

IT WASN'T ANY OLD CHEESE WE WERE HUNTING FOR. OCTOBER, 2013 – BACK IN COPENHAGEN THE DAYS WERE DARKENING, WHILE IN SARDINIA THE SUN BEAT DOWN ON WRINKLING FIGS AND RIPE GRAPES. WITH MY TWO PARTNERS, BEN – A CHEF AND MY COLLEAGUE AT NORDIC FOOD LAB – AND OUR FILM-MAKER FRIEND ANDREAS, I HAD EMBARKED ON A THREE-YEAR RESEARCH ADVENTURE TO INVESTIGATE THE GASTRONOMIC DIVERSITY OF INSECTS AROUND THE WORLD. SARDINIA WAS OUR FIRST FIELD SITE – THE HOME OF A DELICACY BOTH REVEILED AND CELEBRATED, ANCIENT AND NOW TECHNICALLY ILLEGAL. WE HAD HEARD VAGUELY OF CASU MARZU, THE LARVAE-RIPENED “ROTTEN CHEESE” OF THIS MEDITERRANEAN ISLE, BUT FIRM INFORMATION HAD PROVEN ELUSIVE AND IT SEEMED IMPOSSIBLE TO PROCURE ONE FROM AFAR. OUR INITIAL GOAL WAS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW THE CHEESE WAS MADE AND ENJOYED, AS A SHORT TEST-RUN FOR LONGER ENTOMOPHAGICAL EXPEDITIONS TO COME, YET OUR PURSUIT DREW US INTO THE BROADER WEB OF ANIMALS AND PLANTS, CULTURE AND LANDSCAPE, THE PEOPLE OF THE ISLAND AND THEIR CONCERNS FOR THE FUTURE, THAT TIGHTLY ENTWINES THIS REMARKABLE CHEESE.

WORDS/PHOTOGRAPHY JOSHUA EVANS

WE ARRIVED IN SENEGHE AFTER DARK, and left the house the following morning before dawn. Our host Antonio Maria Cubadda, the village veterinarian, set out, as he does every morning, to feed his cows. Roberto Flore, a local chef and our guide in Sardinia, picked us up and drove us into the hills, following Antonio Maria through the scrub to his barn. Under the brightening sky we caught our first glimpse of the island. We jumped out of the car as Antonio Maria slid back the barn doors and began spreading hay around the paddock with a pitchfork. We were admiring his cows' auburn coats as the sun broke over the slope, catching the dust sideways and making their hides shine a burnished copper. Known as Sardo-Modicana or Bue Rosso, the breed is managed by a consortium of the same name. A few thousand are raised on the island, and their meat is highly valued for its quality and taste.



FRANCESCO CORRIAS HAS RUDDY CHEEKS, A WINNING smile and a vivid green dairyman's coat. He makes a cheese called *casizolu*, with raw milk from his own cows, a dairy breed called Bruno-Sarda. "Casizolu means 'women's cheese'," Francesco tells us. "You know, 90 per cent of all cheese in Sardegna is made by women." "I milk the cows in the morning, curdle the milk at eight, and cut the curd at nine. I cut it in a cross, always in a cross." The fresh curd was soft, squeaky, grassy and lightly mineral. "I pour in whey from the previous day, and leave it for around eight hours. Then I drain the whey and stretch the curds in hot water to form the cheese." The finished cheeses looked like balls with oblong necks, hanging from the beams in Corrias' *caseificio* (dairy). "I save some of the whey for the next day's cheese, and the rest I give to the pigs." "I will see you later today when you return, and I will show you how I make it." He winked and returned to his cows.

ON THE WAY TO OUR NEXT VISIT, ROBERTO TOOK US on a detour up Monte Ferru, the mountain overlooking Seneghe and the blue horizon beyond. He pulled off the side of the road and gestured at us to hop out. "Look – *finocchietto selvatico*, wild fennel!" The steep slope next to the road was overgrown with aromatic green. We began to gather some. "We call it *fenugu areste* in the Sardo language. And look over there, lavender, and wild asparagus." And further along: "Here is *nebidedda*, or *nepetella*. There too." A kind of catmint. We left the car and walked further on, Roberto pointing out lentisc (*Pistachia lentiscus*) or mastic, a member of the pistachio genus, which is grown for its resin, as well as the strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*), with its distinctive clusters of dimply red fruit. Everywhere tempted us to linger, but we dragged ourselves back to the car and drove a little way under the green canopy. The Defender turned off-road and up a bumpy path, emerging at last on to a ridge with clear vistas in both directions, one facing inland, the other out west towards the sea. Roberto left the jeep teetering dramatically, the front wheels on a rocky ledge. The sun was high.

