

The British Cheese Awards

9 Oct 2001 by Nick Lander

The past few months have brought a remarkable amount of good news for cheese lovers on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the US, where the production of fresh cheese from unpasteurised milk is banned, a concerted approach has begun to silence the fears of the FDA (the Food and Drug Administration) about the continued production of cheese made from unpasteurised milk but then matured for longer than 60 days before being sold, such as the highly acclaimed Vermont Shepherd cheese.

At a recent gathering in New York's new cheese haven, the restaurant Artisanal (2 Park Avenue, tel 212 725 8585), the defence produced their star witness, Catherine Donnelly, professor of nutrition and food science at the University of Vermont. Donnelly's new findings suggest that past FDA tests were flawed and that the few documented cases of illnesses linked to aged cheeses were traced to contamination in humans not animals, something that could not be prevented by mandatory pasteurisation.

In the UK the future looks a bit brighter too despite the long shadow cast by foot- and- mouth disease, many of whose consequences are heart- rending. Most poignant was the culling, because the contiguous farm was infected, of the entire herd of Ayrshire cattle on the biodynamic farm belonging to the Camphill Village Trust in Dumfries, Scotland, where the unassuming Barry Graham leads a physically handicapped workforce to produce the widely respected Loch Arthur cheeses (happily still being produced from bought- in milk).

However, it would now appear that no more than five per cent of the UK's dairy herd has had to be culled, which means that production and prices will not be seriously affected in the busy Christmas period. And thanks to sterling work by the Specialist Cheesemakers Association and others, considerable progress has been made with DEFRA (the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) on the vexed question of the sale and handling of unpasteurised cheeses. The result is that Environmental Health Officers will be taking a more balanced view towards our future enjoyment of such distinctive cheeses as Montgomery Cheddar, Appleby's Cheshire and Wigmore, a nutty semi- soft sheep's cheese.

The mood at the judges' dinner the night before the British Cheese Awards in Stow- on- the- Wold, Gloucestershire, last week was therefore rather jollier than it would have been even two months ago. Wine obviously played a part, as did the eye- catching advertising boards of McLelland, a large Scottish producer attempting to market its Seriously Strong Cheddar via a tenuous connection between safe sex and dangerous cheese.

The mood in the Guildhall at 8.30am the following morning was far more sombre, thanks to thick fog outside and dark Stuart portraits and 17th century swords on the walls inside. Seven racks, some three high, were piled with 750 cheeses, each secretly coded, all organised by New Zealand- born Juliet Harbutt, founder of Jeroboams cheese shop in London W11.

Aside from the sheer achievement of organising these awards, which began eight years ago with fewer than 150 entries, Harbutt also has to be commended for her eclectic but highly professional collection of 50 judges which includes cheesemongers, food writers and chefs who are then paired with those who spend their working lives at the technical coal face of cheese production. This proves to be a highly beneficial, albeit all too brief, symbiotic relationship: the technicians spot the cheesemaking faults, the writers supply the descriptions, whilst the chefs draw on their wider food knowledge and put the cheeses' flavours into context.

At 8.45am I was shaking hands with my co- judge, Jayne Hickinbotham, an independent dairy technologist from north Wales, who came armed with vast experience as well as the accoutrements of her profession, notably a cheese iron for boring into large cheeses and various knives for cutting into the smaller, softer cheeses. Within half an hour I had been introduced to such technical terms as 'elephants feet', a pattern which emerges between the outside and inside of a soft cheese when it has not been properly stored or turned often enough, yeast growth, excess whey and uneven whey drainage.

By 9.40am, having tasted the tenth successive disappointing soft blue cheese in our category, Hickinbotham turned to me and wailed, 'I think I am going to weep. There is nothing here to make my mouth water.'

At the end of three very disappointing categories with her I was moved on to judge the Single Gloucester category with Sandy Boyd of the Chatsworth Farm Shop. Out of 12 entries we found one worthy of a gold medal (later revealed as made by Charles Martell & Son) and a silver (made by Smart's Traditional Gloucester Cheeses), but again there were plenty of cheesemaking faults. Was I being over- critical?

For confirmation or otherwise I went off to seek the opinion of fellow judge Randolph Hodgson who, as founder of Neal's Yard Dairy in Covent Garden has developed into a cheese agony uncle for many writers, customers and producers. Hodgson sadly agreed, adding that in his experience the production of top quality milk in the dairy is often not being matched by patience, care and attention to detail in the cheesemaking process.

As I left the judging hall at midday so that HRH the Prince of Wales, who had entered a cheese from his Highgrove Estate, could walk the floor in peace I was struck by the similarity between the huge number of British cheeses currently available and the vast array of wines now on offer. None of the best are inexpensive and there is little to choose between the more interesting but there is a vast gulf between the very best and the faulty. Alongside your favourite wine merchant trust your friendly, local cheesemonger.

These are some of the best:

Neal's Yard Dairy, London W1 (tel 020 7379 7222)
La Fromagerie, London London N5 (tel 020 359 7440)
Paxton & Whitefield, London W1 (tel 020 7930 0529)
The Fine Cheese Company, Bath (tel 01225 483407) and Cheltenham (tel 01242 255022)
Iain Mellis, Edinburgh (tel 0131 226 6215) and Glasgow (tel 0141 339 8998)