

Cheshire's Last Stand

Saving the Great Cheeses of England

By EMILY GREEN

TIMES STAFF WRITER

At the turn of the century, there were more than 1,000 farms making Cheshire cheese in England, says Randolph Hodgson; now there are about half a dozen. Hodgson is hardly a census-taker, but he does have reason to keep track of British farmhouse cheese-makers. For the past 20 years, he has dedicated himself to saving them from extinction.

Hodgson runs Neal's Yard Dairy, a central London shop whose British cheeses are so highly prized that they are given pride of place on dessert menus in restaurants thousands of miles away, including at Campanile in Los Angeles. They even sell in France.

Hodgson insists, though, that the shop is as much the creation of its suppliers as its founders. Opened in the late 1970s as a Greek yogurt supplier in a whole-food ghetto, the store might have gone the way of much bean-sprout ephemera had not a series of old-style cheese-makers found it. "They'd come in, slam a truckle of cheese on the counter and say, 'Here lad, try this,'" Hodgson recalls.

By the time they sought out Hodgson, they were desperate. It was not just Cheshire-makers whose numbers were dwindling precariously. The number of

Please see Cheese, H4



Clockwise from top left: traditional Stilton maker Ernie Wagstaff of Colston Bassett; Cheshire makers Lancelot and Lucy Appleby; and Ruth Kirkham, one of the three remaining makers of authentic Lancashire cheese.



Photos by Frances Lang / © Estate of Frances Lang

Cheese Classics

Continued from H1 dairies making authentic versions of Stilton, Cheddar, Lancashire and Caerphilly had also plummeted.

Their crime was having remained a bucolic bunch in the very home of the Industrial Revolution. From the 1850s onward, the rise of the railways, advent of refrigeration and subsequent boom in liquid milk consumption rendered the craft of preserving milk in cheese increasingly redundant.

World War I then laid waste to a generation of British men and half of the farmhouse dairies. Women helped staff the remaining dairies, but during the Second World War, the very milk was rationed and only a tenth of farmhouse cheese-makers operating in 1939 survived to the repeal of rationing in 1954.

Then the 1960s supermarket boom swept away specialist retailers and the 1970s brought unprecedented crises as livestock feed prices shot up and the price for milk plummeted. In the '80s, there was the introduction of milk quotas throughout Europe, and by 1989 there followed what may prove to be the final nail in the coffin of British artisanal cheese-making: the modern food scare.

This is not to say that the situation is hopeless. It seems possible that farmhouse cheese-making might even enjoy the same sort of "real" food renaissance achieved by microbreweries and craft bakeries during the 1980s and '90s, both in England and the U.S. A former Neal's Yard staffer is working with California cheese-makers in and around the Cowgirl Creamery in Point Reyes.

However, one revival is not necessarily much like another. Unlike a microbrewery or a bakery, an artisanal cheese-making operation is often only part of a larger business: a dairy farm. So the most old-fashioned of practitioners not only make cheese, they also tend pasture, make silage, oversee the breeding and calving of their cattle and milk their herds twice a day. They can't pop up in gentrifying warehouse districts. Take them off the land and it isn't farmhouse cheese. Leave them on it and one cannot expect them to abide by hygiene laws largely drafted to suit huge commercial dairies.

Given all of this, the extraordinary thing may not be that there are so few British artisanal cheese-makers left, but that there are any at all.

Cheshire: Refusing to Go Meekly

Cheesemaking on the Cheshire plain has been going on at least since the Norman Conquest, when it was mentioned in the Domesday Book. Certainly, the extended family of Lancelot and Lucy Appleby have been making it as long as anyone can remember. "Lucy made cheese at her home before she got married," says her daughter-in-law, Christine. "Her mother did before her. And so on. Everyone in the Shropshire-Cheshire area did."

Until World War II, that is. While Patrick Rance, author of "The Great British Cheese Book" (Macmillan London Ltd., 1988, out of print), finds evidence of 405 farms making Cheshire cheese in 1939, by 1948 the number was down to 44. "Now there are maybe half a dozen," says Hodgson.

For a style of cheese that is nearly extinct, Cheshire refuses to go meekly. Rather, its style is defiantly robust. It comes in drums and has the firm texture of a fine young Cheddar. And it is positively abloom with flavor. At an informal tasting held in Los Angeles recently, it stole the hearts of most of those present. "It's got grass and meadows and flowers in it," said one.

If it tastes authentic, that is because it is. The Applebys refuse to change with the times. Hodgson



Caerphilly makers Chris Duckett, left, and brother Phil: "We felt duty-bound to carry it on."

explains: "As Cheshire cheese-making became industrialized after the Second World War, the Cheshire Cheese Federation used to meet to discuss why sales were falling. Lance Appleby got up and said that there was one reason: It didn't taste good. He blamed the new methods. For example, replacing cloth wrapping with wax kept the water weight up, and the cheese didn't ripen properly."

The only change in the dairy in decades came five years ago when Lucy Appleby retired. An apprentice named Gary Grey is making the cheese now, but Lucy's very much in evidence, says Christine. "The dairy is just off the kitchen. It was set up that way because in the '50s she was looking after seven children while she made cheese."

