

Picodon, a goat's cheese with altitude

Deeply rooted in tradition and *terroir*, Picodon is a goat's cheese produced in Ardèche and Drôme, writes **Patrice Bertrand**

Ideally, a Picodon should have a strong flavour, should not bite when tasted and any slightly spicy after-taste must come later, explains Hervé Barnier who, in the hills of the south of the Drôme department, at an altitude of six hundred metres, has just led his goat herd to a new pasture.

He adds: "It can also have a hazelnut or woody taste. It can be a little dry and brittle, but if it's a little creamy, it's better. It's a cheese that should make you want to eat more."

If Hervé describes the Picodon with so much care, it's because this delicious little cheese, made from raw whole goat's milk, with a soft texture and rind, disc-shaped with rounded edges, deserves it.

Produced in the Drôme and Ardèche departments, on both sides of the Rhône, protected by a PDO since 1983, it's one of the most emblematic cheeses of southeast France and the object of a real cult by its aficionados: in 1996, during the 78th mission of the American space shuttle, the French astronaut Jean-Jacques Favier brought one with him, making it undoubtedly one of the only cheeses to have gone into space!

Based at "la Ferme de Pracoutel," his farm near the small village of Vesc, just east of Dieulefit, Hervé, 57, is one of 146 Picodon producers. More precisely, he's one of 69 farmer producers of the appellation, whose great pride is perpetuating a

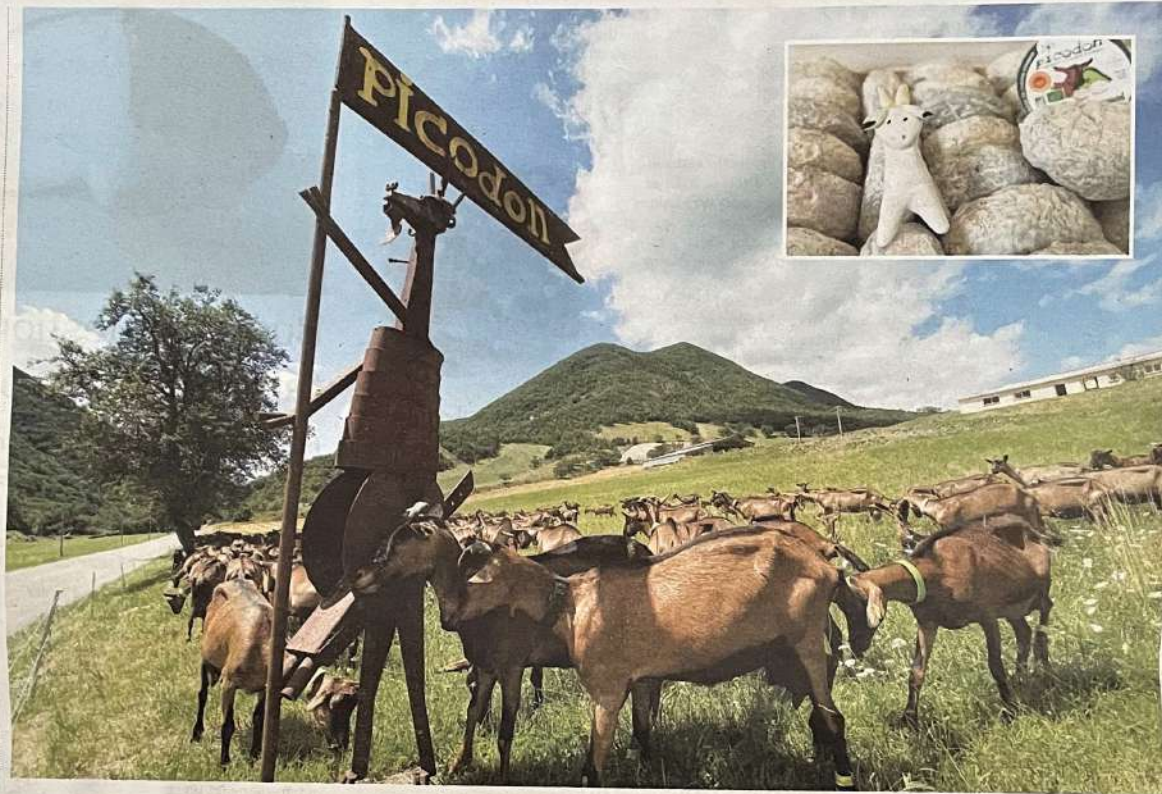


Photo: Hélène Barnier/Syndicat AOP Picodon Ancestral de l'Ardèche

at 6am, from March to mid-December, Hervé begins the day by milking his 150 goats, the French-Alpine breed with a beautiful chamois colour which, during spring and summer, feed on grass, leaves, acorns, chestnuts or lavender. Then, he sends their milk via a milking pipeline to the dairy where his wife Hélène handles production, assisted by an employee.

