

GREAT BRITAIN

The Soft Cheeses: A Find in a London Courtyard

BY ALAN DAVIDSON
Photographed By Adam Woolfitt

Alan Davidson concludes his series on British cheeses by describing what Trish Murphy has done to recreate, in the heart of London, the art of making soft cheeses.

Trish came through our front door with her bicycle. "Handmade," she explained briefly, "a man who works under Waterloo Bridge. Fantastic craftsmanship. Daren't leave it in the street." With that she emerged from the protective cocoon of luminous and waterproof garments which cyclists in central London are well advised to wear, produced her notebook, and descended to my library to check on what some eighteenth-century English writers had to say about making soft cheeses.

They had plenty to say, especially those such as Richard Bradley (the first Professor of Botany at Cambridge University) and William Ellis (an Essex farmer), whose works on cookery and food were based on a sound knowledge of agriculture and dairy farming. Bradley wrote in detail of more than a dozen cheeses—hard, blue, and many soft varieties—and Ellis described yet others. The making of soft cheeses was a major activity on farms in their day, and the variety was great. People read eagerly about the best way of



making a rennet bag; about Queen's Cheese and Sage Cheese in Checkerwork (see *Lost and Gone Forever?*, page 22); and about the other niceties of this domestic industry.

Trish Murphy's interest in all this was both academic and practical. She wanted to know the history of these old-time cheeses; but she also wanted to know which could be made and sold again today, without contravening twentieth-century regulations. Her assignment was to set up a specialist dairy in a "hidden" courtyard near Covent Garden, which had been London's fruit and vegetable market for centuries. The area was then hovering between decay and revival. Trish was a revivalist.

Neal's Yard

Neal's Yard—that is the name to remember—is one of those enchanting surprises which most great cities of the world still hold for the persistent searcher. It can be reached from two streets but is visible from neither. [The map on page 22 will

On the board at right: *York, or Cambridge* ("Trish's favorite oddity"), a specialty of Neal's Yard Dairy. Clockwise from top left: *Coulommiers*, *Caboc* (covered in oatmeal), *Colwick*, *chèvre pyramide*, *chèvre with herbs*.

enable CUISINE readers to find it without difficulty.] All you see from the street is a kind of tunnel, which looks as though it leads to nothing in particular, maybe even to nothing at all. But walk through the tunnel and you will arrive in something not unlike the courtyard of a medieval inn, bustling with activity, decorated with flowers, and offering a range of excitingly different food shops.

The main store, the hub of the whole enterprise, is devoted to the sale, in large, unadorned packages, of grains, dried fruits, nuts, herbs, fruit juices, and honey. The merchandise is piled on huge racks made from old beams pitted with ancient nail holes. Close to the serving counter is

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Trish Murphy, reviver of a forgotten craft.

Cheese

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an area where you can taste the honeys, thirty different varieties of them; beyond it a pile of cartons and sacks in which the shoppers can bear off their booty. (It is not unusual to see someone staggering

Colwick, Crowdie, Cottager's, etc.) made from cow's milk; three others made from goat's milk; a trio of different yogurts; cultured buttermilk; crème fraîche; a tangy, slightly salty butter, made in Whitchurch, Shropshire, from the butterfat floating on the whey left from cheesemaking; frozen unpasteurized goat's milk

opening countries. But she keeps in close touch with her creation, speeding to and fro on that handmade bicycle of hers. She has written a vivid record of the problems she overcame (number one of many: no milk tanker could get through the tunnel to the dairy!) and of the experiments which led her eventually to discover which soft cheeses could still be made according to the almost defunct traditions. In all this she was greatly helped by a course in cheesemaking at the Cheshire College of Agriculture and also by studying U.S. Department of Agriculture publications. Here is her account of the principal cheeses she finally brought into production, followed by the recipe for her own "favorite oddity," which is as delicious to eat as it is striking in appearance.

The Cheeses

Trish told me that, considering her cramped premises, she decided to start with only three categories of soft cheese. First, Coulommiers, unripened and ready to eat in three days. Second, Colwick; and third, the "bag cheeses," descendants of the simplest hung cheeses, which probably go back to Roman times.

She suspects that Coulommiers was an import from France in the nineteenth century and is not really part of the old English tradition. She knew, however, that it was the best known of the few surviving soft cheeses; that recipes for making it were still to be found in recent official publications and in current cheese-

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A London courtyard reveals its treasures to the culinary explorer.

out with two full sacks, weighing thirty or forty pounds each.)