Will Appleby Cheshire survive through the 21st century? Christine Appleby is torn between her love of dairy farming, of her mother-in-law's cheese and her alarm at a zealous new food safety culture. "It's like we have no common language left. We live year by year," she says.

Cheddar: It Isn't Orange

Almost three centuries ago, the novelist Daniel Defoe said of Cheddar cheese: "Without all dispute, it is the best cheese that England affords." Today, it is the orange stuff found on cheeseburgers.

Certainly, its ubiquity is Britain's own doing. Having dispersed Cheddar-makers to its colonies, the cheese is now as legitimately Australian, American or Canadian as British. All of these countries now produce mountains of orange stuff. Naturally enough, all have scrappily idealistic Real Cheddar movements, too.

Real being relative. To find a cheese that is really real—which is to say, made from single-herd milk, cloth-bound, matured in the characteristic hefty rounds and of a natural wheat color, not dyed orange—is another matter. Steve Jenkins, author of "The Cheese Primer" (Workman, 1996) singles out two Somerset Cheddars—Jamie Montgomery's and George



George Keen makes traditional Cheddar in Somerset, where Cheddar was born.



Special mention is due to the photographer, Frances Lang, whose work in newspapers and magazines such as Vogue

Entertaining often chronicled the food world. Here she captured the last of the traditional British cheese makers with her characteristic mix of classicism and respect. Lang did not live to see this series published. She died in a plane crash in October 1996. However, with the kind permission of her family, the images are published for the first time.

Keen's—as "definitive, magnificent Cheddars that are head and shoulders above all other Cheddars."

For Montgomery, classifying the flavors of real Cheddar is a source of endless fascination. "On top of the underlying grassy flavor, it might go peppery, it might go nutty, it might be fruity," he says.

Montgomery Cheddar sampled here proved as strong and salty as fine Parmesan, but with creamier texture and decidedly floral finish. "It starts off tangy and finishes sweet," marveled one taster.

A basic source of variety, Mont-

gomery says, is season. There are obvious differences between summer milk, when cows are on lush pasture, and winter, when they are fed silage, or fermented grass. However, the most intriguing changes, he suspects, may be due to the use of a multi-strain bacterial culture to start the cheese-making process. "Most people use a single-strain starter," he says. "We tried it and got only a single flavor, straight down the line, with no floweriness and no character."

Montgomery delights in the variability. To his mind, a great cheese and an inconsistent one are one and the same. "People who are making 100% good cheese all the time avoid the lows," he says. "But they miss the highs, too."

Stilton: Its Blues Are Green

Like Cheddar, Stilton is named for the place where it once was sold (a Midlands coaching stop on the Great North Road). However, unlike Cheddar, Stilton producers banded together in 1910 to claim rights to exclusive use of the name. Rance says they had reason. He was finding ersatz "Stilton" as late as the 1980s. Today, the Stilton Cheese Makers Assn. licenses only seven dairies in Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire.

However, the measure hardly ensures an artisanal cheese. In fact,

an extremist could protest that Stilton is already dead, dispatched by the association's own hand.

This was the pitch of the argument in 1989, when the last raw-milk Stilton-makers, Colston Bassett and District Dairy in Nottinghamshire, turned to pasteurized milk. Richard Rowlett, Colston Bassett's manager, explains: "It was after the listeria scare. It was a difficult time."

Though it was in no way implicated, Colston Bassett was sufficiently alarmed by the hysteria that it decided to pasteurize. "It was decided that it was protecting the whole Stilton industry," says Rowlett.

Then everyone got a shock. The listeria outbreak was traced to two sources: a heat-treated cheese made in the Alps and a Belgian pâté. In neither case was raw milk the problem. However, the shrillest advocates of raw milk had to accept a comeuppance as well. After pasteurization, Colston Bassett's quality held.

It remains not only a classic artisanal cheese, but, to Hodgson's mind, one of the best that he sells. A wedge sampled here in Los Angeles lived up to that evaluation: It was perfectly ripe, rich golden-colored paste evenly traversed by greenish (as opposed to more sour-bitter blue-black) veins.

Hodgson puts the triumph down to the continuity of staff at Colston Bassett. Formed by a village doctor as a co-op of local dairy farmers, this modest red brick dairy has had only three managers since it opened in 1920: Tom Coy, Ernie Wagstaff and Rowlett.

"Almost everything is done by hand," says Rowlett. "Our milk comes from the same pastures year in and year out. We don't standardize the milk, or put skimmed milk into full-fat milk and lower the fat content. We don't make lots of cheese when milk is cheaper. We still use traditional wooden shelves in our maturing stores. Because we are traditional, our cheese starts to look different from the rest."

Caerphilly: English or Welsh?

Describe Caerphilly as an English cheese and objections invariably follow that it is Welsh. Technically, of course, it is; however, it is English cheese-makers who have kept it alive—and none more than the family of Somerset dairyman Chris Duckett. Until recently, they made the last farmhouse Caerphilly in the U.K.

