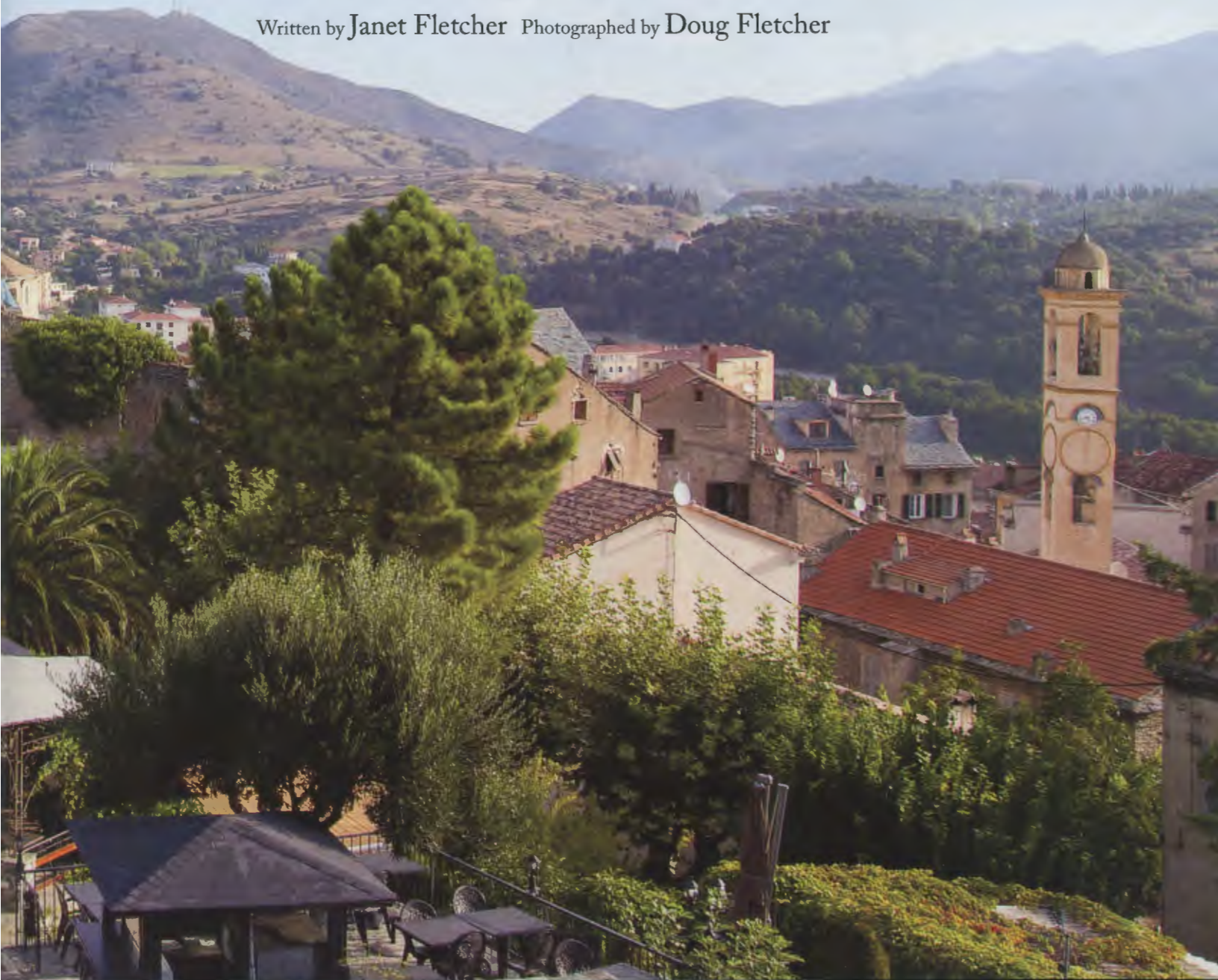


Only in. CORSICA

*This rugged French island in the Mediterranean boasts
terrain and tastes you won't find anywhere else*

Written by Janet Fletcher Photographed by Doug Fletcher



PREVIOUS PAGE: The ancient town of Corte with its imposing citadel is located in the mountainous interior of Corsica.

Shortly before visiting Corsica, I learned that everything I knew about cheese there was wrong. Seana Doughty delivered this news. Doughty, a Northern California cheesemaker (she owns Bleating Heart creamery in Marin County), had recently returned from this mountainous French island in the Mediterranean and was regaling me with stories of her vacation, including a litany of all the fabulous cheeses she had eaten. Then she dropped the bombshell: “You know,” said Doughty, “that Corsicans do not eat Brin d’Amour.”