"This is *elicriso*, a very special herb. It is also called *iscova de Santa Maria*, or *Helichrysum italicum* in Latin." It smelled like curry leaves, but stronger. "And here, this is wild thyme, an important herb in Sardegna. We call it *armidda* in Sardo, or *timo erba barona* in Italian. We use it in grappa. At my restaurant I like to serve it with chocolate and nuts with the cigars at the end of the meal." The air was thick with its pungent aroma – it was growing in rocky crevices across the ridge. "And this one is very strong. *Teucrium marum*." I wasn't familiar with it, but later research revealed it as cat thyme, which some cats go even more crazy for than catnip. "This is the *macchia mediterranea* – the mix of flora particular to this place." Our plant harvest seemed to be disturbing some of the neighbours. Grasshoppers, a mottled grey, hopped just ahead of us along the ridge, briefly giving up their

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camouflage before blending back into the pebbled ground. At a certain point we forgot about plants and just became a bunch of boys hunting bugs. “We will cook them for lunch!” Roberto shouted triumphantly across the ridge.

HEARD THE SHEEP BELLS LONG BEFORE I SAW SIDOE. The sound was how I imagine some divine kaleidoscope must sound when it turns, celestial spheres tumbling into ever new alignments. The barking dog was the only thing that kept me from falling into the bells completely.

“There is an old shepherd’s trick: if one ewe’s lamb dies and another in the flock has newborn twins, take the pelt of the dead babe and put it on one of the twins. If you’re lucky, the bereaved mother will take up the other lamb as her own.”

Isidoro Perria, or Sidoe, as his friends know him, keeps sheep. He works with a breed called Pecora Nera di Arbus, also Sardinian. “My great-grandfather bred them. My grandfather and father were not shepherds, but I returned to it. These sheep – their meat and milk – is superior to those of other breeds. But this means little in a commodity market. They also have better resistance than some other breeds to the bluetongue virus, and better pelts. I prefer the black ones, but my wife and daughter like the white ones, so I keep a few for them.” He cast a quick smile to his daughter Elaide, 15, standing nearby.

When we asked him why he keeps the sheep despite the difficulties of the commodity market, he responded: “It is hard to start... and hard to stop.” He laughs, with a tinge of weariness. “Twenty years ago, 150 sheep could keep a family. Now, the same number is not enough. Input prices are rising, and cheaper lambs are shipped from Albania, but killed and sold in Sardinia. The free market is not helping, but there are also problems with legislation, such as the IGP [Indicazione Geografica Protetta – Protected Geographical Indication].

“In addition to Elaide, I also have a 17-year-old son. This is a tension in the family – we want our children to become professionals and not have this arduous, thankless work, but we also want to keep the tradition, the biodiversity and the genetic resources alive.”

Elaide supports her father’s sentiment. “I would like to continue my father’s work, but maybe it is not my thing, because it’s really hard. But, it is also relaxing,” she says, stroking their sheepdog’s white fur.

“I want the best for my children,” Sidoe concludes, “but I also do not want the knowledge to be lost.”

Is there a way to have both? Ben, Roberto and I discuss this with Sidoe and between ourselves over the course of the day. Antonio Maria seems like an image of what one future could look like: he left Seneghe for an education at a

veterinary college in Parma, and returned with new knowledge and skills to strengthen his community. Could this approach also generate a diversity of expertise – veterinary science, chemistry, microbiology – enhancing the local food consortia and communities of producers through new skills and new energy? Perhaps, in this way, children would not have to choose between education and tradition.

“It is a beautiful idea,” says Roberto, “but it will have to be something that emerges out of the community itself. It cannot be imposed.” It might be supported through subsidies and educational programmes, but it cannot be mandated – many people we spoke to had seen how rarely such top-down approaches to community development had worked.

