A CHEESY REUNION WITH PSFC’S FRENCH SIBLING COOPERATORS

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By Hayley Gorenberg

“Created by a group of crazy people in Brooklyn in 1973, the Park Slope Food Coop has inspired dozens of similar experiments in the United States and elsewhere,” the French *Le Journal Minimal* remarked in October 2020. One of those experiments, La Louve food cooperative, thrives in the 18th Arrondissement in Paris, after the Park Slope Food Coop (PSFC) helped its founders launch in 2016.

Having written about La Louve while situated in the PSFC’s native Brooklyn, I made sure to seek out our sibling food cooperative when I had the good fortune to visit Paris this summer. Its founders happily connected me with Jean-François Herry, who

welcomed me on a Sunday before La Louve's inventory. Proudly self-identifying as La Louve's "first salary"—its initial staff member—Jean-François guided me through La Louve.

La Louve cooperative operates on a membership model similar to PSFC's. Members invest in the coop by purchasing a share and are required to contribute their time by working in the store.

"All you have to do is become a cooperator, that is to say participate in the financing, governance and operation of La Louve," the coop advertises, welcoming Parisians to join in focusing on providing fresh, locally sourced and sustainable products to members.

LIKE THE PSFC, MEMBER PARTICIPATION IS A FUNDAMENTAL ASPECT OF LA LOUVE. MEMBERS ARE ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN THE DAILY OPERATIONS OF THE STORE, WHICH HELPS KEEP COSTS LOWER AND PROMOTE COMMUNITY.

It offers a variety of food items, household products and more. Like the PSFC, member participation is a fundamental aspect of La Louve. Members are actively involved in the daily operations of the store, which helps keep costs lower and promote community. Like its American counterpart, La Louve engages in community-building activities and education, as well as promoting a sustainable and socially responsible approach to food.

With early closing for coop-wide inventory just hours away, the store was purposely relatively low on produce. Jean-François showed me a storeroom with remaining crates of Valencia oranges, bright kumquats and roly-poly mini-watermelons.

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> CHEESE PEERED OVER THEIR MASKS AND UNDER THEIR HAIR NETS, A TABLEAU VIRTUALLY INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM THE ONE OUR MEMBERS RENDER IN BROOKLYN.

His tour was tinged with unnecessary apologies for the understandably low pre-inventory stock, and he became downright emotional when we encountered the coop's cheese area, seemingly reflecting a French person's cultural and culinary proclivity and pride.

The members working to slice and package wedges and blocks of cheese peered over their masks and under their hair nets, a tableau virtually indistinguishable from the one our members render in Brooklyn. But the cheese storage room itself elicited by far the strongest expressions from my host.

We stood amidst boxed and labeled Dutch cheese, a massive quarter-wheel of hard-rinded cheese bumping up against a plank mazed with picturesque holes, a trio of soft-rinded cheeses, trays of tanned and twisted cheese knobs and a fleet of wood--cased Camembert.

Cheese blocks proclaimed they hailed from Bergers du Larzac, a group of "20 producers from Larzac and the Levezou mountains [who] have come together to create a range of sheep cheeses with character!" The Larzac cooperative's members mature their cheeses in four levels of natural underground cellars, imparting "a unique taste and floral crust" to 26 cheeses, including nine organic cheeses.

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I spied boxed Soignon goat cheeses and learned later that the brand dates to 1895, when it was founded in the Poitou-Charentes region of France. Soignon is noted for logs of thick, smooth-textured cheese with an “aroma that complements its fresh creaminess,” often packaged in delightful chestnut-leaf wrappings.

The Parisian coop stocked hundred-gram packages of Vrai fresh, organic sheep’s milk cheese advertised as “made in the traditional way, hand-molded and just drained,” yielding a cheese that is “light, soft and melting in the mouth,” alone or cooked, mixed into spreads or gratins. In short, the La Louve cheese room provided a portal into France’s centuries of cheese history, with production techniques developed throughout the country by monks and farmers alike, yielding more than 1,000 different types of French cheese.

But Jean-François radiated unease in this space. Shifting his weight, he confessed himself deeply “uncomfortable” at the day’s relatively low stock of cheese. The coop’s inventory processes were about to start, and it was time to go. I heaped effusive Brooklynite appreciations on my sibling cooperator for his hospitality, deployed my most heartfelt “merci!” and bid him a practiced “au revoir!”

Hayley Gorenberg has worked in environmental justice and trained this spring with the Climate Reality Project.