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Pierre Boisard, *Camembert: A National Myth* (California Studies in Food and Culture, 4) Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003. xiii +254 pp. \$29.95 (hb) ISBN 0-520-22550-3.

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It would be hard to drive on a major French roadway without noticing the ubiquitous signs displaying products of the *terroir* or enticing drivers to stop in yet another small town for a unique taste of the local culinary savoir-faire.[1] Pick up a French guidebook or a tourist brochure and you are sure to find a reference to a local culinary delight or regional product. We are invited to sample a true, authentic France through cheese, wine, or the foods served at a village festival. The vogue for products of the *terroir* and the France of regions progressively increased in 1980s and 1990s. It was in the midst of this wave of popular constructions of *terroir* that Pierre Boisard conducted his research and wrote *Camembert: A National Myth*. A survey of French consumers by the Institut français pour la nutrition captured this moment, documenting a sharp rise in interest in products of the *terroir* and a demand for increased availability at the local grocery store or supermarket. Interest in *produits du terroir*, as the survey indicated, was closely linked to tourism; those interviewed for the survey reported acquiring an interest in regional products during a vacation or trip. Culinary tourism to taste and experience the *terroir* is quite lucrative. The survey concluded that the French attach several meanings to products with claims to *terroir*: traditional, artisanal production of superior quality, an “authentic” product with deep roots in France’s past, and a pleasurable, convivial experience.[2] This extraordinary relationship between food and history, gastronomy and memory has played a role in making food, as historian Pascal Ory has concluded, “one of the distinctive ingredients, if not the distinctive ingredient, of French identity.”[3]

Cheese, as Pierre Boisard reminds us, has a special place in French memory. After all, one of France’s most legendary statesmen, Charles De Gaulle, famously made reference to the nation’s diversity of cheeses when attempting to explain to Winston Churchill the challenges in governing the country. More recently on this side of the Atlantic, American conservatives have ridiculed the nation’s cheese eating habits, employing “Cheese Eating Surrender Monkeys” as an epithet.[4] There is a strong identification of France with its cheeses both inside and outside of the hexagon. Boisard, from the Centre d’Etude de l’Emploi, has turned his considerable research experience in workplace sociology to an examination of the historic evolution of this national identification. The result is a highly readable, nostalgic account of the rise and demise of a cheese. For Boisard, this is more than an esoteric food lover’s tale. Camembert is a mirror of France, with a story that parallels that of the nation. And, just as the cheese has strayed from its rural past, its *terroir*, its identity, so too, he seems to suggest, have the French people. Camembert is a “witness to history, a messenger from the past to remind the French of their peasant origins” (p. 224).

This book is best categorized as an ethnohistory, with its origins in fieldwork conducted by the author in the 1980s.[5] (In fairness to the author, however, he does not bill it as one.) As such, it bears many of the shortcomings of the genre. Like other recent ethnohistories of the food and wine industry, it lacks a historian’s realization that the past creates the present. Instead, the ethnographer is entrapped in nostalgia, lamenting the past and a mythic golden age. After much field work--often with those on the losing end of globalization or those buffeted by the vagaries of capitalism--the ethnographer briefly glances into the archives and confirms our fall from grace.[6] Boisard’s work is a bit more sophisticated and subtle, yet nonetheless his historical scholarship remains mired in his memories and a nostalgia for a perfect cheese that, in many ways, never existed. If the cheese he mourns is a myth, is it possible that so, too, is the nation that he imagines it represents?

Camembert has never been more than a plebian cheese. There is a reason that the French government did not concede the coveted *appellation d’origine contrôlée* (AOC) for the cheese until 1983 (and, even then, reluctantly). Almost from its emergence in the early nineteenth century, Camembert has been a highly commercialized cheese manufactured by a few large producers. As Boisard carefully chronicles, producers quickly embraced new technologies, new distribution methods, and new methods of organizing milk provisioning. Farmers eagerly

welcomed the security of regular milk purchasing by industrial producers and abandoned the complicated and uncertain task of cheese-making. Standardization, homogenization, and mass production allowed Norman manufacturers to meet the growing demands of consumers in France's urban markets. Prosperity seemed guaranteed. Yet, as early as the 1870s, Camembert cheese-making "overflowed the borders of Normandy" and cheese factories were established in Brittany, the Loire valley, the Nord, Eure, and Charentes. Normandy's milk suppliers and cheese makers had competition. By the 1900s, a few cheese aficionados tried to argue that there was a "vintage" or exclusive area for Camembert and that one could distinguish "counterfeits" from other regions. Much like France's wine regions, manufacturers in Camembert amassed their power in a syndicate to lobby for exclusive rights to use regional or local names for their produce and garner government protection through emerging AOC laws.