“I would like to build a small *caseificio* to make my own cheese – if my back gets better,” Sidoe told us. “And I would be happy for my children to be involved with it, if they wanted to be. But for now, I give my milk to the consortium to make into cheese.”

And what about casu marzu – did he eat it? “Well, the first thing you need to know is to be careful of ‘dealers’ of *crema*, a sort of cream cheese they put in jars and pass off as the real deal. If it doesn’t have the worms, it’s not casu marzu.” In a way, the fakes are a testament to its gastronomic value – it is so desired that it generates ersatz versions of itself. Though its legal status could also play a part – sale of the cheese is prohibited by EU and national legislation, and monitored by the centralised Italian food safety authority, and sometimes other regional authorities, for compliance. “Imperialism, bureaucracy, too-big government,” Roberto railed. “Do people die? Is it actually a threat? The alien governors ban what scares them, what they do not know and do not understand. They oppress us because we are different, because we are a minority, by policing our foods and our gastronomic traditions.”

Casu marzu may be the most well known of the cheese-fly cheeses, but similar traditions seem to exist or have existed, however struggling or defunct, around the Mediterranean: *cacie’ punt* in Molise, *formaggio saltarello* in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, *pecorino marçetto* in Abruzzo, and analogues in other Italian provinces; *u casgiu merzu* in Corsica; *trulo sir* in Croatia; and certain specimens of *queso de Cabrales* in the more Atlantic-leaning climes of Asturias, Spain. I wonder what would happen if the EU were to recognise this tradition not as a dismissable anomaly on some peripheral island, but as a robust culture with dozens of versions around the Mediterranean basin, only dying out, or at least becoming harder to see, because of the widespread stigma and legislation that have all but crushed them into the dust.

WE RETURNED TO ROBERTO’S FAMILY’S HOME FOR a late and welcome lunch. His mother set the table outside with wine, olives and bread, while his father lit the grill. Roberto brought over a pecorino with a small but

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conspicuous crater on its surface. “Are you ready to taste the casu marzu?” he asked us, cutting around the cheese’s rim and lifting off the top like a lid.

The inside swam. Tiny cream-coloured larvae animated the exposed surface. They had transformed the hard, aged curd into a creamy, fluffy substance. They had only ever eaten the cheese – they were the cheese, and the cheese was them.

Roberto spread a thin layer onto a piece of waferly *pane carasau*, a type of Sardinian flatbread, and handed a piece to Ben and to me. The taste was strong, long, piquant – similar in flavour and texture, both crumbly and moist, to some blue cheeses, which made sense: the enzymatic breakdown of a cheese’s interior by blue moulds must be similar to what the larvae were doing. But it was also saltier, with a pronounced aftertaste of butter and the strength of the mountain herbs we foraged earlier.

“It doesn’t happen all the time, but when it does, we like it,” Roberto said, smiling.

Roberto diced some Bue Rosso meat for tartare, which he seasoned with casizolu (non-marzu) and some of the wild fennel seeds and other herbs we found earlier. Later, when the

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for the end of a meal, with dense, fleshy dried figs from the family’s tree. This cheese and the casu marzu are both considered to be Sardo Viagra. From their potency one can understand why.

As we lingered over the lunch table, Roberto’s mother repeated her shock at our test with the grasshoppers. “I still can’t believe you ate those insects,” she said with a shudder, spreading some more casu marzu on a piece of *pane carasau*.



fire had burned down and the embers were hot, he and his father grilled slabs of Bue Rosso, rare. Roberto had made the red wine himself. There was sheep ham. Roberto invited us to taste some local bee pollen, in an astonishing array of colours: amber, russet, apricot, coral, violet.

And, in a small pot over the embers with a bit of oil, we cooked our grasshoppers. Their slate carapace bloomed vermilion, and expanded slightly with the heat. They weren’t bad. They certainly weren’t traditional.

After lunch it was time to taste another strong cheese – because, of course, Sardinia does not have just one. *Callu de cabreddu* is a cheese made in the stomach of a kid goat. “It is a kind of proto-cheese,” Roberto told us. After the young goat has fed on the last of its mother’s milk, the kid is slaughtered and every part is used. The stomach is cured and dried and aged with the curd inside, just like any cheese. The result is a pungent, smooth paste, potent and somewhat bitter – perfect

AFTER LUNCH, WE RETURNED TO FRANCESCO’S dairy, where his curd, begun in the morning, was almost ready to stretch and form. He greeted us and took us to his cows to show us the afternoon milking. “The best cheese is in April and May, when all the flowers are blooming, and all the aromas fill the air – the cows eat them and they come into in the milk.”

