Food as Place: The Cheese Caves of Faribault

Today many people are very disconnected from the land on which they live. They may commute to work, spend most of their free time indoors, and buy food that is imported from all over the world and sold at large-scale industrial grocery stores. A food cycle that includes local production and consumption is a natural way to build connection to place. In interviewing Laura Fromen, the manager at Faribault’s store, The Cheese Cave, I was reminded of the importance place-based food traditions. In a particularly revealing part of our conversation, Laura mentioned that St. Pete’s Blue Cheese is one of The Cheese Cave’s most popular cheeses. She said that this would be unheard of in just about any other cheese shop, since blue cheese is so distinctive. She attributes its popularity at the Cheese Cave to customers’ desire to support and consume a local food tradition.¹ There is a series of sandstone caves in Faribault where this blue cheese is produced and has been produced for many decades. The cheese produced in these caves creates a sense of regional identity by connecting people to their local land-based history.

The cheeses are not simply produced in a facility that happens to be in Faribault, it is the specificities of the land itself that allows for the production of the particular cheeses. The uniqueness of the cheeses comes from the particular characteristics of the caves. This process takes something from the land and makes the place part of the consumers. The cheeses from the cheese caves of Faribault are part of a larger global movement to consider food as place. While this was not directly discussed in my interview with Laura Fromen, the evidence from our

¹ Laura Fromen (Manager at The Cheese Cave, Faribault, MN). Interview by Megan Hafner, Kai Knutson, Sally Morgridge and Emily Schickli. April 22, 2011.
conversation and my research into the caves, leads me to believe that these cheeses have a strong taste of place.

While the cheese produced in the Faribault caves is not considered an ethnic food by the local producers or consumers, it constructs a sense of group identity that is similar to the way ethnic foods are often thought of as constructing or contextualizing a group. In the first chapter of *Culinary Tourism*, Lucy Long associates ethnicity with otherness, describing it as a “dynamic cultural construct…more usefully thought of as a process of contextualization rather than an actual objective state.”2 This is a particularly helpful definition when considering the importance of local food and place-based identity. Although it is most common to contextualize food by particular ethnic food traditions, Long reminds us that ethnicity is just one form of contextualization. Another way of contextualizing food is through regional identity. This is an especially dynamic form of contextualization because it can connect a local product with its environment, the local culture and its consumers. And just as Long points out in regards to ethnicity, regional identity is also a process rather than an objective state. This is especially important to take into consideration when examining food traditions in the United States, since they are often compared with regional food traditions from Europe that are comparatively older and more static food traditions.

Cheese produced in the cheese caves of Faribault connects people to the unique place in which they live and puts them in context with other people who also share that familiar land-based heritage. Faribault Dairy is proud that it is the only U.S. cheese maker to maintain a tradition of curing and aging its blue cheese exclusively in caves.3 It is the combination of the cave’s ideal climate and the knowledge of the producer that creates a “legendary” cheese.4 The history of the caves as sites for production goes back to around 1857 when they were started as a brewery by the

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Fleckenstein brothers. The caves were the first in a long series of aging sandstone caves used in the greater area.\(^5\) The brewery was very successful and by 1879 it was the 25\(^{th}\) largest brewery in the state. The brewery was shut down during prohibition and the caves lay dormant until Felix Frederickson bought them in 1936 and started Treasure Cave, Inc., the United States’ first commercial producer of blue cheese.\(^6\) That tradition continues today with the Faribault Dairy Company, which still produces award-winning blue cheeses. The history of the caves themselves is imbued in the cheeses.

Not only does the cheese connect consumers with the local caves themselves and keeps their money local, it also connects consumers with past generations of Faribault who were involved in working in the caves. Laura Fromen mentioned how most people in Faribault either worked in the caves themselves or know someone who worked in the caves.\(^7\) The caves offer a physical presence that connects people across generations. The most vivid example of this is that there are still some people who insist on picking up their cheese from the caves themselves, even though there is now Laura’s storefront in town that directly sells that exact cheese.\(^8\) The store is owned by the same people who control the caves, and was meant to take some of the burden off the cave workers by allowing them to keep working rather than stopping to help customers with cheese orders at the front desk. This desire to return to the site of the caves underscores the importance of them for consumers.

