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14 March 1999

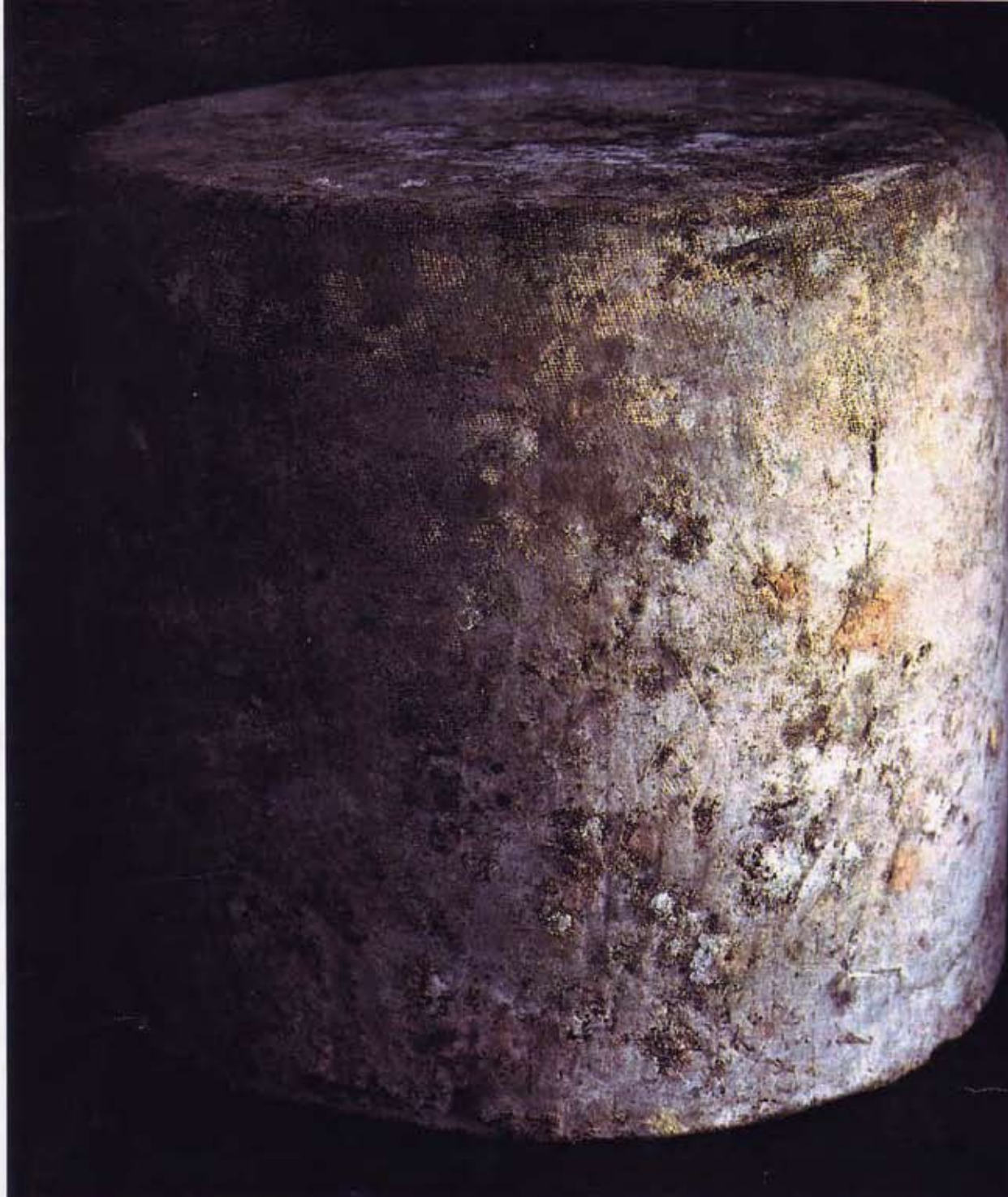


Paul Eddy went to Washington, DC, to report on the titanic battle between Microsoft and the US government. 'With the world's richest man effectively on trial, and the future of the Internet at stake, this was one antitrust trial that was never going to be dull.' See page 40



Richard Girling's investigation of British cheese was, for him, both a revelation and a fright: 'Revelation that English farmhouses are making a range of cheeses that rank among the very finest in the world. Fright that the apostles of conformity, masquerading as official champions of public health, will not rest until they have legislated them into oblivion.' Turn to page 16

Cover photograph by Paul Lowe. Main picture, this page: unpasteurised cheddar cheese at James Montgomery's farm in Somerset. Photograph by David Montgomery



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TOMORROW'S NEWS TODAY
Read the history of the years 2040-50 in the last 32-page chronicle. Gladiators fight to the death in Las Vegas, aliens are picked up by radio, a spaceship sets off for Eden, and television sets go completely mental



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The Bland Brand is a plain and ordinary trademark. Produced for people who have never been within three inches of a decent British cheese, and know no better.

