents toured markets around Roanne, selling cheeses from a van. Today Mons employs 90 people, purchases and distributes cheese from between 120 and 150 partner farms, and exports to more than 100 countries, including Australia.

“Our family has always specialised in what we call in France traditional produce,” Laurent explains. “It’s a niche that represents around 10 to 12 per cent of French cheese.”

Hervé produces around a dozen Mons cheeses. Other cheeses marketed under the Mons brand are purchased from farmers who maintain the same traditional methods. Cheese production has two main stages. The first is the turning of milk into curds. The second stage, the all-important *affinage* or maturing stage, sees curds become cheese.

During this maturing phase, cheeses are cellared and closely monitored. Under Hervé’s constant watch, temperature, humidity and the length of maturation are all carefully controlled. This expert *affinage* ensures each of a cheese’s unique characteristics, including texture, aroma, flavour and rind, is revealed to its full effect.

“I don’t like to call our cheeses the best because the idea of ‘best’ is subjective. We aim to make cheese that is different.”

With up to 200 different types of cheeses being matured at any one time, a special cellar is needed. In 2007 the Mons family purchased the Tunnel de la Collonge, a disused, century-old railway tunnel. The 200-square-metre tunnel was repurposed as the perfect cheese-maturing cellar.

“This *affinage* process makes our cheeses different,” Laurent says. “I don’t like to call our cheeses the best because the idea of ‘best’ is subjective. We aim to make cheese that is different.”

Far from jealously guarding their traditional methods from potential rivals, the Mons brothers share their techniques with cheesemakers from around the world. In 2001 they opened a training centre, Académie Opus Caseus, where professionals, and the >>



## Mons Fromager’s Cheese Tart

### INGREDIENTS

1 sheet (250g) shortcrust pastry  
3 eggs  
200g pouring cream  
200g full-fat milk  
100g Comté cheese, finely grated  
200g soft goat cheese  
Pinch of salt  
Mixed peppercorns, freshly ground  
Nutmeg, grated

### METHOD

1. Preheat oven to 150°C for 10 minutes.
2. Grease a 26cm loose-based tart tin, roll out pastry to fit tin and line tin with the pastry.
3. Mix remaining ingredients in a food processor for 2 minutes at maximum speed.
4. Pour onto uncooked pastry.
5. Bake for 1 hour and 15 minutes.
6. Remove tart from tin and return to oven for 15 minutes.
7. Turn off oven and allow tart to cool in the oven before serving.





occasional cheese-loving hobbyist, get hands-on training at making, ageing and commercialising cheeses under Laurent's guidance. But studying and replicating the Mons techniques are two very different things.

"The techniques we use here to make cheeses are not really transferable. Here someone can learn a technique or a method but will need to adapt it for their own conditions," Laurent says. "In other regions you don't have the same milk, the same animals or the same climate. So even with the same methods of production you won't get exactly the same results."

Seeing someone else successfully adapt the Mons techniques to produce a great cheese makes Laurent happy. "The best reward for me is receiving an email or a photo from someone who has trained here saying 'Voilà Laurent, I did it. Look at my cheese!'"

And with any luck he might have something new to taste. ♣



### AVOIDING A FROMAGE FAUX PAS

There are some strict rules about how you should cut and serve cheese. Get it wrong and your French hosts and fellow guests may think you very rude. So here are a couple of tips to help you avoid embarrassment:

#### 1. Never mix cheeses

It's considered bad manners to allow cheeses to mix on a plate, not only due to different tastes but also because they can be ruined.

"Each cheese has an odour and texture that are a bit different," Laurent explains. "The flavour and experience of eating the cheese might be spoiled by allowing the different cheeses to mix."

When preparing a cheese platter, provide a clean knife for each different cheese to help your guests avoid mixing them. When you serve yourself, take care to keep the platter neat and never cut different cheeses with the same knife.

#### 2. Cut cheese like a cake

The way a cheese is cut is important, particularly for round or wedge-shaped cheeses. The centre of a round cheese is the ripest; basically, it's the best bit. It should be shared. When cutting yourself a slice of cheese, cut it from the interior to the exterior, as you would cut a slice from a round cake. That way everyone gets to share the nicest part.

But if you cut across the centre of a round cheese or take the point off a triangular cheese, *quelle horreur!* You will be taking all the good stuff and making yourself look greedy.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Mons Fromager-Affineur ([mons-fromages.com/en](http://mons-fromages.com/en)) is in Saint-Haon-le-Châtel near Roanne, about 90 minutes west of Lyon. Mons cheeses are distributed in Australia by the Smelly Cheese Shop in Adelaide ([smellycheese.com.au](http://smellycheese.com.au)).

Ecole des Trois Ponts ([3ponts.edu](http://3ponts.edu)) offers a week-long French and gourmet excursions course combining French lessons and visits to some of the region's artisan food producers. The program includes a visit to Mons Fromagerie for cheese tasting and a lesson on pairing cheese with wine.



### IMAGES & CREDIT

Pages 28-33: Mons Fromager, both images of the brothers in the cheese cellar © Mons Fromager • cheese images © Louise Reynolds