He lifted the curd, now cultured by lactic acid bacteria, out of the metal drum, drained the remaining whey, placed it in a plastic bucket, poured hot water over it and pounded, folded and kneaded it like dough. At a certain moment he scooped the mass into his hands and pulled it into its shape, like a potter throwing clay on a wheel. Suddenly the surface was smooth and round, and a neck had formed. He sliced off the top and pinched the neck into three corners, his specific mark. Every cheesemaker has their own.

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kilogram – so for these casizolu, maybe around 14 hours. And then I hang them here,” Francesco gestured to the aging casizolu hanging from the beams of the small room. “People used to hang them with straw, but that could have mould – sometimes it gave extra flavour, but also sometimes toxins, so now we use simple plastic nets, which we can also use again. In any case, the shape hasn’t changed.”

“Kids who have never liked cheese will eat Francesco’s cheese,” Roberto told us with a smile.

“And what about this one?” Ben asked, moving towards a casizolu hanging apart from the others.

“Ah, this one is becoming a casu marzu.” The cheese hung slumped in the thin plastic netting, more irregularly shaped than its brethren and darkening to a deep orange. “Sometimes, as the cheese dries and ages, small cracks can form on the surface. If the cheese fly, *Piophilidae casei*, manages to lay its eggs inside, and they hatch and grow, the cheese turns onto a different path.

“Usually I prefer to keep the cheese ‘fresh’, not marzu, or *marcio* as the Italians would say, but if it happens, I keep it and take care of it.” Both of Francesco’s cheeses, fresh and marzu, cost €12 per kilogram, so it seemed to be mainly a question of taste – fresh for those who prefer fresh, and the occasional marzu for those who like it a bit ripier. “I do like the marzu,” said Francesco, “especially with a bit of sweet wine, it is beautiful.”

He poured each of us a small plastic cupful of *mirto*, a Sardinian spirit infused with the dark berries of the myrtle plant (*Myrtus communis*). After a brief pause, Francesco continued, with a conspiratorial glint in his eye. “Sometimes, if I have one marzu and I want another, I will make a small cut in a fresh cheese, and put some of the larvae inside, like I did with this one.” He gestured to the one ripening in the corner.

Ben and I shared a look. “*Salute*,” we said, and raised our cups to Francesco and his cheese.

OUR LAST TRIP OF THE DAY WAS TO TAKE FRANCESCO’S whey to feed the pigs. They sucked and snorted it from the trough as the mauve dusk settled about us.

On our way home, we stopped the car and parked on the side of the road while we harvested prickly pears, and some of the season’s last figs. A horse watched us silently from above. My tongue tingled.

That night, we had a beer at the local bar to debrief on the day. Ben talked to a neighbour about casu marzu. He started to say “As it’s part of your history...” but the older man cut him off: “It’s part of *our* history!” he insisted, indicating himself, Ben and everyone in the room. “Part of the history of humanity!”

THE NEXT MORNING IT WAS TIME FOR A BIT OF cooking. The night before we had decided we would try making a dish with the casu marzu. We settled on gelato, garnished with all the tasty things of the season. Mindful of its illegality, we dubbed it *Il Gelato Clandestino* – The Secret Gelato.

The setting for our illicit culinary venture was a vineyard on the outskirts of town, where some of Roberto’s friends were harvesting grapes. We arrived and had a little forage: prickly pear pads, shorn of their spines, would work well for plates; and there was plenty more wild fennel – the green seeds and tiny yellow flowers would go well as garnish.

Seated among the vines, we planned our gelato. We had two casu marzu: the pecorino from lunch the day before, and the casizolu from Francesco. The latter was still quite young and bitter, while the pecorino was spicy and full, so we opted for the pecorino. Roberto had also brought two honeys we could use to sweeten the gelato: an orange blossom honey, delicate and floral; and a clover honey, full and complex enough to stand up to the powerful cheese. The latter also had a nice bit of poetry, as the clover had given both its nectar to the bees and its flower heads and leaves to the sheep whose milk was then used to make the cheese we were using for the gelato.