Was she kidding? I had thought of Brin d’Amour as Corsica’s signature cheese, like Cheddar is to Somerset or Gouda to Holland. The sheep’s milk cheese with a cloak of dried herbs—said to be wild herbs from the *maquis*, or Corsican scrubland—had long been a

personal favorite. I wanted to see and smell the *maquis*, and Doughty’s enthusiasm for the island persuaded me to book a ticket. Maybe she had misunderstood someone’s French. Maybe Corsicans didn’t eat Brin d’Amour every day.



Before Summer

“Cheese with herbs on the outside is not eaten here,” confirmed Catherine Le Beschu, a few days into my Corsican trip last spring. The executive director of Casgiu Casanu, an organization that protects and promotes Corsican farmstead cheese, Le Beschu had the credentials to convince me. “The first time I ever saw Brin d’Amour was at Rungis,” she added, referring to the Paris wholesale market. She spoke in French, but there was no mistaking the meaning of her message: Brin d’Amour—a modern cheese made in a creamery near Bastia and shipped to the French mainland—is all but unknown in Corsica.

Pas de problème. As I discovered in a two-week tour of this astonishingly beautiful place, Corsicans make plenty of captivating goat’s and sheep’s milk cheeses, most of which never leave the island. From the ricotta-like *Brocciu* to the bloomy-rind *Bastelicaccia* to the pressed sheep’s milk *tommes* made near Sartène, Corsica’s cheeses have pride of place on its table. Dining around the island, in restaurants both haute and humble, I was never offered any cheese that wasn’t Corsican.

Visiting the island in late spring is ideal: the weather is mild, tourism minimal, and sheep are still on the job. Sheep milking stops in July, typically, which means that *Brocciu* production takes a break, too. Visit in May and you can catch the annual *Foire du Fromage Fermier* (*Fiera di u Casgiu*, in Corsican), a weekend cheese festival on a tented fairground in Venaco, near Corte. Staged by Casgiu Casanu, the fair brings consumers face-to-face with Corsica’s dwindling cadre of farmstead, raw-milk cheese producers for direct sales, a cheese competition, and cheesemaking demonstrations.

On the Saturday night of the fair, I met Le Beschu and cheesemaker Mireille Armbruster for dinner in Corte, a university town. Over *cannelloni au Brocciu* (pasta tubes filled with *Brocciu* and Swiss chard) and a bottle of Corsican red wine, they filled my ear about the challenges facing tradition-minded producers. Casgiu Casanu has already fought, and won, some battles against European Union regulations that prohibited wooden shelving and natural caves for cheese aging.

Land Grab

But the larger, more intractable issues relate to the growth of tourism on the island and the resulting development pressure on rural landowners. Two-thirds of Corsica is steeply mountainous, leaving too little suitable land for the competing demands. Landowners fear that leasing to shepherds could encumber their property; if bureaucrats deem land agricultural, it can’t be sold for development.

At the fair on Sunday, a pretty, raven-haired shepherd who heard I was a journalist approached me with tears in her eyes. Her landlord of 15 years was refusing to renew her lease, and she could find no place to move her flock of 150 sheep. Sadly, her dilemma is common. Corsica still has about 700 shepherds—almost half of them also cheesemakers—but there were twice as many 30 years ago, Le Beschu says.

Venaco, the small mountain village that hosts the fair, sits at the foot of Monte Cardo, one of the highest peaks in Corsica. Until perhaps 70 years ago, shepherds still led their



OPPOSITE PAGE: Hiking the transhumance trail; **INSET:** A door carving of *The Moors Head*, the emblem of Corsica. **THIS PAGE, TOP:** A *Filetta brocciu*, served with jam; **ABOVE:** *Brebis Corses* graze in the pasture at A *Filetta*; **BELOW:** A shepherd displays his cheese at the *Foire*, a weekend cheese festival in Venaco



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: A shepherd's stone hut; "migliacciu," a Corsican pastry made with cheese; Mireille Ambruster selling her husband's sheep's milk cheeses. **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Corsican cheeses formed in baskets; warm, fresh brocciu at A Filetta; cheesemaker at the festival La Foire du Fromage fermier



flocks up this 8,000-foot mountain to summer pastures in the annual rite known as transhumance. With mountain guide Claude Ceccarelli and about a dozen others, I retraced those steps on the Sunday morning of the fair, following the steep migratory path bordered with wild lily-of-the-valley, nepitella, and asphodel.