THE CHEESE PICKLE

Tasty, traditional British cheeses could soon be pasteurised out of existence. Rich



irling says the time may be ripe for a rethink. Photographs by David Montgomery

THE

and the wensleydale.

It is like a video game, except the moves are played through a human finger in space, not through a cursor on a screen. Back a bit. Left. Forward. *There!* The finger hovers, describes a neat little circle in the air, then stabs down into a wedge of Parmigiano Reggiano. "This one?"

She is evidently a very nice girl. Chatty and smiley, she wants customer No 79 (as I am identified by the blue ticket issued by the supermarket queueing machine) to be happy. The finger returns jauntily to its starting point and steadies itself to try again.

"This one?... This one?... This one?..." Eventually, running out of options, she hits it: a small, plastic-wrapped cylinder of Hawes Wensleydale. Ah, *that one!* It makes her laugh. "The first I knew about wensleydale," she says, "was when I saw it on Wallace & Gromit."

The sign above her head says *Delicatessen*, identifying the section of the Safeway superstore set aside for the delectation of gourmets. Spooning, slicing and wrapping to order, she is that mighty grocer's concession to humanity; its public face and gastronomic fig leaf. The promise of expertise tugs like a pheromone – *delicatessen!* – filling one's mind with questions. That Somerset brie – is it unpasteurised? When will it be ready to eat? Is this a traditional wensleydale or a creamery (ie factory) job?

But one's passion dies like Epoisses de Bourgogne in a freezer. She can't tell one cheese from another.

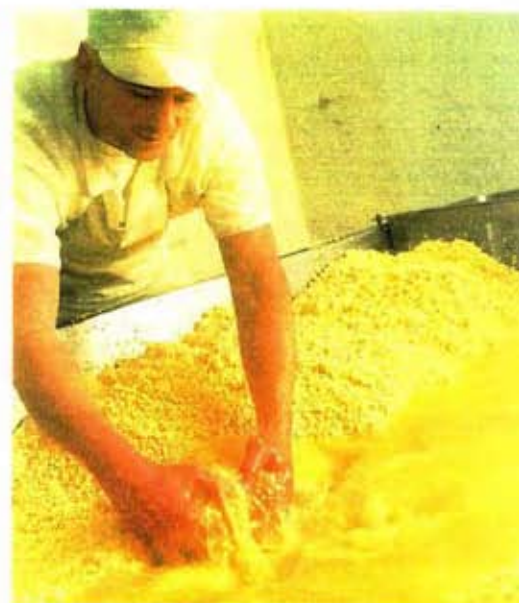
Two days later, my shoes galoshed in plastic bags, I am paddling through water in a cheesemonger's storeroom near Southwark Cathedral in London. I am, it would be easy to believe, in the company of a fully developed eccentric. Not long ago Tam Mason was reading zoology at Edinburgh University. With his long, scragged-back hair, wire-rimmed spectacles, earring and gap-toothed, beery-looking grin, he would still look comfortably at home in the students' union bar. His knowledge, however, is professorial and goes far beyond the academic.

My tape machine records what sounds afterwards like two badgers in a wormery: slow, heavy shufflings, breathy snufflings, uninhibited lip-smackings and contented grunts. Tam doesn't just know the names of the cheeses on his shelves. He knows the name of the man or woman who made each one, and the date of its making. He even had a hand in making some of them himself. We begin by journeying through the flavour curve of Mrs Kirkham's traditional Lancashire. A cheese made on Boxing Day is still a grainy amalgamation of curdy particles, but already by mid-January it has the kind of sharpened creaminess that has one's lips craning for more. We move on to a cheese made a month earlier, on November 27.

