

# A French masterpiece from goat-farm co-op

The luscious Ovalie Cendrée, a bloomy-rind goat cheese from France, is yet another little masterpiece from affineur Hervé Mons.

Produced by a goat-farm cooperative in the Poitou-Charentes, in western France, Ovalie Cendrée is new to the Mons line. The cooperative sends the cheese to Mons when it is a mere 10 days old; he ripens it for another 10 days — that's the affineur's job — then ships it to the U.S. But because of the mountains of paperwork along the way, it can be another month before this delicate cheese

lands at Bay Area shops.

Given its arduous journey, the cheese I sampled was in astonishingly good shape — better than many California goat cheeses of the same type. These bloomy-rind disks are super finicky; they need a constant cold temperature in transit and enough humidity to keep them from drying out.

Mons' representative Laure Dubouloz told me that her company packs the cheeses in wooden crates and then overwraps the crates with breathable plastic, creat-

ing a sort of miniature aging cave en route. Then it's up to the retailer to continue the pampering.

Fashioned in an unusual oval shape (hence the name) and weighing 6 to 8 ounces, Ovalie resembles no other cheese I know.

Cendrée means ashed, a reference to the slate-gray powder — it's food-grade charcoal — that is sprinkled over the young cheese. The ash raises the surface pH, which encourages the white mold to grow. My Ovalie had plentiful splotches of fuzzy gray mold, too, so there was

quite the microbial community on this cheese.

Those surface denizens help ripen the cheese, causing it to soften from the outside in. I knew the Ovalie I

purchased was ready to eat because it yielded to gentle pressure and that moldy exterior drooped a bit, both signs that the inside was softening.

Beneath the thin, damp rind was a chalk-white paste with an inviting mushroom scent. Still firm at the core, but almost molten near the surface, the interior offered a spectrum of textures.

I typically eat cheese without bread, but Ovalie wanted some. The rind had no hint of ammonia, so I ate that, too. The salting was

spot on, and the cheese finished with bright acidity. All in all, a benchmark for the style.

Look for Ovalie Cendrée at Cheese Plus in San Francisco, Whole Foods Potrero (San Francisco) and Mill Valley, and Pasta Shop in Oakland and Berkeley.

A 6-year-old Etude Pinot Noir made a great companion.

**Benefit tasting:** Please join me from 3 to 6 p.m. April 27 at North Coast Brewing Co. in Fort Bragg for a cheese and beer tasting to benefit the Mendocino Music Festival. Brewmaster Mark Ruedrich and I will collaborate on the pairings. Tickets (\$40) include the tasting.



Craig Lee / Special to The Chronicle

**Ovalie Cendrée, a 6- to 8-ounce oval disk of goat cheese from a farm co-op in France, is sprinkled with food-grade charcoal and develops a bloomy rind.**