We passed several of the primitive stone huts (u stazzu), some in ruins, where shepherds slept and made their cheeses. They lived in the mountains from May until September, alone in these dark, tomb-like structures, which were thick walled and windowless to keep them cool on searing days. One of the huts still bears a shepherd's plaintive cry, carved in the stone: *Il vaut mieux mourir ailleurs que vivre en cet enfer*. ("Better to die elsewhere than to live in this hell.")

After reaching the little chapel of San Eliseo, at about 4,500 feet, we began our descent. Partway down, Ceccarelli paused in a shady spot and pulled a baguette and Corsican saucisson from his backpack. Bread and sausage never tasted so good.

Later, inside the fairground tents, I found plenty to feed my hike-fueled appetite: *migliacciole* and *migliacciu* (sweet pancakes filled with *fromage frais*); *falculelli* (sweet pancakes made with Brocciu and baked on chestnut leaves); and *ambrocciade* (a Brocciu-filled pastry). Vendors selling honey, beeswax candles, wine, and jam vied for attention with the real draw: 34 of the island's shepherds

sampling and selling their handiwork, from delicate bloomy-rind disks with silky pastes to rustic, thick-crust wheels with deep crevices.

Modern Measures

Corsica's loss of shepherds matters beyond the realm of artisan cheese, as I learned on a visit to A Filetta, the island's fifth largest producer. In a modern facility about an hour south of Bastia, A Filetta owner Michel Mattei makes excellent bloomy- and washed-rind cheeses from pasteurized goat's and sheep's milk. His own flock of 500 *brebis Corse*, the small native sheep breed, doesn't begin to meet his needs, and he can no longer find enough milk on the island. In an irony not lost on him, Mattei now purchases milk from Sardinia and France's Aveyron region—ironic because, for decades, Aveyron producers bought sheep's milk for their Roquefort in Corsica. Some even made their cheese on the island, shipping the wheels back to the mainland for required aging in the caves at Combalou.

I watched some of Mattei's employees—all women—make *fromage de brebis*, a small washed-rind sheep's milk cheese matured for about three weeks. Afterward, using 500 liters of whey drained from that morning's curd, they made brocciu, Corsica's only cheese protected with an AOC (*appellation d'origine contrôlée*) certification. Regulations allow the addition of up to 25 percent milk (Mattei uses less, about 10 percent) and





When delicate curds began floating to the top, the women shut off the heat and rapidly began scooping the steaming fluff into waiting baskets.

require that the cooking vessel be heated over a direct flame, in keeping with traditional methods.

I asked Mattei if any Corsican shepherds still made brocciu over a wood fire. “Only for journalists,” he replied.

When delicate curds began floating to the top, the women shut off the heat and rapidly began scooping the steaming fluff into waiting baskets. “The best place to taste brocciu is at the creamery before it’s refrigerated,” said Mattei, handing me a spoon. Fragile and sweet, the brocciu dissolved on my tongue like soft custard. The women, still scooping curds, rattled off the many ways they use this fresh cheese at home: topped with jam, or with sugar and chestnut liqueur (a Corsican specialty); in an omelet with mint; in stuffed zucchini or tomatoes; in beignets; or in *fiadone*, a custard baked with lemon zest.



Corsican Handcraft

A few days later, I watched Armbruster’s husband, Jean-André Mameli, make cheese on a more intimate scale, at his small sheep dairy near Figari. For my benefit, he delayed the morning milking two hours, until 7 a.m.



Cheeses of Corsica

To sample the gamut of Corsican cheeses, you must go to Corsica. Few are exported. Casgiu Casanu, an organization that promotes them, has defined the five most traditional styles. Each type may be made with sheep’s milk, goat’s milk, or a combination of the two.

Sartinesi: A firm, pressed, aged wheel characteristic of the region around Sartène

Bastelicaccia: A semisoft bloomy-rind cheese matured for 20 to 30 days; from the area in and around the village of Bastelicaccia, near Ajaccio

Venachese: A semisoft washed-rind cheese aged about 45 days; from the area around the town of Venaco

Niulinu: Similar to Venachese but typically saltier, stronger, and more mature; typical of the Niolu region around Albertacce

Calinzana: A salty, pungent semisoft cheese matured four to 12 months; aged wheels become highly piquant

Where to Stay

All venues listed here are *chambres d'hôte*, which means that breakfast is included and another meal (usually dinner) is offered by pre-arrangement.

Maison Borghetti
TALASANI
(+33) 04 95 38 50 87
maisonborghetti.com

A lovingly restored 18th-century house in a remote mountain village with three charming bedrooms. One of the two English-speaking proprietors is a former chef. About 45 minutes south of the Bastia airport.