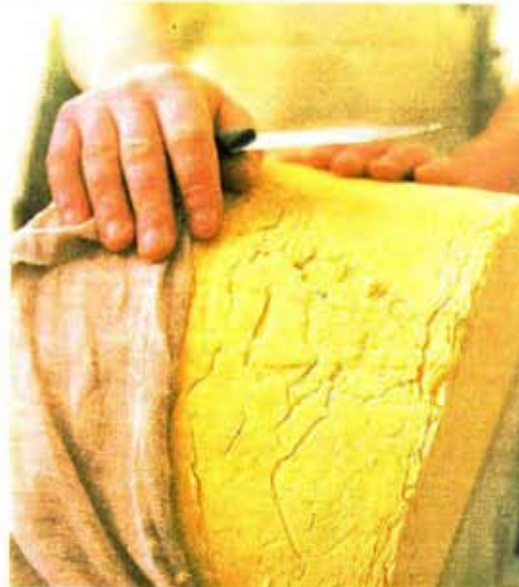
"More curve to the flavour," says Tam. "A bit more spread out." Then back another month, to October 21.



Brian Gale (above left) is herdsman at Manor Farm, North Cadbury, Somerset, a maker of traditional cheddar. Steve Bridges (above right) dry-stirs the curd away from the whey



The curd is pressed in moulds (above left) for three days; on the second day the cheeses are quartered and the cloths are stripped off (centre) before the cheeses are quartered and sold. Manor Farm



"Drier and deeper, but still with a lot of the sweetness of a young cheese." Then leapfrogging all the way back to a mature six-month-old. "Aaah!"

And so on around the shelves. There is Colston Bassett Stilton, Montgomery cheddar, Cuddy's Cave, Wolsery, Isle of Mull, Caerphilly, Cheshire, Gloucester, and Irish cheeses in the style of Gruyère and Gouda, like deep yellow curling stones. Another Irish cheese, quaintly named Desmond after part of the former kingdom of Munster, has a floral, almost boozy flavour that seems to be looking for an escape route down one's nose. Golden Cross is intensely creamy with a glandular spicing of goat that lays a scent trail all the way to the Loire valley, though its real home is Sussex. Two-year-old, extra-mature Lincolnshire Poacher – made to a cheddar recipe but as close to mousetrap as Meursault is to tinned Heineken – has such a depth of flavour you need a bigger mouth to contain it.

Cheese men, like connoisseurs of every sort, are suckers for the baroque excesses of wine-speak and Frenchification. A merchant who buys young cheeses to

age and mature in his own store is no mere cheesemonger – he is an *affineur* (literally, a ripener). The atmosphere of the Neal's Yard hard cheese store, where Tam works, appropriately mimics a chateau cellar or a limestone cave: the temperature held at 13°C, the air constantly moistened by regular sloppings of water across the floor. Soft cheeses, in their impatience to ripen, need to be restrained by a marginally lower temperature coupled with rainforest humidity of 95%. Overactive Stiltons are disciplined at 5°C.

"The point is," says Tam, "that everything in here is alive. A lot of activity is going on both inside them and on the surface – the moulds are developing, and the bacteria are slowly breaking down the proteins. You need a temperature which allows things to happen."

The flavour of the Lincolnshire Poacher is, as he says, as powerful and complex as old Burgundy, with a finish so long that you could watch an uncut Julius Caesar at Shakespeare's Globe just down the road and still find the imprint of it on your palate afterwards. The proffered



dipped in hot water to produce rinds. They then mature on shelves for 12 months. Finally owner, James Montgomery (above right), vacuums off excess mould before shop delivery

tiny sample is his wordless answer to a question about the difference between "real" and supermarket cheese. His grin, already broad, sets off on the last short leg of the journey towards his ears.

☆☆☆☆

It used to be said of the Rolling Stone Keith Richards that he was the strongest man in the world. His body had been abused so many times, and in so many ways, that there could be no other explanation for his survival. In this respect at least one cannot speculate on the matter of moulds and bacteria; he is a perfect analogy for British cheese. Fifteen years ago you would have said that British cheese was all but dead, its raucous flavours drowned in a sea of blandness. Cheddar for the chingfilm age was like a boy band of the palate, singing of lightly salted baby soap. Red leicester, cheshire and double Gloucester played exactly the same tune. To tell one from the other – indeed, to know that it was cheese at all – you had to read the label on the packet. We are told it's different now, that British cheese has

entered a new, golden era of quality and variety, in tune with the more sophisticated, educated tastes of *fin-de-siècle* Europe. Cheered on by the Ministry of Agriculture, UK cheese makers are pursuing not only domestic but also international markets, including the US. The best of their products rank among the best on the planet. And yet... Watching British cheese cross the Atlantic, one is reminded of a hedgehog crossing the road. There is excitement, anticipation; there is even an objective; but there is terrible danger. The odds against the long-term survival of real cheese – Tam Mason's kind of cheese – have always been longer than any sane man would put his money on. Its enemies are everywhere, and never more dangerous than when they are dressed as friends.