Manufacturers and milkmaids were staking a claim to *terroir*. Boisard's narrative makes clear, however, that there was not much *terre* to be found in *terroir*. Manufacturers were laying claims to rural roots even as they sterilized and standardized. "The rural life sells," he chides, "only when it has been properly sanitized" (p. 73). Cheese makers eagerly studied and quickly employed new scientific findings on the role of microorganisms in the dairy industry. Gradually from the 1900s to the 1930s, traditional--and sometimes unpredictable--production methods were abandoned as a new faith developed in carefully controlled laboratory molds and sterile factories. Widespread adaptation of a laboratory manufactured mold modified the cheese's maturation speed and taste. In the process, Camembert became an impeccable white. Camembert seemed risk free, wrapped in waxed paper and protected in a wooden box originally used for pharmaceutical products. Brand names, not place of origin, seemed to guarantee quality. Consumers, like their cheese, were protected from the "less appetizing aspects inherent in the cheese's rural origins" (p. 73).

Unlike Augeron producers of Livarot and Pont l'Évêque who clung to the artisanal model of production, manufacturers of Camembert took a gamble on modern, mass production and distribution. The gamble paid off. By the 1920s, Camembert was France's most popular cheese. But, as historian Martin Bruegel has demonstrated, the transition to eating sterilized foods was not an easy one for the French.[7] How did the consumer come to embrace sterilized, boxed cheeses? Was it simply a matter of price as increased competition brought about a sharp decline that placed Camembert within the working-class budget? Was it consumer concerns about food purity as elongated supply chains distanced them from the land and a provisioning comfort zone? Or could it have been a gradual, creeping Puritanism, as Boisard seems to argue, that banished earthy odors and sensual pleasures from both the bedroom and the dining room table (p. 220)? Perhaps the answer is a combination of these possibilities. Bruegel's work suggests, however, that World War I was a critical turning point in consumer acceptance of industrial foods. Wartime turned the army into a school of taste. Troops were educated to eat not only canned food but Camembert cheese. The Normandy producers jockeyed to become purveyors of cheese to the French military, supplanting Gruyère as the cheese of choice in the trenches. If there was a turning point for the Camembert industry, it was surely the Great War. As Boisard points out, soldiers brought home their taste for Camembert and it became enmeshed in the collective memory of the war.

Camembert continued its ascent in the French pantheon of cheese preferences. Yet it bore little resemblance to the cheese that was produced only a century earlier. It also had little connection to the Norman countryside as the continued rebuffing of syndicate demands for AOC protection attests. That is until the fateful pilgrimage of an earnest American tourist in search of the mythic *terroir*. It was the voyage of one Joseph Knirim to the tomb of Madame Harel in March of 1926 that bolstered the image of a link between region and cheese. Knirim joined a surprising number of American tourists who set out in the 1920s and 1930s as gastronomic tourists.[8] This obscure physician professed to have been cured of intestinal ailments with a diet of Camembert cheese and had, subsequently, come to Normandy to pay homage to the inventor, a humble Norman farmer's wife by the name of Marie Harel. The doctor hoped to lay a wreath, adorned with French and American flags, on his heroine's tomb and leave a donation to raise a statue in her memory. Astonished local officials scurried about in a desperate search to find where the largely forgotten Marie might be buried. Inhabitants of the town of Camembert finally pointed officials to a tiny cemetery in Champosoult, where there was, indeed, a tomb for Marie.

Camembert was well-known prior to this auspicious visit, but Boisard argues that it was Knirim who "made the figure of Marie Harel known to the French." The "Knirim effect," as Boisard calls it, "is not measured in kilograms of Camembert sold but rather by its impact on the sphere of the imagination, in the realm of symbolism" (p. 5).

What Knirim had done in the popular imagination was two-fold: ground the cheese spatially in rural Normandy and establish the notion that its distinctiveness resulted from the *savoir faire* of a few producers. This myth of origin, Boisard argues, “gave Camembert a unique status that set it apart from other cheeses and made it stand out” (p.5). With the Norman farmer’s wife drawing international interest, local historians, Harel descendants, and regional oral traditions would layer a narrative that combined fact and fiction to link the cheese with the region and a larger patriotic narrative of the birth of modern France. Most versions of the story follow a basic line: a recusant priest fleeing Brie briefly sought refuge with the Harel family; the priest shared the secret of cheese production with Marie; she, then, became a keeper of a secret tradition that was threatened with extinction; these secrets she dutifully passed down to her children who, the myth continued, supplied this fruit of Normandy to the entire nation.

