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NEPAL

RISES AGAIN

A deadly earthquake couldn't stop
cheesemakers from Kathmandu
to the Himalayan foothills



It's perhaps the most unlikely spot on earth to taste locally made, French-style cheeses: the rooftop of an apartment building in the Lazimpat neighborhood of Kathmandu. It's April 10, 2015, two weeks before a devastating earthquake will level much of the city and villages throughout this region of Nepal, cause an avalanche on Mount Everest, and result in over 9,000 fatalities.

At the moment, however, I'm sitting with French cheesemaker François Driard in a high-rise urban oasis that seems a million miles from the smog and chaos below, watching the sun set and sipping pastis between bites of his superb tomme. Driard owns Himalayan French Cheese and produces a diverse array of pasteurized cow's and yak's milk cheeses at his two creameries in the foothills of some of the highest mountains in the world.

I've been fascinated with Nepali cheesemaking since researching my book, *Cheese for Dummies* (co-written with **culture** founder Thalassa Skinner), mostly because little has been written about it. Last spring I traveled there to explore both rural cheesemaking traditions and how Kathmandu-area producers such as Driard are modernizing their craft for a feature in the Autumn 2015 issue of **culture**. But nature had other plans. Now it's also a story about how Nepal and its cheesemakers are moving on, one year after the country's deadliest natural disaster on record.

DAIRY AND DAILY LIFE

Nepal—with geography ranging from tropical and subtropical lowlands to the staggering heights of the Himalaya—lies between India and Tibet in a region that's been inhabited for at least 11,000 years. While

dairy has been an important subsistence food on the Indian subcontinent (which includes Nepal) for centuries, acid-set paneer is the only cheese indigenous to the area, according to Paul Kindstedt's book, *Cheese and Culture*. The revered status of the cow in religious doctrine may have been a factor in discouraging the use of animal rennet and the development of aged cheeses, he continues. So the fact that Nepal's population is primarily Hindu and Buddhist, then, helps explain why European-style cheesemaking was slow to catch on there.

Previously a monarchy, Nepal became a democratic republic in 2008, and agriculture—mostly rice and wheat cultivation—still dominates the economy. Cow's milk is used for the ubiquitous chai masala (spiced tea). Nepalis also eat yogurt, made from the milk of cows or domesticated water buffalo (the latter is a delicacy known as *juju dhau*; see sidebar, p. 77). Air-dried cheese,



THIS PAGE: Yaks in the street in Lukla, Nepal, top; François Driard at the farmers' market he founded at Le Sherpa in Kathmandu, bottom.

OPPOSITE PAGE: A sunrise view of the Himalaya Mountains.



known as *chhurpi*, is traditionally made at higher elevations from the milk of yaks or cow-yak hybrids known as *dzomos*. Native to Central Asia, yaks produce butterfat-rich milk that's sweeter, thicker and higher in calcium, protein, and linoleic acid than cow's milk. Unsurprisingly, *chhurpi* is a diet staple during winter in the Himalaya.

OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY

In the Himalayan foothills, where the clanging of yak bells echo in the mist, Mitra Kala Khanal partly relies on income from selling *chhurpi*. Khanal owns and runs the Makalu Hotel & Lodge, a rustic teahouse in the village of Gufa Pokhari that her father founded 52 years ago. Located at 9,000 feet above sea level, the hamlet is dwarfed by Kangchenjunga, the world's third-highest peak. To the northeast, the summits of Makalu—the fifth-highest mountain—and Mount Everest are visible. Simply put, the locale is mind-blowing.

An anomaly among rural Nepali women, the energetic Khanal is an entrepreneur who owns a herd of 35 yaks and a flock of sheep. She also buys local cow's milk for chai and yogurt and raises a few goats for meat. Sitting before the red clay oven she built herself, Khanal tells me she began making cheese when she was unable to sell enough yak milk at market. She learned from a nearby cheesemaker and eventually the endeavor took off. As Khanal cut slices from square loaves of *chhurpi*, she explains that while the curds are ready to eat in two days, they're best when aged at least two weeks. The cheese brings in money when the teahouse is closed during the winter.

