

...and a loss for British cheese

30 Aug 2010 by Jancis Robinson

Randolph Hodgson of Neal's Yard Dairy (on the right in the atmospheric photograph on the left and below) and patron saint of the British cheese revival sends news that Mrs Montgomery (left) of the peerless Montgomery cheddar in Somerset died last week.

She was an extremely powerful force and made such wonderful cheese that it inspired us to make it and her son Jamie the subject of one of episodes of our tv series about British food *Matters of Taste* in 1989. Randolph has written the most inspiring account of his professional relationship with her below.

Mrs Montgomery was one of the main characters in the story of the surviving tradition of farmhouse cheesemaking in Britain.

I originally bought cheddar from the huge Stores in Wells where most of the farmhouse cheddar makers kept their cheese. The cheese was sold anonymously; every farm was identified by a number. After a year or so of tasting as many cheeses as I could, I discovered the ones I liked best and 774 was at the top of the list. After some prying I discovered that these were cheeses from Manor Farm, North Cadbury. I would then stop at Manor Farm on the way to Wells to chat to Harold Chase, the cheesemaker, see the cheeses being made and, if no one was looking, take a look at the make-book to try and get an idea of which cheeses were best.

It was not long before I met Mrs Montgomery. My first sight of her was riding an old bicycle from her house to the dairy with a small milk pail over the handle bars followed by her terrier. She was off to check up on the cheesemaking and to collect milk for the house.

Later she would take me up to the cheese loft where the truckle cheeses were kept on the old shelves known as cheese dales, and we would taste those cheeses together. Sometimes she would have older large cheeses up at the Court and she would ask me to come to taste them. Sometimes they were cheeses that had been deemed unsaleable by the wholesaler but which were quite delicious and it was with Mrs M that I learned so much of the difference between the modern view of how cheddar should taste and the more old fashioned flavour of the traditional cheese. I would buy the cheese and while I wrote the cheque Mrs M would load my van, lifting the half-hundredweight cheese with seeming effortlessness.

Mrs Montgomery stuck to her guns and made cheese the way she thought it should be made and she didn't pander to the vagaries of the modern market. Her memories of cheesemaking were invaluable. I remember recently sitting with her with her terrier on her lap and Jamie in front of the fire. I showed her Dora Saker's book on cheddar making from 1917, trying to get her memories of how the cheese used to be made. When she saw the picture of the soft, chamois leather-like curd hanging over the mill she brightened up and said 'that was how it was' and then spoke at length with memories of a way cheese was made that few others had. She was always strong-minded and clear but always self-effacing, shy and gentle. Her contribution to our world of farmhouse cheese was immense and I will miss her greatly.

On the right of the picture below is Randolph's partner David Lockwood and the photograph was taken by his wife Jennifer Kast.

