

Hervé Mons – natural born caveman

Near the town of Ambierle, in central France, is a railway tunnel full of cheese. The man in charge doesn't know much about trains, but has few equals when it comes to curds and whey. Irina Fainberg caught up with Hervé Mons on his first visit to Australia in February.

Fromager and affineur **Hervé Mons** was born into a cheese family. His parents, **Hubert** and **Rolande**, began selling cheese at market stalls in and around Roanne, in central France, in 1964.

Growing up around good cheese made career choice easy for young Hervé. With his parents' business booming, Hervé travelled to Paris to train with some of the city's best cheesemongers and in the early 1980s opened the first Mons shop in Roanne city centre.

Over the next three decades, Hervé and younger brother **Laurent** built up the business to include several retail and concept stores, maturing cellars in Saint-Haon-le-Châtel, a dairy training centre, a cheesemaking arm and a railway tunnel converted into a home for 190 different types of cheese.

Today, the Mons 'empire' extends to markets in 25 countries in Europe, North America, Middle East and Asia. In Australia, Hervé's products are distributed through Adelaide's Say Cheese.

Wine leads the way

In February, Hervé visited Australia for the first time, to judge the Sydney Royal Cheese and Dairy Produce Show and to present cheese masterclasses around the country.

His first impressions of the dairy industry 'down under' have been overwhelmingly positive, although they do betray a sweet tooth.



"At the Sydney Show, I was a little surprised. I tasted some very good blues, a great washed rind, some good goats' cheese," Hervé said.

"My biggest surprise was ice-cream, gelato and yogurt. Wow! It was very nice. I gave a perfect score to a yogurt gelato. It was very, very good."

Hervé found Aussie cheeses produced on the industrial scale to be as good as their French counterparts. But the artisanal, farmhouse cheeses had a long way to go in terms of inventiveness and variety.

"In my opinion, the Australian cheese industry will develop in a way similar to the wine industry. The wines made in Australia

40 years ago weren't great. Today, it's a completely different story. We tasted some Penfolds the other day and wow, it's come a long way!

"I'm sure the cheese will go the same way as the wine. It will take a long time, because transforming the industry takes experience and happens step by step. But I'm sure it'll happen."

Blue mould cheeses are leading the way in Australia, Hervé said, with interesting styles and cheesemakers not afraid of a little experimenting. Imitating European cheeses is a good start, but cheesemakers would really hit their stride when they embrace Australia's unique 'terroir', or natural environment, and develop their own styles of cheeses, unique to their region of Australia, Hervé said.

The man in the middle

The conservative attitude of many cheesemakers is both helping and harming their businesses. True, many consumers are cautious when it comes to cheese. But there are many others who are curious and hungry for new food experiences. The great news is that their number is growing.

How does the cheese industry capture this emerging market? Enter the affineur, a middle man, equal parts cheesemaker and marketer.

In France, affineurs are a respected and integral part of the cheese industry. In Australia, the profession does not exist. Yet, anyway.