The 20th century struck its first blow against cheese in the first world war. Many businesses perished with their owners in the trenches, others died in the Depression that followed. The imposition of statutory control by the Milk Marketing Board in 1933 applied some much-needed lubrication to the rusted cogs of production and

supply, but the period of stability was short-lived. In January of the same year, Germany elected a new chancellor, Adolf Hitler, and unknowingly paved the way for a near-fatal attack on English cheese.

When war broke out, the Ministry of Food ordered that all milk for cheese should be diverted away from the farmhouses and used in factories to make bulk supplies of cheddar and other hard varieties such as cheshire and leicester. The policy was well meaning but devastating. Centralised production cut centuries-old regional supply chains. Instead of easily manageable cheeses leaving the farms on short local journeys, vast quantities of cumbersome raw milk lumbered off into the distance at enormous cost in wear and tear, labour and fuel. For every pound of cheese, the ministry had to shift a whole gallon of milk. By the time the war ended, English soft cheese, and farmhouse cheese-making in general, had suffered a mortal blow – where once there had been 15,000 cheese makers there were now just 126 – leaving the market softened up for its next three murderous assailants: the supermarkets, the European Union and the food police.

The Milk Marketing Board continued to show little sympathy for small cheese makers, using its power to raise its prices beyond the value of their finished cheese, or straightforwardly refusing to supply them. For makers of "territorial" cheeses, which depended for their character on the quality of local grazing and small variations in climate, the situation was especially hopeless. The milk supplied by the MMB could – and did – come from anywhere. A few small makers milking their own herds managed to struggle on. Others accepted the inevitable and went into bed and breakfast. Dazzled by the protectionist pyrotechnics illuminating the night sky over Brussels, the MMB wasn't going to mess about with batty little cheese makers when its own manufacturing arm, Dairy Crest, could more profitably convert the milk into another few metres of the European butter mountain.

The screw was given another turn in 1984 when Europe imposed national milk quotas – each member country was set a production limit based on its milk yield in the past. Given that much of the shortfall in British dairy production historically had been made good by imported butter and cheese from Australia, Canada and New Zealand – a supply line now constricted by European diktat – supply problems worsened and cheese makers faced yet more obstacles in expanding, or even sustaining, their businesses.

"The effect of quotas," says David Lees, commercial director of the Dairy Industry Federation, "was that the UK was not self-sufficient in milk production and the MMB had the monopoly on the supply and delivery of what we had." The outcome was predictable. "Farmers making cheese in the last few years," wrote English cheese's greatest champion, Patrick Rance, in *The Great British Cheese Book* in 1982, "have had to fight against bureaucratic interference calculated to make them feel like absconding criminals."

While all this was going on, and in the name, as always, of "the housewife", the supermarkets were busy squeezing the last few drops of taste and character out of what they obstinately persisted in calling "cheddar cheese". In the brave new world of sell 'em cheap, pile 'em high, there was no room in the economic equation for expensively trained staff dispensing personal attention to individual customers.

"Once they decided that it was cheaper to cut and wrap cheese by machine and leave customers to themselves," wrote Rance, "the rot had set in. Cheese had to be tough enough in texture and angular enough in shape to cause no problems requiring human understanding to solve them. They must submit, uncrumbling, to the violation of automatic cutting and prepacking." In place of carefully made, unpasteurised, cloth-bound cylindrical cheeses, with all their inconveniences of maturation and storage, loomed the anodyne monster of "block".

Designed to spend its life cased in plastic, it was rindless, tasteless and immature and – *eureka!* – demanded no greater skill from retail staff than a toddler's competence with building blocks. The Milk Marketing Board loved it.

