

Richmond Hill cafe & larder

CHEESE NOTES

Saint Marcellin

(pronounced: san mahr-se-LAHN)

Cow's milk uncooked, unpressed surface ripened

Rhône-Alps, France

Why put a French cheese in an Italian offer you may well be asking. In the past we have been able to source stunning hand crafted, fresh style cheeses from the alpine valleys of the Piedmont and Val d' Aosta. Due to continuing issues though, primarily seemingly automatic quarantine by AQIS (Australian Quarantine Inspection Service), producers/exporters rarely want to take the risk of exporting these cheeses to Australia. So we have chosen a cheese from the other side of the mountains that displays similar flavours and characteristics to some of the Italian surface-ripened cheeses.

St. Marcellin hails from the region of Dauphinè, which stretches east from the Rhône Valley to Italy. Traditionally, St. Marcellin was made of goat's milk and came from the northeast département of the region called Isère. Within the département of Isère, there is a mountain region called Vercors, which stretches between Diois in the south and Grenoble in the north. St. Marcellin, the town that gives this cheese its name, is 20 kilometres north from Voiron on the bank of Isère River. The Vercors region is rich in cheese traditions.

Like a lot of French cheeses, the origins of St. Marcellin are a mystery; however, it has been written about since 1445. The legend goes that the noble of the area, Dauphin Louis, was wolf hunting when he found himself under threat from a bear. Two woodcutters heard his cry for help and came to his assistance. They took Dauphin to their hut and there they gave him all that they had, a small amount of cheese similar to the modern day St. Marcellin. As a display of his gratitude, Dauphin set up a charity that still exists to this day. When he became Louis XI of France he had St. Marcellin served at the Louvre & Plessis-lez-Tours. In the town of St. Marcellin itself, there was (and hopefully still is) the Fromagerie La Petite Ferme, which Patrick Rance wrote about in his book, French Cheese. It was there that he tasted true farmhouse made St. Marcellin cheeses that 5 or 6 local producers would bring in for the proprietors every week, the experience proving to be somewhat of a taste revelation for Rance.

Nowadays virtually all St. Marcellin are made from cow's milk. It is a difficult cheese to categorise (i.e. fresh, washed rind, etc) as it displays characteristics of a couple of different types. Made by using a process of high lactic fermentation (a process that uses little or no rennet and more starter cultures or acid). It has the typical flavours of lactic cheese; a slightly sour, clotted cream flavour with a very creamy texture. As this cheese ripens it becomes more and more gooey. The terracotta dish that it comes in makes it easy to handle in its oozy stage. The smaller size makes this cheese more challenging to ripen; however, as it ages it will become stronger and soupier in texture. When it reaches this stage, St Marcellin is amazing served with fresh strawberries dipped into it. The surface of this cheese will pick up natural microflora in the air and will sometimes result in the development of a thin rind. It is an ivory to light straw colour and has a satin smooth texture on the palate. St. Marcellin has a gentle nutty sourness with aromas of pasture and foliage; it would be excellent with light reds or floral light whites such as Alsatian wines.