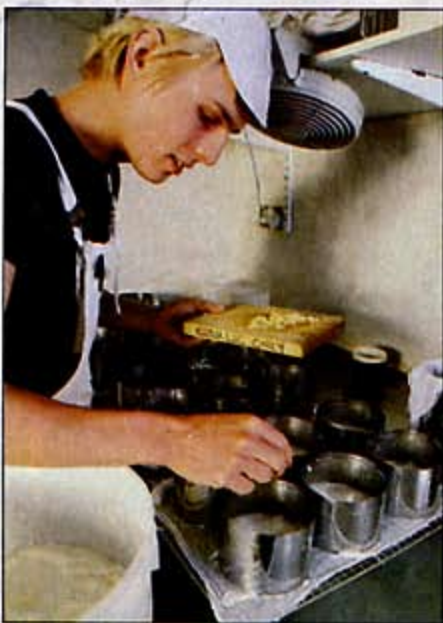
Beside this main shop is a vegetable stall selling organically grown produce; opposite is a bakery which produces a broad array of unusual breads, including an excellent sourdough, and lunchtime snacks which can be carried upstairs, where nonalcoholic beverages are served. (If you plan to lunch there, go early, by London standards, about noon.)

The best beverage is the coffee. It will be one of the three kinds sold by the Monmouth Street Coffee House, the only associated shop which is actually out in the street and visible. It has become famous for selling coffee at a price 25 percent below its nearest competitors. The privileged are allowed, after buying their three- or seven-pound package of freshly roasted beans, to take a look downstairs and see the old-style roasting machine in action.

This was the complex to which a dairy was to be added, and, despite formidable difficulties, the dairy has been established. Here, since the summer of 1979, you can buy numerous soft cheeses (Coulommiers,

from Priestland Goat Farm in Kent; and superb ice creams made on the premises.

Trish Murphy, the designer and technologist of this new establishment, which I believe to be unique, has returned to her academic work and her research on devel-



Cheesecraft at the Dairy: Garlic is added to a batch of Coulommiers, and a bag cheese is prepared for draining.

Cheese

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making-at-home books; and that Clares Carlton of Wells in Somerset was still making the tall, round, two-piece Cou-lommiers molds.

In her opinion, the cheese deserves its popularity. It looks like a Camembert in shape and size, has a pleasantly mellow flavor, and is of a soft, creamy texture. It is from full-cream cow's milk or goat's milk, and the curd may be layered with parsley and garlic or with coarsely crushed black peppercorns. The cheese can be eaten fresh or left to ripen naturally for a week. (Note, however, that uncontrolled ripening may be disastrous. The high moisture content of these soft cheeses makes them an attractive home for just about any microorganisms—molds, yeasts, and bacteria. Some may enhance the flavor, but others spoil the cheese with off-flavors or taints.)

Colwick, which takes its name from a village near Nottingham, is a larger cheese of one and one-half pounds or so. It is made in a mold like a cake tin with the bottom perforated and lined with cheesecloth. As the curd drains in the cloth-lined mold, the edges of the cheesecloth are pulled upward and inward, causing the top of the curd to sag into a concave shape. It is this characteristic "dished" center—excellent when filled

with cream and fresh strawberries for dessert—which makes Colwick so attractive.

The term "bag cheese" refers to cheeses which are hung in bags to drain. For these, pasteurized milk or cream is first coagulated either by the addition of starter bacteria and rennet or the starter alone. (The latter procedure produces the flavorful, tangy Cottager's Cheese, which bears no resemblance to bland, factory-produced "cottage cheese.") When curds have formed they are gently ladled into sterile cheesecloths, the corners tied, and the bags hung to drain, usually for two days. After the first day, the cloths are changed and the firm curd on the outside of the nascent cheese is scraped down into the center to ensure uniform drainage. When ready, the cheese is salted or flavored to taste. Garlic, chives, fresh herbs, or spices may be stirred in, or fresh cream added. Bag cheeses are best eaten fresh within a few days of making; like all soft cheeses, they should be refrigerated.

The Favorite Oddity

Trish particularly likes the cheese variously called York or Cambridge or Bath—no doubt because in past times it was made in each of these three places. A special rectangular mold used to be available for making this cheese but is unfortunately no longer made. [Traditionally, the molds were placed on woven straw mats on cheese-draining boards. The curd was

Lost and Gone Forever?

There are many soft cheeses which disappeared from the English rural scene as cheesemaking was taken over by industry and farmers were encouraged to sell their milk to supply ever-increasing city populations. Here are three which readers of eighteenth-century books may meet.