First we prepped our garnish: big green table grapes right from the vine, sliced in rounds; the dark red skins of smaller wine grapes, peeled from the flesh; the wild fennel seeds, plucked from the stem. Throughout, the wine-pickers threw us curious looks.

Then we began making the gelato. We lifted some of the most moist part from the middle of the cheese, like the weeping viscera of a small creature, into a metal bowl. Roberto added a touch of milk to loosen it while Ben mixed it all with a fork. We balanced it with some honey, and when the mixture was ready, Antonio Maria provided the freeze: he had brought his tank of liquid nitrogen, which he used to store and transport frozen bull semen, and he had a bit to spare. Liquid nitrogen, that is. He lifted out a small amount in a thin plastic vial, and poured it straight into the metal bowl while Ben whisked for his life. Smoke billowed, traces of the heat being pulled from the inchoate dessert. After administering a second dose, more mad whisking, and more steam, it was ready to serve: a brisk spoon onto the cleaned prickly pear pad, a few slices of sweet white grape, convex, tannic arcs of wine grape skins making tangent, a small scatter of wild fennel seeds, a brief touch of olive oil.

We gave Antonio Maria the first taste. He nodded, looked at us, and proclaimed, “*Buono*.”

The rest we shared with whomever wanted to try. A spontaneous break from the harvest was tacitly agreed.

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Antonio Maria and three other men began singing brightly in dense four-part harmony. Ben, Roberto, Andreas and I shared a toast of *mirto*. Wine was poured.

What began as a simple desire to make a dish to bind together what we had learned turned into something more – it became a way we might offer something to the community who had welcomed us, hosted us, shared with us and taught us how they live. If what we experienced in Sardinia was any indication, it would also prove a good practice for our fieldwork to come.

After a few more visits throughout the day, we returned to Roberto’s house to say goodbye to his family before leaving for the airport. He insisted we take some casu marzu with us, sealed in three small glass jars. We were glad to take some, of course, though also recognised it as a gesture of political resistance to spread this harmless, contraband cheese elsewhere within the EU. I did ask Antonio Maria how dangerous the cheese fly might be, for food-safety people. “There have been a few cases of larvae of *Piophilidae casei* living in the gut, what is known as intestinal myiasis. But none of those came from casu marzu.”

We tossed our bags into the trunk of the car that would

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Danish Red Cow. Roberto told me that the famed Bue Rosso of Sardinia, the breed of Antonio Maria’s auburn herd, may have inherited some of its blood from the ancestors of these Danish Red Cows, brought south by the Vikings hundreds of years before. Everything is already hybrid; everywhere is inoculated; everyone is implicated.

Ben pulled from the fridge half a dozen Danish cheeses he had ordered while we were away. I fished the jars from my bag to resuscitate our charges. They were certainly alive and



take us south to the airport in Cagliari. “Until we meet again,” Roberto said, with a broad smile. It wouldn’t be long, in fact, as a few months later he came to the lab as an intern, and would eventually become head chef. His parents waved as we turned into the beaming afternoon sun.

COPENHAGEN WAS DARK AND POURING RAIN WHEN WE returned. Ben and I went straight to the lab.

When we left for Sardinia, we thought we would encounter a product. Upon returning, what was fresh in our minds was how casu marzu seemed less a product than a phenomenon, an occurrence, and then, a technique. It already had multiple versions – could we extend them? “The history of Italian techniques is a history of adaptation,” Roberto had said. “This cheese should be considered our souvenir of it.”

His words made me think of a Danish biodynamic farmer, Niels Stokholm, who raises an old cattle breed called the

well, springing back and forth and sometimes jumping clear beyond the jar’s glass lip, many times their body length across the stainless steel workbench.

A kind of dark humour pervaded the boat as we impregnated these innocent cheeses with what, in most other places in the EU, is considered a food-safety threat. We had found yet another benefit to being an offshore entity. But, laughing with exhausted delirium, it occurred to me that this experiment was also a kind of practical solidarity – reproducing, remixing, re-sowing the tradition, and perhaps finding some other context in which it might choose to flourish.

Or, at the very least, our boat would be infested with cheese flies.

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