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Sylvia Vabre, *Le Sacre du Roquefort: L'Emergence d'une industrie agroalimentaire fin XVIII siècle-1925*. Rennes and Tours: Presses universitaires de Rennes and Presses universitaires François-Rabelais de Tours, 2015. 582 pp. Maps, documents, photographs, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. 24.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-7535-3557-2.

Review by Kolleen M. Guy, University of Texas at San Antonio.

This book is the story of how to control decay. Cheese, after all, much like wine or ham, is rotting. How to control the flora that invades and transforms so that the rotting milk, grapes, or meat is edible and healthy, not to mention tasty, remains a challenge even in our world of industrialized food systems. Distancing the flora and the diligent fauna, such as the cheese mites essential to the French cheese Mimolette, from the consumer further complicates production, distribution, and marketing. It is this story of production, distribution, and marketing this decay—in the form of that distinctive creamy, veined cheese called Roquefort—that is at the heart of this exhaustively researched study by Sylvie Vabre from the Université de Toulouse-Jean Jaurès.

In many ways, cheese (with its distinctive smells) is found in a historical record largely shaped by urban attitudes toward rural populations. And that attitude, until the turn of the twentieth century, was largely a negative one. Until the early twentieth century, most cheese produced was destined to be consumed by the rural populations of France. With the exception of a few “noble” or bourgeois cheeses—such as Cantal and Roquefort—which found their way onto chic tables, most cheeses were not distinguished and certainly France had yet to earn a distinctive reputation for cheese production. Those who tended herds of goats and cows and made cheeses appear in the historical record as brutish peasants yet to be made into Frenchmen and women. Cheese was the food of these peasants, herdsmen, woodsmen, and other “savage” people who verged on the animal condition. Cheese, in this way, sat at that juncture between barbarism and civilization.

Even those “noble” cheeses were seen in literature dating back to the Renaissance as a source of imbalance between body and soul. Literature suggested a lack of temperance and propriety among those that produced and consumed them. Cheese took on the “dark and bilious destiny fermented in peasant blood.”[1] The fact that the cursed cheese was shaped by the supposedly filthy hands of ignoble women—the wives of rural savages and the earthy, sensual daughters of Eve—was a cause for concern, particularly among Church fathers. Medical literature sometimes saw “dead foods” or those born from putrefaction as generating smut or excrement. Cheese was seen, in this configuration, as the cold excrement of milk. Milk, on the other hand, was considered a variant of water, the origin of existence, and linked to the vital water—blood—and to life. Cheese was life grown old.

Vabre outlines how gastronomy and the tastes of new elite of Enlightenment slowly began to create a category of “noble cheeses” with a taste profile that assured inclusion on chic tables. Those blue-green veins streaking that soft white mass came to be seen as “a victory of knowledge over nature, the triumph of reason”(p. 79). As the nineteenth century unfolded, scientists turned their attention to the mechanism of transforming milk into cheese and began chipping away at some of the received prejudice. These same

scientific findings became the basis for the emergence of an entire cheese industry that was poised to meet the growing demands of urban-based consumers for regional products by 1900.

It is that industry and, particularly, the uniting of artisans, peasants, commercial houses, and ambitious entrepreneurs into The Société des Caves Réunies de Roquefort that is really the heart of this monograph. Vabre narrative hinges on her ability to trace successfully the transformation of markets and unfolding of changes in production in an agro-industry from the mid-nineteenth century onward. This is hardly a straightforward task. For the historian to be successful, she or he needs to draw on a wide-array of archival materials at the local, regional, and national level, weaving these findings with private business records to try to piece together both an agricultural, as well as an industrial narrative. Vabre, for example, must not only discuss the challenges of milk provisioning with attention to animal husbandry, but she also needs to understand the techniques of cheese production and their transformation when natural grottos and caves were replaced by controlled man-made facilities. She does so brilliantly. Her command of the archival material is impressive. What this provides the reader is a fascinating tale of the regional insertion of a market economy where a division of labor develops between farm and caves under the direction of a wholesaler or *négociant*. While for some this might recall the proto-industrial story of textiles, Vabre makes a convincing case that the cheese industry retained a more balanced and synergistic relationship between milk/cheese producer and wholesaler.

One of the best chapters of this five-hundred-plus-page monograph is “Itinéraires marchands,” a chapter that echoes the title of an excellent book by the late Thierry Nadau.<sup>[2]</sup> Vabre, like Nadau before her, demonstrates how viable “niche” markets for quality products were during the late nineteenth century. These niche producers, like Société, were intimately connected with small-scale agriculture (the kind of agriculture that economic historians like to label “backward”). As Vabre shows, they were also connected with consumer through their sales staff who promoted Roquefort throughout France. Her maps offer a visual illustration of how central the new rail networks were in the diffusion of Roquefort throughout the national territory. These are supported by an excellent analysis of how those representing Société struggled to resist the homogenization of taste and pressure to reduce prices that was so common in democratized food markets. With the rise of mass retail chains, like Félix Potin, that pressure was considerable. Resistance by diversification of market outlets and development of the Société brand turned out to be a long-term winning strategy.

It was a strategy that consumers responded to with a growing hunger at the turn of the century. This hunger was for a stable, consistent quality product or the “surchoix” cheeses. Here, technology takes a leading role in both supply and demand. Higher quality milk combined with new production techniques pioneered after the mid-century allowed a more consistent quality product. New refrigeration technology assured that the maturing and ripening of cheese was controlled. And, of course, refrigeration assured that the quality of the product was not lost in the distribution process. Production and distribution losses diminished while consumer demand for “surchoix” Roquefort soared to over 50 percent of all sales in the 1890s. One of France’s “noble” cheeses found a decidedly diverse consumer base in France and increasingly abroad.

With the technological transformation of this agricultural product came the accusations of fraud and questions of what constitutes a “natural” cheese. These turn-of-the-century debates have been well-documented by historians like Alessandro Stanziani.<sup>[3]</sup> Roquefort was not immune to the local, national, and international battles that occupied French producers of prestigious agricultural goods in these years. Much like prestige wine producers, those in Roquefort were able to take advantage of a cultural and political climate that elevated products of the land to essential elements of the *patrie*. As Vabre concludes at the end of this sweeping narrative, France might have been firmly a republic in these years, but the French people were ready to step up with legislation to protect “the king of cheeses” (p. 488).

Vabre offers a brief epilogue to take the story further into the twentieth century and past the 1925 AOC designations. It is clear, however, that for the author the story is one of consolidation of earlier accomplishments rather than any new directions for the industry or Société. I was convinced that this was a wise choice. For those interested in the broader shifts in the French cheese industry after 1914, they can still rely on the sweeping overview provided by Claire Delfosse.[4] With the integration of production, consumption, as well as distribution, Vabre's work stands as a model for those interested in how to approach the study of the business of agriculture.

## NOTES

[1] Piero Camporesi, *The Anatomy of the Senses: Natural Symbols in Medieval and Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), p. 42.

[2] Thierry Nadau, *Itinéraires marchands du goût moderne: Produits alimentaires et modernisation rurale en France et en Allemagne (1870-1940)*, Textes posthumes rassemblés et édités par Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel et Sandrine Kott (Paris: Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2005).

[3] Alessandro Stanziani, *Historie de la qualité alimentaire, XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2005).

[4] Claire Delfosse, *La France fromagère (1850-1990)* (Lyon: Editions La Boutique de l'Histoire, Mondes ruraux contemporains, 2007).

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