The only thing organic about block cheese was the language used to describe it. Words grew new meanings like Stilton grows mould. The MMB, for example, decided that the correct technical term for a medium-sized factory making industrial cheddar cheese was – what else? – “farmhouse”, while a large industrial plant was a “creamery”. The tenacious few still struggling to make proper cheese on proper farms were described as “traditional”. It was, and remains, a useful distinction, though the MMB itself tried very hard to render it worthless. Its persistently repeated claim, that there was no difference in flavour between traditional cheese and block, served only to confirm Patrick Rance's opinion that the British dairy industry was being run by people who didn't know what real cheese tasted like.

Fortunately, outright falsehoods, even when enshrined in the public policy of a state-run monopoly, have a limited shelf life. The public had already made known its dissatisfaction with horrible bread and horrible beer. Now cheese began to come under the same kind of pressure to make itself worth eating again. The theologies of bulk retailing were non-negotiable – stackability was god – but at least the supermarkets began to understand that a significant proportion of their “customer base” retained complete sets of fully functioning taste buds. Perhaps block could, after all, be made to taste like cheese as well as look like it. At the same time, they observed the glee with which foreign producers – notably the French – had moved in to fill the quality vacuum. They knew very well that the question “Would you like cheese?” at a dinner party heralded the entry of brie, camembert or roquefort, not cheddar, lancashire or wensleydale.

The surviving traditionalists recognised the opportunity to raise the profile of their products. “The consumers after 1980 became more sophisticated in their tastes,” says David Lees. “What we've seen is the development of businesses which survived the process of attrition after the second world war, and the emergence of a niche market.” Connoisseurs emerged and began to speak of floral bouquets, fruitiness, nuttiness, acidity, length and depth of flavour. In the new lexicon of cheese, it was not good enough to speak of cheddar: you had to specify the *terroir* or *château* from which it came. Names such as Montgomery, Quicke and Keen began to be dropped in the same breath as Margaux, Rothschild and Lafite. The quality backlash had begun, and it was shortly to be handed a landmark victory.

Ironically for an organisation that had never retreated from the argument that debasement of standards was what its customers wanted, the Milk Marketing Board's nemesis came in the form of the Ultimate Housewife. Mrs Thatcher may have quit the spotlight by 1994, but her loathing of state monopolies was burnt into the Conservative government's psyche. The ludicrous milk waster Dairy Crest was floated on the stock market and freed to develop products that bore comparison with real cheese. The MMB itself was replaced by the dairy farmers' co-operative Milk Marque, which now controls about 48% of the UK milk supply. Not all the cheese makers' problems disappeared with their main antagonist (as we shall see, the bureaucracy is still alive and taking scalps), but at least it became easier for them to specify which farms their milk should come from, and to produce cheeses of genuine local character.

For the first time since the Ministry of Food surrendered them to the war effort, soft cheeses began to appear in significant quantity. Alongside (and in many places instead of) French classics on smart tables appeared the wondrously creamy Wigmore, made from sheep's milk in Berkshire, and the camembert-like, Jersey-milk Bonchester from Roxburghshire. Hard-cheese lovers



Neal's Yard Dairy, Covent Garden (left), is for cheese connoisseurs; plastic-wrapped cheese blocks (right) are not



got the sublime Lincolnshire Poacher, and macho men got Stinking Bishop, a Gloucestershire variety whose flavour would awaken the taste buds of the dead. Overall, England now has more than 300 varieties of craftsman-made cheese, many of which can stand comparison with the best in the world.

Is this, then, the end of the story – the happy conclusion we've all been waiting for? Alas, no. All the old tensions are still simmering away, and it is by no means certain that the right side is going to win. Supermarket shelves are still dominated by block, and block's more passionate enthusiasts are still ready to argue that rindless, plastic-wrapped, pasteurised factory cheddar tastes every bit as good as a traditional, cylindrical cloth-bound one made from unpasteurised milk.

On both sides of the ideological divide, “pasteurisation” raises more hackles than any other word in the entire vocabulary of dairying. In cheeses made from raw milk, which includes most of the traditionals, the souring or curdling process is begun by naturally occurring bacteria in the milk. In cheese made from pasteurised milk, which includes all block, the natural bacteria and flavour-friendly enzymes are killed by heat treatment and must be replaced by laboratory-bred artificial “starter” cultures.