Not that Duckett is bragging about it. He is a humble man who has spent his life making a cheese traditionally eaten by an even humbler clientele: the coal and tin miners of South Wales. "The recipe was originally from Caerphilly in Wales," he says, "but there were very few dairy herds in south Wales, so a lot was made in Somerset and shipped across to Wales. It used to go on the old Aust Ferry, a very ancient and precarious thing."

Unlike the tastes of its distinctive counterparts, such as Cheddar and Lancashire, Caerphilly is hard to describe. It begs the language of a Thurber cartoon wine snob: "simple," "unassuming" and so on. Hodgson explains: "It's a quick cheese, which was adopted because it was less laborious than Cheddar and it could be got to market in days, rather than months. That said, it's a tricky cheese, precisely because it is simple: It's honest. The acidity and the moisture must be perfect. Put Caerphilly in a factory and it dies."

Duckett's Caerphilly, a raw-milk cheese, very nearly died recently, but for different reasons. Last year, an *E. coli* 0157 scare prompted the closure of his dairy without compensation for 10 weeks before it was given a clean bill of health. A chastened local council and Department of Health were recently censured in court over government handling of the episode, and outrage was such that it reached both houses of Parliament.

Duckett's Caerphilly is no longer available in the U.S. "It's going to take a long time to turn things around," Duckett says. "We felt duty bound to carry it on, because it was tradition. And it would seem rather sad to see it ended the way it was temporarily stopped."

Today, Neal's Yard is exporting the cheese of a new Caerphilly-maker—Martin Trethowan, a former Neal's Yard employee, trained by Duckett. Recently, Trethowan took Caerphilly back to Wales, where he makes it at a farm in Gorydd. So Caerphilly is, once again, a Welsh cheese, if one saved by a Somerset family called Duckett.

Lancashire: Pure Lactic Zing

No British cheese is more readily recognizable than Lancashire, which has an almost pure lactic zing. Rance puts it in a unique class, writing that real Lancashire is "a semisoft, loose-textured, crumbly, buttery cheese, unlike any other in flavor."

Ruth Kirkham is a cheese-maker responsible for one of only three authentic versions still thought to

Tasting the Classics

(Numbers correspond to map below.)

● **Cheshire:** A semi-hard cheese traditionally sold sliced from clothbound drums, which range in size from small rounds to weighty things as big as top-hat boxes. The paste is a pale orange and is slightly crumbly, with a pleasant bite along with distinctly fresh meadow flavors.

● **Stilton:** Semi-soft blue pasteurized cheese with rich golden paste. Some are crumbly, some more creamy (both styles are fine). Classic shape is a large round; "baby" Stiltons are available at Christmas but are a relatively poor value in the rind-to-paste ratio. Bluing should radiate from center and should look more green than blue-black. The mold should never be bitter or dominate the exceptional richness of the cheese.

● **Lancashire:** Rich whole-milk cheese sold semi-hard. Pale wheat-colored paste. Unique lactic flavors register in a series of emphatic punches: butter, milk and yogurt with grassy, tangy undertones.

● **Cheddar:** Wheat-colored and semi-hard. The best are made with raw milk and are clothbound. Traditionally sold sliced from large clothbound truckles. The English answer to Parmesan: complex flavors, tangy bass-line with complex notes that can be nutty at one extreme and flowery at the other.

● **Caerphilly:** A middling style cheese, often sold young and relatively soft but capable of aging into a more complex, harder cheese. Simple, true milky flavor. May have a bit of bluing.



Where to Get Them

LOS ANGELES SUPPLIERS

- **Larchmont Village Wine and Cheese**, 223 N. Larchmont Blvd., Los Angeles; (323) 856-8699.
- **La Brea Bakery**, 624 S. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles; (323) 939-6813.
- **Wally's**, 2107 Westwood Blvd., Westwood; (310) 475-0606.

BY MAIL ORDER

- **Zingerman's Deli**, 422 Detroit St., Ann Arbor, MI 48104; (888) 636-8162.
- **Tomales Bay Foods, P.O.** Box 594, Point Reyes Station, CA 94056; (415) 663-9335.

be made in Britain. Her family farm is in Goosnargh, near the old mill town of Preston. Her son, Graham, now works in the dairy and is the next cheese-maker in line. "My mum's third generation, I'll be fourth," he says.

As with all the traditional British cheeses, there is no truck here with vacuum packing or wax rinds. The cheese is made from raw milk from the Kirkham's own herd of 45 Holstein-Friesians. Graham Kirkham looks at the argument over pasteurization rather than as if urban neurotics have had a bad case of vapors. "They're always kicking a fuss up, aren't they?" he says. "We've never had any trouble. We have a milk test twice a week and a cheese test once a week. When you put your own milk into cheese you have such a lot of control over what goes on."

He seems unflustered by the weight of tradition bearing down on him. Of the 202 farms registered with the government as making Lancashire before World War II, Rance could find only three producing what he regarded as the authentic article 50 years later. Kirkham, however, is confident that his family's Lancashire will survive. "I seem to be slotting in there somehow," he says.