This idea of place endowing food with particular properties, which are specific to that particular location, is not new. This is most often discussed in the context of wine under the name

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\(^4\) Amablu. “Tour the Caves.” 2009
\(^5\) Hoverson, Doug. _Land of Amber Waters: The History of Brewing in Minnesota_. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. pg.223
\(^6\) Hoverson, Doug. _Land of Amber Waters: The History of Brewing in Minnesota_, 223.
\(^7\) Laura Fromen (Manager at The Cheese Cave, Faribault, MN). Interview by Megan Hafner, Kai Knutson, Sally Morgridge and Emily Schickli. April 22, 2011.
“Terroir,” a French word with no literal English translation, but associated with words including “of the earth,” “regional,” and “soil.” The French have a long history of connecting food and beverage to place, and while terroir is most often discussed in terms of the characteristics of the place endowing wine with certain flavors and odors, the ideas behind the term are applicable to many products. There has also been a movement to translate the notion of terroir to the United States. Heather Paxson, an anthropologist, has written on American Artisanal cheesemakers’ and observed that since the 1980s there has been a movement to create an American notion of terroir that differs from the European definition. The pride in, and association with, a particular location is evident on the St. Pete’s Cheese wheels themselves, which say prominently: “from the caves of Faribault.”

With the industrialization of American agriculture and a farm bill that favors large-scale commodity production, it is often hard to foster strong associations between where food is grown, made and purchased. The primary way that the United States has tried to link the global and local components of the food system is through “values-based labels,” like “fair trade.” But this mostly only addresses single components of production, rather than integrating the greater food system. An example of a system that takes a more comprehensive view, is the French system of appellation d’origine contrôlée (AOC). This system protects place-based food and drinks, which demonstrate unique links to particular regions. This system acts as a counter to the placelessness of our present homogenizing food systems.

8 Laura Fromen (Manager at The Cheese Cave, Faribault, MN). Interview by Megan Hafner, Kai Knutson, Sally Morgridge and Emily Schickli. April 22, 2011.
With the system of AOC, not only is local production secure, but customers are provided with information on the place, process and production of the product.\textsuperscript{12} The Cheese Cave provides a similar environment for Faribault consumers. Many Faribault residents know where the caves are, and if they come to the storefront in town, they can see a video on the history, process and current production of cheeses in the local caves. Then they can buy those exact cheeses from people they know are directly connected to the production of the cheeses themselves.

The concept of \textit{terroir} is a powerful cultural concept that is not directly translatable for Americans. Even regional food production has a very different flavor in France where some regions have produced the same products for hundreds of years.\textsuperscript{13} While the United States has a much more heterogeneous food culture and comparatively recent regional food traditions, I believe that it is possible to foster a similar type of system in the United States. Conversations about local food have recently become more commonplace and there has been a large increase in the number of farmers’ markets around the country (less than 100 in the 1970s to over 4,385 now).\textsuperscript{14} This excitement surrounding local eating and building a stronger connection to food, lays the foundation for a United States version of \textit{terroir}. With this social groundwork, it seems that there is a strong possibility that the United States could develop a food system that emphasizes connection between food and place that will include goals like sustainability and regionality.

In speaking with Laura Fromen and other employees at the Cheese Cave I was reminded of the strong regional pride that is already present in the United States. I think that consumers will benefit from linking the environmental and cultural elements that contribute to a locally grown/produced food or drink, to that product itself. Whether the product has a history that goes

\textsuperscript{12} Trubek, Amy B., Sarah Bowen. “Creating the taste of place…French?” 24.
\textsuperscript{13} Trubek, Amy B., Sarah Bowen. “Creating the taste of place…French?” 27.
back centuries or only a few decades, rooting a product in a place helps connect people with the uniqueness of their particular environment.
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http://www.faribaultdairy.com/tourthecaves/


http://www.faribault.com/content/caves-provide-hibernation-cheeses


http://www.ama.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/facts.htm

Laura Fromen (Manager at The Cheese Cave, Faribault, MN). Interview by Megan Hafner, Kai Knutson, Sally Morgridge and Emily Schickli. April 22, 2011.