



## The Cheese Course - Janet Fletcher

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### Stichelton a Stilton cousin fit for the holiday

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Craig Lee / Special to The Chronicle

Stichelton is a relatively new cheese made from the same starter cultures formerly used for Stilton.

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Even people who shun blue cheese during the rest of the year recognize that the holiday buffet practically requires one.

Stilton may be the conventional choice, but who wants to be conventional? This year, consider introducing your dinner guests to Stichelton, a relatively new British cheese with Stilton roots.

Randolph Hodgson of Neal's Yard Dairy, the London retailer and exporter of fine cheeses from Great Britain, nurtured Stichelton from idea to reality about three years ago. Made with raw cow's milk, Stichelton is a farmstead blue produced with the same starter culture formerly used for Stilton.

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Until the late 1980s, Stilton was a raw-milk blue, too. But a *Listeria* scare in 1989 persuaded Stilton producers to make the use of pasteurized milk mandatory. Stilton was never directly implicated in the *Listeria* matter, but overnight, raw-milk Stilton, a cheese made for centuries, ceased to exist.

Working with pasteurized milk, which has less bacterial life, Stilton producers had to use a more vigorous starter culture. The refashioned Stilton wasn't inferior, Hodgson diplomatically told *Culture* magazine, but it wasn't the same. He wanted to create a blue with the sweet flavor and creamy texture he remembered from the old days.

Fortunately, a colleague had saved some of the former culture, and a culture manufacturer had kept it alive. Hodgson recruited an American cheesemaker, Joe Schneider, and the owners of a Holstein farm in Nottinghamshire, and the partners built a creamery on the farm to produce their new cheese. They can't call their product Stilton but that's clearly the model.

The recipe calls for minimal amounts of starter and rennet, so the milk coagulates slowly and the resulting curd is especially delicate. After cutting, it is hand-ladled onto a cooling table and drained overnight. The next day, the slabs are milled into small curds, salted and molded.

About six weeks into the aging process, and again a week later, the 15- to 16-pound

cylinders are pierced with needles to create the air channels that allow the blue mold (*Penicillium roqueforti*) to grow. At three months, the wheels go to Neal's Yard for further maturing. By the time they arrive on the West Coast, they are typically 4 to 5 months old.

A wedge of Stichelton has a thin, crusty natural rind with an overlay of powdery white mold. The interior is butter-yellow to pale gold, with a moderate amount of veining. I love the aroma, a mingling of toast and hazelnuts, and the plush, buttery texture. The flavor is mellow, neither piquant nor salty, leaving a lingering, balanced impression. If you've been saving a special bottle of Port or dessert wine for the holidays, Stichelton would make a worthy companion.

Look for Stichelton at the Cowgirl Creamery Ferry Plaza in San Francisco. Availability in the Bay Area is limited and may be more so after the holidays.

**Next up:** Appalachian, a cow's milk cheese from Virginia's Meadow Creek Dairy.

*Janet Fletcher is the author of "Cheese & Wine: A Guide to Selecting, Pairing, and Enjoying" and "The Cheese Course," both from Chronicle Books. Contact her at [food@sfchronicle.com](mailto:food@sfchronicle.com) or at [www.janetfletcher.com](http://www.janetfletcher.com).*

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