

400 cheeses: Are they losing their flavor?

By Matthew Saltmarsh

PARIS: Philippe Alléosse's cellar in Paris is an Aladdin's cave for lovers of French cheese.

His temperature- and humidity-controlled subterranean storage rooms in the 17th Arrondissement are packed with carefully aged varieties, among them Brin d'Amour from Corsica, Bethmale from the Pyrénées and Bleu de Gex from Haut-Jura. He knows just when to add a dash of water or Chablis to the rind and when the product should finally be released to the public.

But Alléosse, premier maître artisan fromager affineur, or a master of the art of aging cheese, fears that he is one of a dying breed.

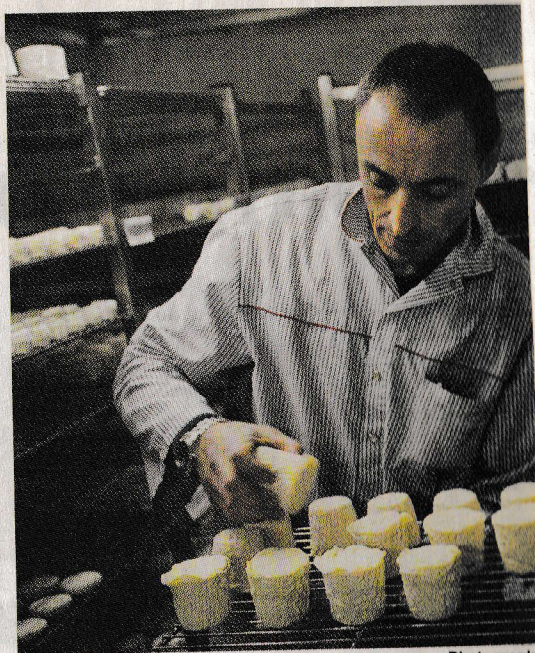
He is worried that industrial processes — from sourcing through production and distribution — are squeezing small farmers and threatening to deny consumers the choice, complexity and quality of a product that is considered a luxury in many countries but a staple on French tables.

The giant producers counter that such complaints are sour grapes and that traditionalists are scared of losing market share to new techniques, resentful of their profit. Consumers, they say, are happy with the products available and prices charged.

The debate seems to go to the heart of an acutely French dilemma: whether to embrace globalization, or to fight to preserve heritage. For now, the tussle is centered on the process of pasteurization and the effect that it is having on the product and the market.

"Raw milk is the battlefield," said Pierre Boisard, a sociologist who is author of "Camembert: A National Myth." One mass producer in particular, Lactalis, has altered the landscape through its production of traditional products using industrial methods, he said.

"It's a problem," he added. "It hurts the brands of the traditional producers" who have "legitimate



Photographs



pasteurized cheeses are allowed to stay longer on supermarket shelves.

In thermizing its milk, Lactalis sacrificed its Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée, or AOC, status, a label supplied by a government body to verify that a product has achieved certain standards. But the industrial giant subsequently led a fight to win back the label, arguing that pasteurized cheese

EU and Canada to study a broad free trade pact

By Ian Austen

OTTAWA: Since the first free-trade agreement between the United States and Canada, 20 years ago this month, the economy in Canada has become increasingly integrated with that of the United States.

On Friday, with the U.S. economy in disarray and its global leadership in question, Canada was to take what appeared to be a step back from that relationship.

After a meeting in Quebec City, Canada's prime minister, Stephen Harper, and President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, who holds the rotating presidency of the European Union, are expected to sign an agreement for preliminary negotiations meant to create a trade pact between Canada and Europe that would be even more sweeping than the North American Free Trade Agreement.

A person who is familiar with the government's plan, but who did not want to be identified as upstaging an announcement by two heads of state, said the agreement would begin "a scoping exercise leading to the launch of talks."

It follows the release Thursday of a 192-page study by the Canadian and European governments that concludes that such a deal could increase exports from Canada to Europe by 20.6 percent by 2014.

Thomas d'Aquino, the chief executive and president of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, a lobbying group, said that a deal for Canada and Europe could, in the long run, also involve the United States.

"One of the arguments I'll be sensitive to from Americans is, 'Now that we're in trouble, you're turning your

domestic product in 1990 and rose above 65 percent 10 years later. (It has generally been just under that peak for most of this decade.)

The preliminary trade deal suggested by the study, which was released by the European Union but not by Canada, exceeds Nafta in some respects.

If adopted it would minimize barriers in services, include sales to government, open up the air travel market and allow skilled Canadians and Europeans to work across borders without visas.

D'Aquino said that Canada's experience with the first trade agreement and Nafta meant that most Canadian governments and businesses would welcome a pact with Europe. Any deal would also require provincial approval on many issues.

Jean Charest, the premier of Quebec, has been among the most prominent proponents for a deal. Europe's enthusiasm, it seems, is largely a product of Sarkozy, who has a long relationship with the Montreal financier Paul Desmarais Sr.

Through the Power Corporation of Canada, Desmarais and his family have investments in several prominent European companies, including the French oil and gas company Total and GDF Suez, a major natural gas and water utility operator.

The preliminary work leading up to Friday's announcement has passed relatively unnoticed in Canada.

But the 1988 trade deal and, to a lesser extent Nafta, were polarizing issues. Maude Barlow, the chairwoman of the Council of Canadians, a group that was formed in part to protest the first trade talks with the United States, acknowledged that there might be less public