A Mandria
MURATO
(+33) 04 95 37 66 16
location-corse-amandria.com

A restored stone *bergerie* (shepherd's residence) with three antiques-filled bedrooms. Located in the mountains, but with easy access to Saint Florent, Cap Corse, and the well-regarded Campo di Monte restaurant. Proprietor Pascale Flori is a gracious host and accomplished baker whose pastries make breakfast memorable.

La Villa Guidi
PILA-CANALE
Avenue Jérôme Guarnieri
(+33) 04 95 24 22 64
lavillaguidi.com

The warm and hospitable Habani family operates this residence in the mountains about 45 minutes from Ajaccio. Four stylish rooms, a small swimming pool, and delightful breakfasts on the terrace.

Where to Eat

Kissing Pigs Wine Bar
BONIFACIO
15 Quai Banda del Ferro
(+33) 04 95 73 56 09

Excellent charcuterie, local cheeses, omelette *au brocciu*, composed salads, and a superb wine list in a relaxed and rustic venue offering good value. Highly recommended.

Terra Cotta
PROPRIANO
31 avenue Napoléon
(+33) 04 95 74 23 80

Modern Corsican seafood cuisine in a tiny restaurant with a larger covered terrace facing the sea. Specialties include grilled turbot fillet with Buddha's hand and lemon foam; monkfish skewers with fregola risotto and shellfish jus.

Restaurant Le Frère
CASALABRIVA
Domaine Kiesale
(+33) 04 95 24 36 30
restaurantlefrere.com

Proprietor Henri Abbatucci is the brother (*le frère*) of celebrated vintner Jean-Charles Abbatucci, whose winery is nearby. Another brother, Jacques, raises a rare breed of cattle, whose meat is showcased on the menu. Start with *cannelloni au brocciu* (ricotta-stuffed cannelloni in tomato sauce) or *tarte aux blettes* (savory Swiss chard tart), then go for the veal or beef grilled over a wood fire, served with a bottle of Domaine Comte Abbatucci wine.

L'Orriu
PORTO-VECCHIO
5, cours Napoléon
(+33) 04 95 70 26 21
orriu.com

A well-curated range of Corsican wines, cheeses, charcuterie, *torrone*, and preserves stocks this retail shop. The adjacent wine bar is a popular spot for sampling the best Corsican wines with a simple meal.





Eighteen at a time, the 130 ewes scrambled up a ramp into the milking parlor and lowered their necks into a slot, eager for the snack in the trough. City slicker that I am, I wanted to know why, if these sheep were all the same breed, their udders varied so much. “They’re like women,” grunted Mameli, dressed in military camouflage pants and cap. “Some are big, some are small.”

An hour later, in his petite and pristine white-tiled creamery, Mameli combined the raw evening milk and the morning milk. After setting some of the latter aside for brocciu, he heated the vat to 25°C (77°F). Adding lamb rennet but no culture, he had curd developing in 40 minutes.

“If you’re adding culture, you need to know why,” said Mameli, a third-generation cheesemaker. (“At least,” he added.)

Curd cutting, molding, draining, and flipping unfolded with smooth, practiced motions. By late morning, Mameli had 44 moist sheep cheeses that would, after salting and a month of curing, develop the bloomy rind characteristic of Bastelicaccia-style cheese (see “Cheeses of Corsica,” p. 85). Most likely, he would sell them in Ajaccio, at the Saturday market.

“Would you like a little glass of wine?” Mameli asked around 11 a.m., as we waited for the whey to heat for the brocciu. He poured himself and my husband a glass and made me a concoction of homemade fig syrup diluted with water. When the whey reached 50°C (122°F), he threw in some salt, “by eye.” At 60°C (140°F), he added the reserved milk. At about 75°C (167°F), the mixture began to flocculate, or make curds. He turned off the flame and began scooping gently. He could heat the mixture a little

more, he explained, and get a higher yield, but the result would be more granular, less delicate. “I’d rather have less but better,” Mameli said. “I make brocciu for eating. If you want it for cooking, buy industrial.” When it comes to Brocciu, he added, “everybody is a connoisseur here.” **C**

Janet Fletcher is an award-winning staff food writer at the San Francisco Chronicle and the author of numerous books on cheese.



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Woman people-watching in Bonifacio; pastry filled with brocciu; taking the milk’s temperature for brocciu making; a washed-rind cheese from A Filetta. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** The lighthouse at Propriano



PHOTO: LEFT, Allard One/Shutterstock/Images