



Fresh Produce from an Irish Farmer

Sandy McKeen brings the special taste of raw milk and tender lamb straight from Normandy to the Paris streets

by Joe Ray

Almost nobody would expect to find an Irish cheese-maker successfully working in France. And yet three days a week, Sandy McKeen brings his fresh sheep, goat and cow milk cheeses to the street markets of Paris.

He also sells raw-milk yogurts, butters and crème fraîche, as well as free-range lamb, chicken, duck, and guinea fowl produced by him and others near his farm, La Bergerie du Mesnil, in Normandy's Sainte Scolasse sur Sarthe.

How does he convince Parisians that a foreigner can make good cheese? By mixing hard work, good salesmanship and a bit of specialization. "It's hard to find really fresh cheese in Paris – most cheesemongers in town buy their cheese

in Rungis," he says, referring to the giant wholesale food market outside of the city. With the made-that-morning goat milk cheese that he brings straight from his farm, he eliminates middlemen and has something few cheesemongers can procure.

Still, persuading Parisian visitors to his stands to become regular customers is a step-by-step process. "A pot of cheese in the display takes a lot of work to sell," says McKeen. "For months, a woman will buy six eggs a week. Then it might be six eggs and some cheese. Breaking peoples' routine isn't easy."

"If I shout like the vegetable guy in front of my stand, it doesn't work. But sometimes I'll give people a little present," he says, slipping a nub of goat

cheese or a pot of yogurt into a client's bag. "They always want to pay for it, but instead, I ask them to tell me what they think the next time they come by." His products are up to the challenge. Fresh cheese is rare and different in Paris markets – a succulent throwback to older days. His soft, fresh cheeses are made with unpasteurized milk that gives them a lactic acidity – a slightly sour and nearly sweet flavor that can be paired with tomatoes and olive oil, eaten with fruit or, better, all on its own.

McKeen also sells lamb steaks that are meltingly tender, yet retain both a taste of the grass the lamb was raised on and the animal's slightly punchy flavor that its mass-market equivalent would be missing.

"People don't seem to reflect on what they put in their bodies"

"My parents farmed in Drogheda, just north of Dublin, on a classic farm with grains and animals, but I didn't see a future in it," he says. "Last year, milk was at an all-time high and now it's at six- or seven-year old prices – you're a slave to the system. I wanted to be independent, but I still wanted to be a farmer." So in 1999, he packed up and left Ireland, eventually partnering with a Dutch farmer in Normandy before buying him out in 2002.

It's still tough going. Sandy gets up at 3 am to milk his animals and then drive to Paris. Selling in the markets is not easy either. "You talk to the old guys here at the market and they say the number of customers went down when supermarkets started showing up in Paris around the first Gulf war, then again when the euro was introduced," he says, adding that he's seen a decline in the number of customers in the past year alone.

PHOTOS: JB NUSSELL

"You look at supermarket trolleys and people don't seem to reflect on what they put in their bodies," he laments. "If someone asks for two large rolls of goat cheese, I can't put them in a bag and charge 12€, even though that happens every day in Parisian supermarkets." Instead, McKeen charges 4€ each.

"It's a lot of work to produce good raw milk and good cheese," he concludes, "but I like to meet clients and I try to make nice stuff that's not expensive." ■

**Sandy McKeen,
La Bergerie du Mesnil**

Marché Président Wilson

Av. du Pdt Wilson between rue Debrousse and Place d'Iéna, 75016

Metro: Alma-Marceau, Iéna
Wednesday, 9 am – 2 pm and Saturday, 9 am – 2 pm

Marché Point du Jour

Av. de Versailles from rue Le Marois to rue Gudrin, 75016

Metro: Porte de Saint-Cloud
Sunday, 9 am – 2 pm

