

GOOD *food*

Jason Hinds is in many ways responsible for the nation's renewed love affair with artisan cheeses. He will be talking about his passion for pungency in the North East this month.

ARTISAN cheeseman Jason Hinds eats cheese for as many meals of the day as he can. His palate is tuned into cheese as a result of years of tasting the soft stuff. Hence it really isn't unusual for Jason to eat cheese for breakfast, lunch and dinner – and, invariably, at all points in between.

He's sales director for Neal's Yard Dairy – which, in the 1970s, virtually single-handedly saved Britain's artisan cheese-makers – and it is his daily task to taste some of its 60-odd farmhouse cheeses.

When we speak he is on his way home on a Friday evening – with a selection of five cheeses on the car seat next to him. Something for the weekend.

"Cheese is close to the most perfect food," he enthuses. "A ready meal available anywhere, any time. And more complex than wine."

Jason's passion started as a boy, in Cairo, where his father was posted in the 1970s. With no sweets available, the only British treat he could find was Laughing Cow cheese. Back in the UK, he discovered Colston Bassett Stilton and Keen's Cheddar and was forced to give up his post-graduate course when he spent more time in London's Neal's Yard Dairy than studying. Joining as sales assistant in 1991, he worked his way up to his present job, and has been key in developing markets in the States and Europe.

Jason is coming North later this month to take part in the Jesmond Dene House Food Festival. He will host a tasting event centred around tasting of a plate of the country's best artisan cheeses. And of course he will be talking up the North East's cheese-making heroes.

His belief is that it's an exciting time for artisan cheese producers in this country. At a time when production of cheese in France is falling, in this country a talented and enthusiastic generation of producers are re-inventing British cheese, unstified



by the tradition of generations – which he thinks makes for exciting times.

"Not sure if it is a word but this country went through a 'blandification' in terms of tastes after the war – like a gastronomic Hiroshima. We have come through that and what has surfaced has been a whole new cheese-making industry.

"There is no limit to the influences because people have travelled and they have tasted the world. There is an amazing energy and creativity which has made for dynamic and new tradition."

He raves about a cheese called St James, which is made in Cumbria and which he will be bringing along to the food festival.

A washed rind unpasteurised sheep's cheese, it is made at Holker Farm Dairy on the Holker Estate. Its flavour, says Jason, is "salty, meaty and a creamy texture". It is made by 26-year-old Martin Gott who typifies the young spirit of the food artisan.

"It is simply a great example of a new way of making British cheese," says Jason.

"The milk comes from a breed ewe that is rare in this country called Lacaune which is used in making roquefort cheese. This confluence of different influences from the UK and abroad is what makes the business so interesting at the moment."

Jason raves about Cotherstone and Doddington cheeses from the North East and will be including these on this tasting plate at Jesmond Dene House.

"It is an exciting time for the industry, there is much to enjoy and taste and I hope that people will enjoy hearing about the factors that have led to the renaissance of British cheese and created the high quality produce we have today.

"Britain has a rich artisan cheese culture which was largely obliterated post-war," he explains. "It's exciting to play a role in keeping these businesses flourishing."

● **Talk, tasting and lunch at Jesmond Dene House, May 22, 11am.**

Tasting plate of British artisan cheeses. Braised turbot, fresh asparagus, Morel mushrooms, iced vanilla parfait with lemon. Coffee and petits fours, £35. Includes coffee on arrival and glass of champagne.

Details: (0191) 213-3000
www.jesmonddenehouse.co.uk