

# Owner of London dairy proves why he is the big cheese

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LONDON — When one of his assistants walks up to Randolph Hodgson with a piece of cheese that the Neal's Yard Dairy owner hasn't seen since the previous season, Hodgson shows what he knows. He pops the cheese into his mouth and seconds later, says "Almonds. Taste it? Last year, it wasn't that strong."

Hodgson, one of the best known cheese purveyors in the world, can talk about cheese the way sommeliers can smell and taste dozens of different flavors in a wine.

There's no hint of condescension or snobbery when Hodgson is talking with his customers or staff. There's simply a man who is excited to pass on his love of cheese to his customers.

Neal's Yard Dairy started small in 1979 as one of the vendors at Neal's Yard "wholefood" shops run by the late Nicholas Saunders. Hodgson had graduated from London University with a degree in food science and chemistry and wanted to figure out which field he was going into. He took a part-time job with the burgeoning business. After a few weeks, Saunders handed over the reins and gave the business to Hodgson.

Saunders's philosophy was novel in London at the time. On his Web site, he wrote, "I decided to start a wholefood shop which I would like myself — one that was cheap, efficient, and would not make customers feel bad because they could not recognize a mung bean. At that time wholefood shops were mostly of the hippy-style; folksy looking with open sacks and reused paper bags; nice meeting places for the in-group, but hopelessly inefficient, expensive, and tending to make ordinary people feel like intruders."

This mindset followed Hodgson. He and his workers spend a lot of their time educating customers. Hodgson operated on the theory that no question is unimportant and employees must be friendly and efficient. Since then,

Neal's Yard Dairy has become the premier wholesale and retail cheese vendor in London, and the de facto place for serious tourists to buy cheeses made and produced on the British Isles.

There are now two Neal's Yard shops in London, and they're spare looking — not unlike butcher shops. More utilitarian than fancy, Hodgson's second London shop was set up initially as a wholesale store, but with a busy street market right around the corner, the conversion was quick and simple.

Giant racks of aging cheeses line the walls, and the "counter" is a large stainless steel bench with stacks of cheese and a cash register. There's a refrigerator with yogurt, butter, and condiments on one side, and some wooden shelves with good bread that is half price after 6 p.m.

Hodgson's specialty is finding the best farmhouse cheeses the British Isles have to offer, and he is vigilant in his efforts to preserve their production. Farmhouse cheeses are sometimes called artisan cheeses. They're often made with raw milk, which means that the milk has never been pasteurized.

Hodgson is so devoted to the farmers making these cheeses that he'll help them solve problems, let them know when they're doing well, and figure out what's wrong when they're not.

Once, when a woman making cheese at a dairy handed the production over to her son, and the quality took a nosedive, Hodgson tried to help the son figure out what he was doing wrong. The son, stronger than his mother, was inadvertently manhandling the delicate product during one stage of the cheesemaking process.

"With farmhouse cheese, each day is like an entire wine vintage," says Hodgson. He moves toward tall aging racks with giant wheels of Montgomery Cheddar. He pulls out a cheese iron, a sort of miniature hole digger used to take core samples, and plunges it into a cheddar wheel labeled May 12,

2000.

He breaks two small bits off the inner end of the plug and hands one to a visitor with the instructions: "Taste."

The cheddar is sharp, firm, fruity, and droolingly good. Hodgson places what's left of the sample back into the wheel and repeats with wheels from May 19 and 30. "I've tasted every day of this cheese's production for the last 15 years," he says. The differences in texture, flavor, and sharpness are subtle.

Of course, there is no substitute for tasting, Hodgson says. He wants to show customers the huge difference between his farmhouse cheeses and something they might be more used to: a cheese that comes from a factory, sealed in plastic. "We try to get a piece of cheese in their mouth as soon as possible," he says.

Hodgson's favorite cheese varies with the moment. "It depends hugely." Farmhouse cheeses are often different every time they're made. "It depends on who's doing a great job at a particular time."

His recommendations for a cheese for an assortment before or after dinner are also hard to pinpoint. He says what a good cheesemonger should, "I'd make sure a customer tastes them first. I don't want to give them a cheese they don't like. Right now, today, I'd suggest a Stilton, some Lancashire, maybe a Wigmore."

When it comes to pairings of cheese with wine, Hodgson avoids the subject completely. "Customers are worried that they need to know some sort of code, and I try to diffuse that," he says. Just taste it and love it."

*Neal's Yard Dairy is located at 17 Shorts Gardens, Covent Garden, and at 6 Park Street, both in London. Some Neal's Yard cheeses are available at Formaggio Kitchen in Cambridge and South End Formaggio, and at Bread & Circus stores in Cambridge (Fresh Pond and River Street), Newtonville, and Wellesley.*