Traditionalists hate pasteurisation because it eliminates the subtle variations in flavour that are the base currency of connoisseurship. James Montgomery, whose family has been making traditional cheddar in Somerset since the 1920s, says each day's make has a different character. “They vary in terms of fruitiness, nuttiness and body. Every so often there's one that goes right up your nose, like perfume. Or you get spritzly flavours with a little more acidity.” To supermarkets such talk is heresy. They want a safe product that always tastes the same and isn't going to throw a tantrum if it doesn't get expert attention. And the only way to ensure that is by pasteurisation.

Wherever the cultures clash there is potential for disaster. Montgomery did supply a few supermarket delicatessens, but felt obliged to send them younger cheese than would be sold by a specialist cheesemonger. To many keen cheese eaters, a bit of blueing on mature cheddar is added value. To supermarkets it means only mouldy, unsaleable cheese. “Another good maker of cheddar in Somerset actually packed in completely,” he says, “because they were losing so much money by having perfectly good cheese thrown away by supermarkets.”

There is a widespread misconception that raw-milk cheeses, like plague rats, are vectors for disease. In reality, unpasteurised hard cheeses are no more likely to carry listeria or E-coli. Any microorganisms that survive from the

raw milk are killed off by the acidity of the maturing cheese. Contamination, if it occurs, will be the result of poor handling, not of anything that happens during manufacture. And yet public health authorities – commonly reviled as the “food police” – often react with panic when a food-poisoning case is traced to unpasteurised cheese. Or even, sometimes, when it isn't. Notoriously, in 1995, an attempt by officials of South Lanarkshire council to have the entire stock of Lanark Blue cheese destroyed was overturned in the courts when the cheese maker, Humphrey Errington, proved his pungent, roquefort-style sheep's-milk cheese was no danger to human health. The cost to the taxpayer was £500,000.

In May last year, when a single case of E-coli poisoning was traced to a caerphilly cheese made by the award-winning Somerset firm of Duckett, the Department of Health banned the sale of any Duckett's cheese anywhere in the country. Despite the fact that the risk turned out to have been limited to a single batch handled by one employee, and that only one case of sickness was ever reported, the order was issued under emergency legislation designed to arrest the spread of major epidemics.

The principal casualties were Duckett himself and a Surrey-based cheese processor, James Aldridge, whose stock included more than £40,000-worth of its cheese. It was not from the same batch as the suspect cheese, and had been passed as safe by local health officials, but the emergency control order not only required Mr Aldridge to destroy seven tonnes of perfectly good cheese, but denied him any right to compensation. This apparent injustice was overturned in November when the High Court ruled that the public health minister, Tessa Jowell, had behaved unlawfully, but hell hath no fury like a bureaucrat scorned. The health department has applied for leave to appeal, leaving the wholly innocent Mr Aldridge, and other cheese makers who depend on him for their business, still facing the prospect of ruin, and other small specialist food producers glancing anxiously over their shoulders.

The incontinence of the UK government's reaction may be measured against the response of the normally ultra-cautious US Food and Drug Administration, which intercepted a consignment of Duckett's cheese that was on its way to America when the crisis blew up. It examined it, exonerated it, and happily cleared it for sale.

Other craft cheese makers have simply buckled under the weight of bureaucracy. New Zealand-born Juliet Harbutt, author of *The World Encyclopedia of Cheese* and organiser of the Tesco-sponsored British Cheese Awards, reported last September that 34 UK cheese makers had vanished from her list in a single year. Some have emigrated – one prize-winner in the Cotswolds moved his business to France; another casualty of the Aldridge fiasco is talking of reopening in Chile. Success, even a worldwide reputation, is no guarantee of survival. A much-mourned absentee from the shelves of Neal's → 21

Blueing on mature cheddar is added value. To supermarkets it means only mouldy cheese

Yard is Boucher, supreme champion at the 1996 Royal Highland Show and a centrepiece of Chris Patten's banqueting tables in Hong Kong. After 18 years the maker, John Curtis, declared it to be "the final straw" when a change in regulations imposed a fourfold increase in the tuberculosis-testing of his herd. "The regulatory regime is intolerable," he said in a widely quoted statement.