Queen's Cheese. This was a three-week mature variety, made from milk and cream enriched with sugar and egg yolks, in the period between Michaelmas (September 29) and Allhallowtide (November 1).

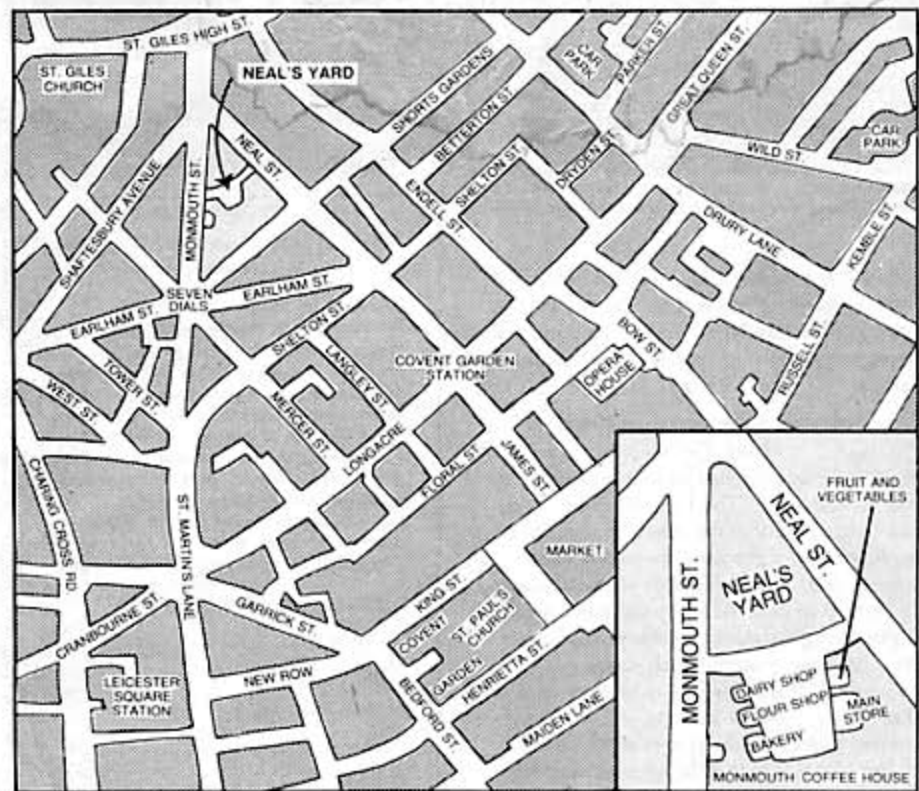
Sage Cheese in Checkerwork. Sage cheeses still exist, for example Sage Derby, but they are hard cheeses. This checkerwork one was a soft cheese, assembled from curds of which part were colored green with sage and spinach juice. Shapes were cut with metal cutters and then interlocked or inlaid, green into white and white into green, to produce a mosaic or checkerboard effect.

Slipcote (or Slipcoat). A name with various meanings. It was sometimes used for a Colwick ripened between two plates, or for any cheese which separated from its outer coat, which would then slip off. It was also used for a Stilton which went wrong and "blew its coat," whereupon it was hastily renamed "slipcoat," to suit its new condition.

ladled into the molds, and as it drained, the mat imparted a pattern to the surface of the cheese. A similar setup can be improvised by cutting the bottoms out of disposable foil baking pans or plastic food storage containers and placing them on heavy wire racks lined with cheesecloth. Racks made of square mesh will impart a nice pattern. Less traditionally, but equally effective, natural (not dyed or lacquered) straw baskets or Oriental bamboo steamer baskets, lined with cheesecloth or coffee filter paper, can be used as molds.] Below is the recipe, with acknowledgments to the Cheshire College of Agriculture.

If you use $7\frac{1}{2}$ quarts of milk you will finish up with two cheeses weighing about $1\frac{1}{2}$ pounds each (and, of course, a lot of whey). Each cheese will have a colored stripe running through its center, an effect achieved by coloring one third of the

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Karen Lee Anderson

Cheese

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curd with a vegetable dye derived from annatto, the seeds of a tropical tree, *Bixa orellana*.

Equipment: This need not be sterilized but should be kept scrupulously clean. Wash and rinse containers and the spoon thoroughly; then rinse with boiling water and let cool before using.

