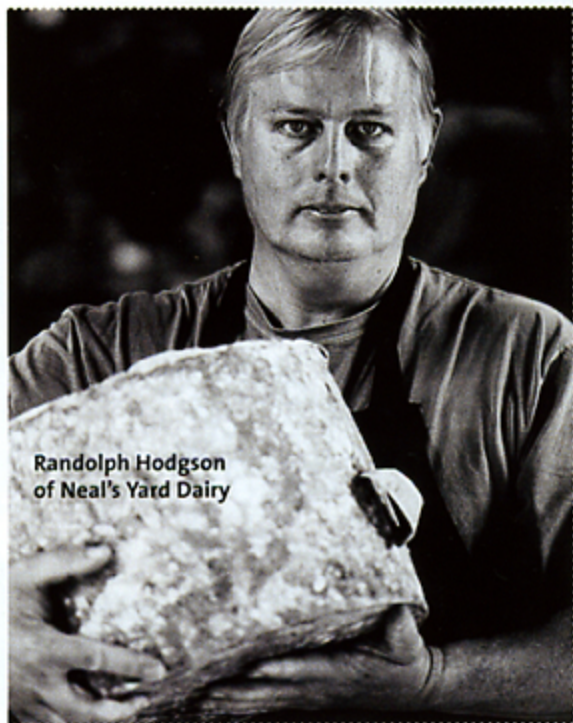
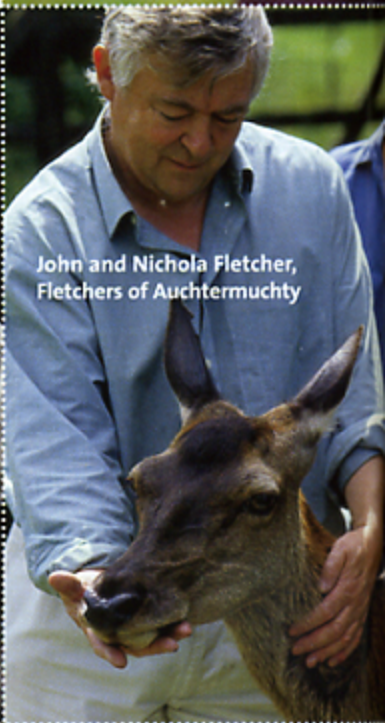


Fare trade



Randolph Hodgson
of Neal's Yard Dairy



John and Nichola Fletcher,
Fletchers of Auchtermuchty

Traditional techniques and sheer dedication all contribute to the high quality of the produce created by Delia's chosen suppliers. If you yearn for the delicate smokiness of salmon or tender, succulent venison, for deep, gamey turkey, subtle cheeses, mellow-tasting goose, meaty sausages or classic preserves, we've found the finest just for you...

By Dee McQuillan and Rose Prince



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM WINTER AND GEORGIA GIVINI SMITH



Neal's Yard Dairy

6 Park Street, London SE1 9AB

17 Shorts Gardens, London WC2H 9UP

In cheese terms, Christmas means Stilton, and there is a reason why the Stilton you buy from Neal's Yard Dairy is unlike any other. Neal's Yard is a shop that specialises in British and Irish cheeses: not just selling the stuff, but maturing cheese, eating cheese and, from time to time, re-inventing cheese.

In a collaboration involving much thought and experimentation, Neal's Yard's owner, Randolph Hodgson, has worked with the Stilton Creamery at Colston Bassett, Nottinghamshire, to produce a cheese with less rather than more blue. I'll let him explain.

'Really good Stilton is not over-blue. You want to taste the

Our way 'He eats his Stilton 500 at a time,' say Randolph's colleagues, referring to his amazing tasting ability. He has also been spotted enjoying the cheese in a more leisurely way with an oat cake

effect of the blue [the mould] on the cheese around it, not the blue mould itself, and that effect is to make the cheese creamier.'

For the Christmas rush, cheese-making starts in mid-August, but the blue veins only develop through tiny airways made by piercing the naturally white cheese. The Stilton for Neal's Yard will be pierced less and later than most and matured separately. For their most demanding customer, the Colston Bassett cheesemakers have gone back to using natural rennet.

'They made a few for me and, as I was walking past the cheeses, I got that lovely, old scent: it's very subtle, but I do believe the flavour is better,' says Randolph. So, if your taste in blue cheese is for the strident, you will have to shop elsewhere.

And what if you want a so-called 'baby' Stilton? 'No way,'

Randolph says. 'Baby Stiltons are half the cheese for twice the money. We try to persuade customers to take a quarter of a whole Stilton instead.' Randolph is passionate about the process. 'Although it seems very popular at this time of year, I do think Stilton is generally underrated. The way they make it at Colston Bassett is painstaking and labour-intensive. For example, the curd is ladled gently from the vat by hand to encourage the creamy texture: now, when the French hand-ladle Camembert, they don't hesitate to make a selling point of the process.'

Surprisingly, the tradition of this being a Christmas cheese does not seem related to a peak in quality. Good Stilton can be made all year round. 'We try to get customers to sample it throughout the year,' says Randolph.

Yes, being encouraged to taste the wares is part of the joy of visiting either of the London shops. The whole premises are chilled and humidified so that the cheese is out all around you rather than under clingfilm under glass. Staff are enthusiastic and mostly expert, and always seem to have some marvellous new discovery or old favourite on exceptionally good form to talk about. You can also order a simplified, but well-thought-out slice of the Neal's Yard range by mail. ('We made it simple so we can't mess it up,' says Randolph, always Mr Plain Speech.) This excellent service has been supplying Delia's restaurant at Norwich City Football Club for years. **DM**

WILL DELIVER Whole, half or quarter Stiltons; 4 lb (1.8 kg) pieces of Cheddar & Cheese selections, from £36. Mainland Britain only.

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