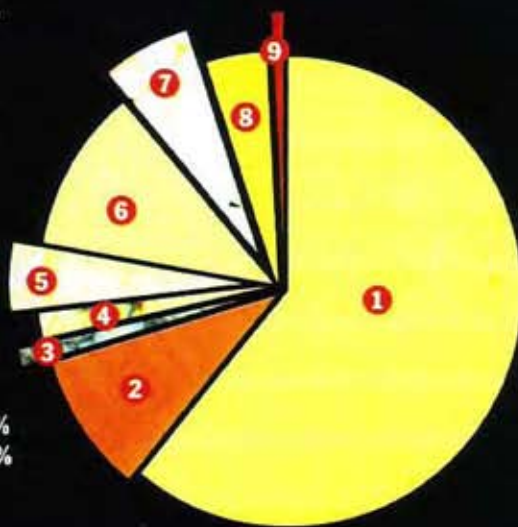
Randolph Hodgson, proprietor of Neal's Yard Dairy and, like John Curtis, a former chairman of the Specialist Cheese Makers Association, is an uncompromising champion of raw-milk cheese. "The best cheeses in the world are all unpasteurised," he says, "but I see a threat to their continued production. A consensus of food scientists and technologists perceive a threat to public health, and they think it shouldn't be allowed to continue. Food scientists distrust it because it's outside their remit — a product that's made on the farm and not in a factory. They hate the lack of big-company control."

The stalking horse for unpasteurised cheese is raw (green-top) bottled milk, which the Labour government promised to ban. "There is no reason why consumers should be exposed to this risk," said food safety minister Jeff Rooker in November 1997. He was confounded in January this year when agriculture minister Nick Brown announced not the expected ban but tighter and more frequent health checks. It is a welcome reprieve, but how long will the line hold? The sale of raw milk is already banned in Scotland, and there is nothing more certain than that it will come under renewed attack in England and Wales, particularly when the new Food Standards Agency hits its stride. Once green-top milk goes, the next target inevitably will be unpasteurised cheese.

The US Department of Agriculture has already made one attempt to achieve an international ban on the sale of unpasteurised cheese. That it failed was due largely to the outraged opposition of the French, but even Gallic solidarity cannot be guaranteed for ever. It remains true

CHEESE MARKET STATISTICS, 1997-98

- 1 All cheddar** 188,000 tonnes (60.84% of the total cheese market)
- 2 Territorials** All UK varieties (except Stilton) identified by a regional name. 30,000 tonnes, or 9.7%
- 3 Blue cheese** Imported and UK cheeses, except Stilton (3000 tonnes; 0.97%)
- 4 Stilton** 5000 tonnes, or 1.62%
- 5 Continental and speciality cheese** All non-blue imports and UK-made farmhouse cheeses, except cheddars and territorials. 15,000 tonnes, or 4.85%
- 6 Cheese spread** 34,000 tonnes, or 11%
- 7 Cottage cheese** 19,000 tonnes; 6.15%
- 8 Processed cheese slices** 13,000 tonnes, or 4.2%
- 9 Pick'n'mix** 2000 tonnes, or 0.65%



that 72% of all French cheese producers, and 49% of all varieties whose names are protected by *appellation contrôlée*, use unpasteurised milk. Analysis of total output, however, tells a different story. Bulk producers command such an enormous slice of the market that fully 82% of the cheese made in France is pasteurised, a figure that in future can only rise. Raw-milk producers can be relied upon to defend their corner for all they are worth, but the worrying fact is that their corner is worth only 18% of the market. France may still be in touch with tradition, but its power base is shrinking,

In the UK, too, none of the commercial big hitters uses raw milk. Much traditional cheddar is now made with pasteurised, as is all Stilton — ironically the only British cheese whose name is protected by an EC designation of origin. Given America's addiction to litigation, nobody will want to be held to blame for making anyone take an unscheduled visit to the bathroom — so it is impossible to believe that the US Department of Agriculture will abandon its campaign to outlaw unpasteurised cheese, and difficult to believe, in the long run, that the big battalions will not get their way.

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In the light of all this – the nervy, trigger-happy and ultimately brutal attitude of the UK health establishment, the hostility of the Americans, the fatalistic surrender to pasteurisation of French and British cheese makers – you might imagine that unpasteurised cheese was some kind of mass killer on the scale of tobacco or the motorcar. As usual, prejudice is not in step with the facts.

Data collected by the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre show the precise breakdown of all reported cases of food-borne illness between 1992 and 1996. Top of the table, accounting for 33.6% of the total, are poultry and eggs, followed by red meat and meat products (18.3%) and fish and shellfish (11.3%). Ultra-healthy salads, vegetables and fruit score 11.2%, and drinking water, as one might expect, only 2.7%.

