

## LISTERIA Sledgehammer used to kill a fly, cheesemakers say

CONTINUED FROM D1

Quebec cheesemakers and retailers are accusing the provincial government of over-reacting, of "killing a fly with a sledgehammer" in the aftermath of the listeria outbreak traced to leli meats from the Maple Leaf Foods plant in Toronto. (That outbreak killed 13 people, mostly in Ontario and is not believed to be linked to the listeria outbreak in Quebec.)

Yesterday, a Medard triple chocolate raspberry cheesecake sold in Alma under the brand name Boulangerie Lesage was added to the recall.

Gilles Lafontaine, president of the Société des fromages du Québec, which represents 150 Quebec cheesemakers, says his organization will wait until the results of the government's tests are made public before making a statement. But he can't help worrying about the future of "the many fine cheeses of Quebec." Once known mostly for its Oka and cheddar, Quebec now produces about 400 different cow's milk, sheep's milk and goat's milk cheeses, each with its own distinct regional character and flavour. Many have won international accolades, such as the American Cheese Society medals, but also top prizes at the Canadian Dairy Bureau's competitions and at the prestigious Wisconsin Cheese Contest.

The majority of his society's members, Lafontaine says, are small family-run farms who were given a head start by avant-garde restaurateurs such as Normand Laprise at Toqué, who promoted Quebec cheeses long before they became famous.

Max Dubois, the owner of L'Échoppe des Fromages in St. Lambert, is fuming. He wants to know who will compensate him for the \$40,000 worth of cheese inspectors seized and destroyed from his store on Saturday. (The Société des Fromages du Québec is preparing a formal request for compensation from the provincial government.) He had demanded the cheeses removed from his counters be quarantined and sent to a laboratory for testing to confirm that they had been cross-contaminated. But he and inspectors refused.

"They came in like the Jostapo, before even having all the test results. Now I can't even



Martin Juneau, co-owner of the Montée du Lait Restaurant, prepares a platter: Customers are not avoiding Quebec cheeses, he says.

prove that my cheese was never contaminated," Dubois said.

"Why could they not have organized a voluntary recall, as they do in France. Each cheese would have been sent away for analysis. We would have better been able to trace the spread of the bacteria. But now all the evidence has been destroyed. We'll never know if it was spread through a distributor, or on the paper it was wrapped in, or in some other way."

In the meantime, he's not re-ordering cheese and his customers are backing away.

Microbiologist Jacques Goulet, a cheese specialist in the food science department at Université Laval, says he, too, believes the government overreacted.

"Listeria is present everywhere. But for most people, the risk posed by listeriosis is very low. Healthy people are rarely affected by the bacteria," he said, noting that the annual average of listeriosis cases in Quebec is about 50. (The public health department reported 63 cases in 2007 and 49 in 2006.)

For their part, Quebec Agriculture officials are adamant

that their actions were justified. Department spokesman Clément Falardeau defended the widespread weekend seizures, which he called the largest food recall in Quebec in recent history. He says tests are continuing at cheese farms across the province, but the exact source of the contamination or its spread may never be known.

"We couldn't take any chances — this is a bacteria that is very difficult to control. It can be spread on kitchen tools, on work surfaces," Falardeau said in a phone interview. "We are not trying to destroy Quebec's cheese industry. But public health is our main priority and our job is to get tainted cheese off store shelves as quickly as possible."

He said raw milk cheese manufacturers are being scrutinized most closely because the listeria bacterium, found in sheep, cow and goat intestines, is also found in raw, unpasteurized milk.

Simon Beaudoin, cheese specialist and co-owner of Le Marché des Saveurs, a food emporium in Jean Talon Market that showcases Quebec products, says the negative publicity couldn't come at a worse time.

Quebec cheesemakers were among the first in North America to pioneer artisanal and farmstead cheese. The growing consumer trend toward eating local, organic food from small family-run farms has also spurred their success. But there is growing competition now from Ontario and the U.S., especially Vermont, Wisconsin and California.

Beaudoin, who has had to destroy more than 250 kilograms of cheese due to the recall, says he feels for the two producers whose plants were shut down.

"These are serious cheesemakers. They make high quality cheeses," he said. "But how will they ever survive this kind of catastrophe?"

Even though he's watched cheese sales drop at his store this week, Beaudoin said some good may still come from the recall. He said cheesemakers and retailers have long been asking the government to impose stricter controls over cheese production and handling. Indeed, new rules, including food safety training for all personnel who handle cheese, are set to come into effect next year. At his cheese counter, for instance,

knives and cutting boards are washed down every time a cheese is cut, before the next one touches the same surface and all his cheese-counter staff have food safety training.

"Cheese making and handling is a science, it is a craft. But more and more, cheese is being sold in a wide variety of stores from dépanneurs to supermarkets, where it is handled by people who are not specialists, who don't have the know-how required to assure hygiene and safety," Beaudoin said. "Listeria spreads quickly and it can only be contained through strict washing and disinfecting procedures."

Despite the bad news, not all fans of Quebec cheese were shy going away. Chef Martin Juneau, co-owner of La Montée de Lait and Le Bouchonné, two Montreal restaurants that showcase Quebec cheeses in their cheese plates, said he still had a few nice Quebec chevres on the menu — and none of his customers were complaining.

"Quebecers are proud of their cheese," he said. "As soon as all this blows over, they will be back."