Boisard carefully unpacks this mythology. We discover that the heroine had nothing to do with the invention of Camembert and probably only briefly visited the village that gives the cheese its name. (She was, in all likelihood however, a savvy cheese-making entrepreneur who managed to commercialize her own production with great success.) This, however, makes the story even more intriguing. Why did people embrace a story that, even at the time of invention, was widely believed to be false? Boisard argues convincingly that the answer lies within the context of an anxious France of the 1920s. There was much about this story of a peaceful Norman dairywoman that was reassuring. Camembert, the result of one peasant woman’s labor, offered material proof of the permanence of French rural values, the hope that rural manufacturing would preserve the social balance. “With high-quality technology and excellence in gastronomy,” Boisard argues, “France could dream of triumphantly reconciling old and new, peasant and city dweller, agriculture and industry” (p. 21). Equally important, for anxious regionally-based manufacturers facing competition at home and abroad the origins myth gave them a vehicle for building a case with the French public for protection of their cheese. This was the cheese of the *poilus*, the gift of an eternal rural France, the collective patrimony of the French people. This lobbying effort failed to produce results, despite continued efforts, until the 1980s. Even then, Boisard states, the word “Camembert is neither a commercial brand name nor a geographical description, nor has it ever been properly defined” (p. 177). It would seem, then, that the French rejected the elevation of Camembert to the ranks of culinary patrimony. This leaves me to wonder, then, what makes this cheese as opposed to Cantal or Roquefort or other more distinguished cheeses the most “odorous emblem of France” (p. xi)? After all, the rigid, sterilized cheese that we find in the refrigerator case at Carrefour has little earthy, French odor left. Is it perhaps precisely this lack of grounding in the region, this lack of connection to the local that makes Camembert “France’s national cheese” (p. 221)? Was Camembert like De Gaulle “chosen by the French virtually by acclamation” (p. xi)? José Bové might have an opinion on this. Certainly today Camembert remains a French favorite with 60 percent of French households consuming at least two of the creamy cheeses per week. This translates to a staggering 190,000 tons of Camembert. Does this quantity alone qualify Camembert as the national cheese?

Boisard, a self-proclaimed devotee of the cheese, clearly believes it to be so. His curious mixture of history and nostalgia, celebration and despair, blinds him to the fact that he is lamenting the rise and demise of an artisanal cheese that, according to his own narrative, probably never existed. What he offers is, thus, not a definitive history of a product, but the portrait of national anxieties. His book reflects a modern France anxious to find a balance between tradition and modernity, a single European market and regional economic interests, earthy odors and what Boisard sees as American-style hygienic homogenization. It is perhaps this last point--anxiety about French identity in the face of Americanization--that most shapes Boisard’s work. The problem is that, by his own account, the supposed demise of his cherished cheese had little to do with pressure for alimentary hygiene from countries in northern Europe and the United States. It may be true that cheese “constantly reminds us of the body, of sensual pleasures, of sexual fulfillment” (p.220). But it wasn’t the imposition of a “hidden Puritanism” from an outside world that sterilized his beloved cheese.

Contrary to what Boisard contends, the story of France’s national icon begins and ends not with Americans but with Frenchmen and women. These are Frenchmen and women eager to embrace a culinary chauvinism when it suits them, and eager to consume “high-tech and ultra clean Camembert” and other foods from “the world of the bar code” (p. 225). Boisard may be correct that France is on the precipice, in danger of losing its rich culinary tradition. The story of Camembert suggests, however, that American cultural imperialism may not be as lethal to that identity as the homogenizing effects of decidedly French food processing companies who exploit regional and local food cultures to reap the ever-growing profits from the notion of *terroir*.

NOTES

[1] Thanks to Patrick Murphey and the graduate students in my Food & Drink seminar at the University of Texas at San Antonio for sharing their ideas and insights.

[2] The result of this survey reported in Veronique Meurgues and Alain Petitjean, eds., *Les produits du terroir: Europe, stratégie, analyse financière* 2 vols. (Paris: Eurostaf, 1996).

[3] Pascal Ory, "Gastronomy" in Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, Vol II, Traditions (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 444.

[4] For those not familiar with American pop culture, conservatives picked this line up from the Fox Network show "The Simpsons." The decision to repeat this line in the context of the build-up to the Iraq war tells us much about American images of the French.

[5] The original field research that launched this study appeared in Pierre Boisard and M.-T. Letablier-Zelter, "Liens locaux de production et standards industriels: Le Cas du Camembert" in *Dossier du Recherche* 15 (Paris: Centre d'Etude et de l'Emploi, 1986).

[6] For more on the shortcomings of ethnohistory, see my review "Wine, Ethnography, and French History" in *Culture & Agriculture* vol. 26, no. 1-2 (2004).

[7] See Martin Bruegel, "How the French Learned to Eat Canned Food, 1809-1930s" in Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton, eds., *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 113-130.

[8] The importance of this transnational gastronomic tourism should not be understated. It is striking how many Americans set off in these years to pay homage to the origins of food products. Knirim, himself, continued on to Czechoslovakia to pay homage to the originator of a beer that was also said to cure stomach ailments. There are other examples of this "food origins" tourism. At about the same time, for example, members of the Avocado Society of California, went on a pilgrimage to find the owner of what was believed to be the original Fuerte avocado tree whose budwood helped populate southern California landscape with avocado groves. A startled Mexican owner found himself surrounded by earnest Americans trying to award him with a plaque. As Boisard points out, these transnational interactions could have enormous ramifications. See, for example, Harvey Levenstein, *We'll Always have Paris: American Tourists in France since 1930* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

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