And cheese? Brace yourself for the worst.

0.1%. And that's all cheese, not just unpasteurised.

The current chairman of the Specialist Cheese Makers Association is Arthur Cunynghame, proprietor of the specialist cheese merchant Paxton & Whitfield. "Cheese is," he says, "a very safe food." He accepts, as all cheese makers do, that pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems – the very young, the very old and the ill – should treat all soft and blue cheeses, raw and pasteurised alike, with the same caution as they would treat eggs. And yet experienced producers of hygienic, well-made cheese are treated like pornographers, balanced on a legal knife edge. Their very smallness is anathema to food scientists reared on the ethos of mass production. Like huge factories, where line managers need to be reassured that health and safety procedures are being correctly followed by their employees, one-man cheese-making operations now need to have hazard analysis control point (HACCP) systems, involving check lists, tick boxes and time charts.

Was the milk delivered at the correct temperature? Tick box. Was the hose connected properly? Tick box. Was

the acidity correctly adjusted? Is the salt from an appropriate source? Has the lavatory been cleaned? Did you wash your hands? And on, and on, and on. Whereas systems like these are essential in large companies where workers cannot be monitored, they invite sledgehammer/nut analogies when they are imposed on a farmhouse where the only performance the proprietor has to monitor is his own. "The sheer volume of paperwork is turning them into penpushers," says Randolph Hodgson. "Instead of looking after his goats, every 10 minutes the farmer has to go and tick a box to prove to himself that he is still doing something he has done all his life. He is being ground down by the hassle." Is it any wonder that so many of them are throwing in the towel?

All this comes on top of ordinary commercial pressures. Against the tide of history, it may happen that some things will actually improve. The government is committed to the abolition or reduction of European milk quotas, and the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC) is taking a hard look at Milk Marque. If the MMC comes down on the milk processors' (ie cheese makers') side, it will kick away Milk Marque's right to dictate prices and stop its plans to build a huge processing plant of its own near Cullompton in Devon (raising the spectre of the bad old butter-mountain days of pre-floitation Dairy Crest). "It would take 1m litres a day off the market," says David Lees, "in a sector which already has supply problems and sufficient processing capacity."

The makers and sellers of block cheese, meanwhile, are busy elbowing their way into the "premium" end of the market and cannot be expected to link arms with the traditionalists who are, after all, their competitors. Even purists such as James Montgomery, Randolph Hodgson and Arthur Cunynghame allow that the quality of block cheddar over the past six years has increased greatly.

"Most people," says Win Merrells, senior cheese selector for Marks & Spencer, "can't tell the difference

between pasteurised and unpasteurised cheese." To prove her point, she sends samples: double Gloucester, red Leicester, Mrs Butler's Tasty Lancashire and M&S's own Taw Valley Mature Cheddar, produced after the supplier, the Cheese Company, had carried out 220 vat trials and about 30-40 tastings to find a formula that would satisfy Merrells's highly developed, exacting palate. "The point," she says, "was to achieve both quality and consistency." Her cheeses are, as you would expect, irreproachable. Good, honest, everyday cheeses.

Yet the fact remains that the very best cheeses, the ones guaranteed to stick in your memory and not in your mouth, are all made from raw milk. "Pasteurised cheese can be good, but not great," says Arthur Cunynghame (whose shops sell both kinds). Complexity of flavour is too often sacrificed for the easier option of acidity and sheer strength. "You get only a single flavour," he says, "not the complex range of flavours that you do with a well-made unpasteurised cheese. Look at last year's British Cheese Awards. Ten out of the 18 class winners were unpasteurised."

Randolph Hodgson makes a special case for Stilton, but only just. "Even the very finest pasteurised Stilton," he says, "would be improved by unpasteurised milk."

So: where does the future lie? Playing hunt the wensleydale in a supermarket delicatessen, or tracing flavour curves with the likes of Tam Mason? In the end, one can do no better than return to the favoured wine analogy. The supermarket cheeses, with their uncomplicated, souped-up flavours and clone-like consistency, are like good-quality products from a modern New World winery – always reliable, never varying. The traditional cheeses, with their variety and unpredictability, are like classic growths, as variable as the conditions that create them. It is not easy, though nevertheless just possible, to believe they will be allowed to coexist, and serve their different markets, in mutual respect and harmony ■



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