Chhurpi in its most primitive form is a shock to the Western palate. It's grainy, dry, faintly smoky, and gamy, yet "very important" to daily Nepali life, Khanal says. More than just a subsistence food, it's part of the social fabric and livelihood for many rural people. "Making *chhurpi* makes me feel good," she explains, stirring a pot of curds.



THIS PAGE: *Chhurpi* hung out to dry, top; Mitra Kala Khanal preparing a meal at her teahouse, bottom.

OPPOSITE PAGE: *Tomme* aging in Himalayan French Cheese's caves.

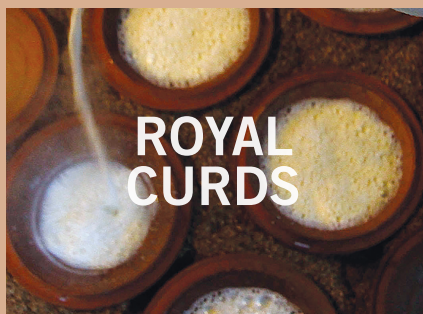
PHOTO: Patrick O' Keefe (Mitra)

CHEESE CULTURE COMES TO KATHMANDU

The livelihood of Nepalis was also on Swiss cheesemaker Werner Schulthess' mind when he traveled there in the early 1950s as a United Nations volunteer. Tasked with setting up a creamery as a way to use surplus cow's milk, Schulthess taught locals how to make Alpine-style cheeses and assisted with their marketing and distribution in Kathmandu (the timing coincided with the rise of the country's mountaineering industry). Schulthess went on to produce yak's milk cheese similar to the styles of his homeland and establish other factories throughout Nepal. Today, the commercial industry he helped initiate is thriving and produces cheese, yogurt, and ice cream with cow's milk purchased from dairy co-ops.

Unlike Schulthess, Driard didn't set out to become a cheesemaker. Like many before him, he was enchanted by Nepal when he first visited at age 18. After studying business journalism in France, he moved to Nepal, attracted by the low cost of living as well as by the "captivating people and culture, and mountains," he says. The lack of non-industrial, domestic European-style cheeses prompted him to start a company. "I figured if cheesemakers had been doing it for centuries in France, I should be able to learn how to make cheese using a copper pot and little investment," he says.

After a crash course in cheesemaking and affinage in the French Alps, Driard and a Nepali friend founded Himalayan French Cheese in early 2008 with \$2,000 USD. "In France, they'd be hung up on the terroir, cattle breed, European Union regulations," he says. "It's hard to start a business there because of the associated costs and restrictions. Here, I have more freedom to act and create.



Juju dhau—"king yogurt"—is made throughout Nepal, but the most famous version comes from Bhaktapur, a city nine miles from Kathmandu. Traditionally made from local water buffalo's milk (cow's milk is sometimes substituted today), juju dhau is a custardy, honey-sweetened delicacy, often flavored with cardamom. To make the yogurt, milk is boiled over an open fire and acidified

with cultures from previous batches. Then it's poured into unglazed red clay pots called *maato ko kataaro* (which are thought to impart a sweet flavor). The clay's porous nature allows whey to evaporate while the juju dhau ages atop rice hulls for up to six hours—the yogurt is sold in the same pots in which it's fermented. Bhaktapur—a UNESCO World Heritage site that was Nepal's best-preserved historic city before the 2015 earthquake—has dozens of juju dhau shops and vendors.

In recent years, juju dhau makers—most of them multigenerational—have seen their industry threatened by milk shortages and reluctance from Bhaktapuri potters to use the increasingly scarce, famed native clay. The current fuel

blockade has also impacted the availability of milk, cooking gas, and firewood. Yogurt is a crucial part of Nepali religious ceremonies and rituals, and in the Kathmandu Valley, juju dhau is an integral part of the culture.