"The milk is inoculated with whey," says Hervé. "Once it acidifies, we add rennet. The milk's solids separate from the liquids and, after twenty-four hours, a curd is obtained. We mould it, let it drain, salt one side, turn it over and salt the other side. The next day we unmould it, leave it at room temperature and the cheese will begin to be covered with surface flora. Then we put it in the drying room where it stays for one to three days."

Once these cheeses are dry enough to the touch, the most crucial period that transforms these cheeses irreversibly into Picodons begins: ageing. According to PDO specifications, they can only be called Picodon after at least twelve days of ripening from the date of renneting (the addition of rennet). After this time, they must weigh at least 60 grams but, as they lose water during the process, this can drop to 45g.

This delicate ripening operation consists of placing them in a room at constant temperature and humidity and they must be turned over every day. As the days go by, it's this process that creates, on the skin, a fine, flowery, white, yellow or grey crust sometimes speckled with blue as well as the unique slightly spicy taste so characteristic of Picodon. This minimum period of twelve

The goat herd at Hervé Barnier's Drôme farm; inset, above: the final product comes in three categories of ageing; inset, left: Hervé milking his beloved goats

days is often exceeded and can reach several weeks or even more.

"Ageing is what makes Picodon," says Hervé. "If it's ten days old, it's not yet a Picodon. You can't find fresh Picodon. It doesn't exist. The more you age it, the better it is." A cheese that is matured for fifteen days, three weeks, even a month or more, reveals much more interesting flavours and aromas with a much wider aromatic palette."

Picodon comes in three categories: young (barely aged), aged, or aged according to the "Dieulefit method". "This is a cheese ripening method that is only used in the south-eastern quarter of the Drôme," says Hervé. "It consists of enclosing the cheese, which has already ripened for at least a fortnight or even a month, in a container - formerly earthenware pots, today a plastic container - where it is left to rest for two to three months.

During this period, it is washed with clean water at least once a week. This allows the cheese to regain its softness and in the past people could eat it during the winter months. I make a small amount of it because it's labour-intensive. But, from a gastronomic point of view, it is exceptional."

Of course, Hervé has his own manufacturing secrets which, added to the geographical disparities of the region, means that, from one producer to another, no Picodon is exactly alike. "It's like wines and different vintages," he observes.

"For example, the Picodons produced in the Ardèche vary a bit from ours because in the Drôme we have a limestone substrate while in the Ardèche it's mainly volcanic - so that has effects on the cheese. But there are constants. The real manufacturing secret is the rigour in the work and in doing things that we love!"

The "Ferme du Pracoutel", which also

makes fresh goat's cheese and yogurt, produces around 60,000 Picodons a year which are sold on site or through retailers in neighbouring towns such as Nyons or Dieulefit. This only represent a small part of Picodon production. In total, some eight million Picodons are sold each year on the market, of which about 40%, called "Picodons fermiers", come from farm producers. The rest is made by companies or cooperatives that buy the milk from farmers located in the appellation area.

Picodons are sold all over France but can be easily bought locally from farms, shops and markets. Several colourful fairs take place in Drôme and Ardèche, notably in Saou ("Fête du Picodon", third weekend of July) and in Dieulefit ("Le Picodon chez lui", second Sunday of August). In Planzoles, there is also a Picodon museum (open all year round).

Beware, by the way, of counterfeits. "They are infrequent but exist," warns Karine Mourier, president of the Syndicat du Picodon AOP, an organisation responsible for promoting and protecting the appellation. "Sometimes picodons without labels are sold to tourists. Or they are so-called Picodons that are not because they are too young and do not have the required twelve days of ripening."

A Picodon can, of course, be enjoyed with wine. "A red is commonly recommended," says Richard Rocle, the chef of the one-star Michelin restaurant "Auberge de Montfleury", in the Ardèche. "I personally find that Picodon goes very well with a white wine, for example a Chardonnay. In Ardèche, we have quality Viogniers whose slightly floral and sweet side are perfect complement to Picodon."

Ferme de Pracoutel, 26220 Vesc
Syndicat de l'AOP Picodon:
www.picodon-aop.fr

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Picodon producer

savoir-faire and a very ancient tradition. The first traces of Picodon date back to the 14th century and we know that in the 16th century, the poet Ronsard tasted it at Château de Tournon, in Ardèche. "In fact, I work like our great-grandparents worked but with today's technology," explains Hervé, whose farm has been in his family for six generations. "I produce and process all my milk and cheese on the premises."



At his farm, the production of Picodon, whose name comes from the Provençal "picaudou" ("small spicy cheese"), ostensibly begins like any other goat's cheese. But in reality, it adheres to very strict specifications. Every morning,