- 1 large kettle (about 9-quart capacity)
- 2 nonporous, noncorrosive bowls or buckets (One should hold at least 5 quarts, the other at least 2½ quarts.)
- 1 dairy thermometer or an instant-reading all-purpose thermometer
- 1 large flat spoon for slicing the curd
- 2 cheese molds (Molds should have high sides and be about 6 inches square, or they can be rectangular, with dimensions that will give a comparable area, about 36 square inches. Use disposable aluminum foil baking pans or plastic food storage containers with the bottoms cut out; or use natural straw baskets or bamboo steamer baskets.)
- 2 wire racks for draining (preferably of ½-inch square mesh)
- 1 large roasting pan to set under racks
- Cheesecloth

Final advice: In making soft cheese, respect the curd. If there is a ritual to soft cheesemaking, then the curd is the sacred element. The clabbered milk, a fragile structure, acts as a sponge, trapping water and fat. It is easily ruined by over stirring or rough treatment, resulting in thin, rubbery cheese. Be patient; don't rush the cheese!

THE FAVORITE ODDITY

Makes 2 cheeses (about 1½ pounds each)

- 1 cup water
- ½ teaspoon annatto seeds
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- 7½ quarts pasteurized whole milk

•• 2 tablespoons active-culture buttermilk

••• ½ tablet rennet
2 tablespoons lukewarm water

1. Combine the 1 cup water, the annatto seeds, and baking soda in small saucepan. Heat over medium heat to boiling. Boil until water is dyed a very deep orange color, about 5 minutes. Strain water; measure out ½ cup for use in dyeing cheese.

2. Heat whole milk in large kettle over low heat, stirring frequently, until it registers 90° on thermometer. Remove from heat. Add buttermilk; stir until very thoroughly mixed. Pour 5 quarts of the milk into the larger bowl; pour remaining 2½ quarts into the smaller bowl. Stir the ½ cup annatto-colored water into the 2½ quarts milk; stir until color is uniform.

3. Crush the ½ rennet tablet to fine powder in small cup with back of spoon. Stir in the 2 tablespoons lukewarm water until rennet is completely dissolved. Add 4 teaspoons of the rennet mixture to the bowl containing 5 quarts milk; stir very gently for about 1 minute to distribute rennet evenly. Add remaining 2 teaspoons of the rennet mixture to the bowl containing 2½ quarts milk; stir gently to mix thoroughly.

4. Cover bowls with a sheet of waxed paper. Let stand, undisturbed, at cool room temperature (65° to 70°) until curd forms and you can see fine line of clear whey around edge of bowls. This will take from 18 to 24 hours. Milk is sufficiently set when a bit of curd, pulled aside with tip of spoon, breaks away cleanly and holds its shape.

5. Place wire racks in large roasting pan. If using molds with cut-out bottoms, cover each rack with double thickness of cheesecloth. If using baskets as molds, line with cheesecloth. Place one cheese mold on each rack. Using large flat spoon, gently cut thin slices from surface of the white curd and layer into cheese molds. Use slightly more than half of the white curd to make this first layer and divide it evenly between the molds. Repeat procedure

with the yellow curd, using all of it and dividing evenly. Repeat procedure, using all of the remaining white curd. Cover molds with waxed paper. Let drain at cool room temperature until cheeses are firmly set, 1 to 2 days. (Drain off and discard whey, which collects in roasting pan, once a day.)

6. Gently invert cheeses onto serving plates; lift off molds and remove cheesecloth. Cheese will keep, wrapped well in plastic wrap, in refrigerator for several days.

TIPS: • Annatto seeds, also known as achiote, are available in Caribbean and Latin American groceries. They can be ordered by mail from H. Roth & Son, 1577 First Ave., New York, NY 10028 (212/734-1110).

•• Commercial buttermilk containing live cultures is used as the starter in making this cheese. The buttermilk should be very fresh, and it should be tested for activity before using to make cheese. To test, mix 1 tablespoon buttermilk with about 1 cup milk. Let stand, covered, at warm room temperature. Begin checking consistency after 8 hours. If milk has not thickened after 24 hours, your buttermilk is inactive. If you are unable to find active-culture buttermilk, this cheese can be made with freeze-dried starter cultures, used according to manufacturer's instructions. To order by mail, see Sources of Starters and Equipment, below.

••• Plain unflavored rennet tablets are available in many drugstores and health-food stores. They can be mail-ordered from H. Roth & Son, 1577 First Ave., New York, NY 10028 (212/734-1110). ○

Sources of Starters and Equipment

- INTERNATIONAL YOGURT COMPANY, 628 Doheny Dr., Los Angeles, CA 90069
- NEW ENGLAND CHEESEMAKING SUPPLIES, P.O. Box 85, Ashfield, MA 01330