While Bhaktapur suffered severe damage and many fatalities as a result of the earthquake, it's open to the public again (\$15 USD entry fee, bhaktapur.com). This stunning brick-and-wood city is a must-visit if you're in Kathmandu. For a taste of authentic buffalo's milk juju dhau, try Bhaktapur's Café Nyatapola (Taumadhi Tole, 977 1-6610346). The restaurant is unapologetically touristy, but the location, inside a historic pagoda in the middle of the famed Durbar Square, can't be beat.



THIS PAGE: A woman pours milk into clay pots to make juju dhau.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Himalayan French Cheese wheels resting on shelves.

The permits and regulations come after.” This is his polite way of saying that there’s considerable red tape for foreign entrepreneurs; Driard hired a fixer to obtain necessary licensing.

Driard’s original (cow) creamery was located just outside Kathmandu. He created enough demand to move the operation to pastoral Dhulikhel, also in the Kathmandu Valley. Here, Driard and his four Nepali employees produce everything from cream cheese flavored with foraged herbs to aged cheeses such as pasteurized Reblochon, brie, camembert, and Belkot, a young, buttery variety with a natural rind. At the time of our rooftop tasting, Driard was gearing up to launch his yak’s milk creamery in Ramechhap. It’s a nod to Nepali culture and the local economy, of course, but also a venture that caters to what Driard sees as the increasingly cosmopolitan tastes in Kathmandu. Located 10,000 feet above sea level, the yak cheese factory employs six locals who oversee production of pasteurized tomme and Serding—an original recipe made using yak and dzomo milk to produce cheese redolent of the lush indigenous grasses and wildflowers.

Driard’s not the only immigrant making cheese in Nepal; Italian artisan Sandro Serafini of Kathmandu

“COMPETITION FROM FOREIGN AND NEPALI CHEESEMAKERS IS GOOD. IT PUSHES ALL OF US TO BE BETTER.”

Valley’s Himal Farm has been in business since 2007. He sources local cow’s milk for a variety of fresh, soft, and aged cheeses, including mozzarella, caciotta, scamorza, and signature Himal Blue. Joining these foreign-born entrepreneurs are next-gen Nepali cheesemakers like Ashok Thakuri, who owns Nepal Goat

Cheese (goats are not traditional dairy animals for the Nepali). Thakuri, who apprenticed in France and launched his company in 2003, started his own herd by selectively breeding animals on his dairy in the high-altitude village of Chitlang, a day’s trek from Kathmandu. Binuka Joshi of Theki Dairy, meanwhile, makes yogurt and paneer from local cow’s milk around the capital.

Most of these cheesemakers sell at two farmers’ markets Driard founded: one at Le Sherpa, a French-Nepali restaurant in Lazimpat, and another in the neighboring city of Patan. Vendors hawk their vegetables and meats alongside makers of jam, pastries, and other prepared foods, and locals and tourists crowd the stalls of the dairy producers in residence. “Competition from foreign and Nepali cheesemakers is good,” Driard says. “It pushes all of us to be better.”



EAT

The national dish of Nepal is *dal bhat*: rice, spiced lentils, and vegetable curry, accompanied by chutney and pickles. In Kathmandu, cuisine from the Newar people indigenous to the region abounds—try dishes showcasing water buffalo and goat (from spiced ground liver and steamed blood to fried tongue and curry) and snacks such as *wo* (fried lentil cakes), *chatānmari* (rice flour crepes), and *musya* (roasted, curried soybeans). A range of international cuisines may be found in Nepal's capital—particularly in Thamel, the backpacker district.



MALTA NEWARI KITCHEN

Inexpensive Nepali eats and beer with lively, friendly ambience.

Shree Marga, Lazimpat, Kathmandu

+977 1-984 122 98 68



PUMPERNICKEL BAKERY

This popular café turns out delicious pastries, yak cheese sandwiches, and salads made with Ashok Thakuri's goat cheese—all in a peaceful garden setting.

Paryatan Marg, Thamel, Kathmandu

+977 1-4259 185

LE SHERPA

This fine-dining French-Nepali restaurant serves Himalayan French Cheese alongside house-made jam, locally baked bread and croissants, and regional products including honey. Dine in the garden, weather-permitting.

Ramalaya, Panipokhari Hill, Kathmandu

+977 1-4006 589, lesherpa.com.np

SEE

LE SHERPA SATURDAY FARMERS' MARKET

Founded by François Driard and held from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., this market offers produce, cheese, prepared foods, handicrafts, jewelry, and other souvenirs.

Ramalaya, Panipokhari Hill, Kathmandu

+977 1-4006 589, lesherpa.com.np

UNESCO HERITAGE SITES

The seven sites in Kathmandu Valley—including temples, palaces, and historic districts—are open to the public again, despite earthquake rubble and damage. visitnepal.com



STAY

3 ROOMS BY THE PAULINES

François Driard's sister, Pauline Driard, and her partner, Pauline Bryard, are proprietors and designers of this stunning boutique hotel in Baber Mahal—a historic palace and garden complex in Kathmandu.

Rooms from \$70 USD.

+977 1-4221 537, +977 1-980 391 95 75

thepaulines.com



PILGRIMS GUEST HOUSE

This friendly, family-owned 26-room guesthouse is simple but with all basic comforts: high-speed internet, hot showers, a restaurant, a rooftop terrace, and free airport transportation. Rooms from \$18 USD.

Thamel Marg, Kathmandu

+977 1-4440 565, pilgrimsguesthouse.com





THIS PAGE: A young woman strings chhurpi for air-drying in Gufa Pokhari, Nepal, left; Belkot aging in Himalayan French Cheese's caves, right.

"CHEESE IS LIFE"

Two days before the temblor, I'm sitting shotgun on a delivery for Himalayan French Cheese, and the roads aren't for the faint of heart. After unloading 300 pounds of cheese in Kathmandu, I stop for the night at Driard's original creamery, which has been converted to a farm stay. My final morning in Nepal is serene—just 24 hours later, however, the inn and much of the surrounding village will be leveled.

The cheesemakers I interviewed on my trip were largely spared. Near the quake's epicenter, Himalayan French Cheese closed briefly. "We shut down the cow creamery for a week, while the employees checked on their homes," Driard recalls. "The building cracked at the yak creamery." Himal Farm's production halted, too. "Luckily, all of the people directly connected to our company were safe and even our factory resisted such fury. We just lost some hundreds of liters of milk," Serafini says. "We realized we had no way to manage the storage and aging of the cheeses [because of the devastation and road and business closures in Kathmandu]. After 10 days of producing without selling, our

cave was full and we decided to take a break." Himal Farm resumed production on May 2, 2015. Nepal Goat Cheese and Theki Dairy are also back in business.

Still, all of the cheesemakers continue to navigate the effects that last year's disaster has had on distribution, infrastructure, and the economy. Since September, an unofficial trade blockade from India has prevented fuel, cooking gas, and medical and relief supplies from reaching isolated villages, including Gufa Pokhari, where Khanal makes chhurpi. However, like natural disasters—common in parts of Nepal, due to topography and the monsoon climate—limited resources are a fact of life. Khanal and others like her carry on as they have for generations. "Cheese is life," she says.

My journey began with a simple mission: to write about traditional and contemporary cheesemaking in Nepal. Although the earthquake added a dark subtext, it also revealed the resilience of the nation's magnanimous people. "The animals don't stop giving milk," Driard says, "so the cheesemaking goes on." **C**

HOW TO HELP

April marks one year since the 2015 earthquake in Nepal—and many people remain homeless and need food and medical assistance. Get involved via the following organizations.

GLOBAL GIVING: This crowdfunding community for nonprofits puts your donation toward partner organizations that are rebuilding homes, providing job-skills training, and addressing food security and education in Nepal. globalgiving.org/projects/nepal-earthquake-relief-fund

HEIFER INTERNATIONAL: This humanitarian organization, dedicated to ending hunger and poverty, gives live animals to people in impoverished areas to help improve breeding stock and provide meat and dairy production opportunities. Heifer also offers agricultural training, bees, trees, and seeds in 30 countries, including Nepal. heifer.org