



MRS.  
KIRKHAM  
HAD A  
FARM

*A handful of artisanal British cheese makers are reviving a great (and delicious) cultural and gastronomic tradition*

BY JOHN WHITLEY

PHOTOGRAPHS

BY HUGH PALMER

Ruth Kirkham, above, makes superb farmhouse Lancashire with milk from her Friesian cows, at right.



## F A R M H O U S E C H E E S E S

**I**N THEIR 400-YEAR-OLD farmhouse on the grassy slopes of a Somerset valley, brothers George and Steven Keen make cheese. Because they're barely five miles from the ancient limestone caverns of the Cheddar Gorge, they call it Cheddar. Yet to anyone accustomed to the flavorless, orange, plastic-wrapped stuff sold all over the world under that name, their Cheddar tastes as if it came from another planet. This is real, handmade cheese—pungent, crumbly, tenderly aged.

The Keens are among the last two dozen or so farming families in Great Britain who still make the great regional hard cheeses according to generations-old methods. Fifteen years ago, such farmers were on the verge of disappearing completely.

"It had got so that there was almost no point in making cheese," George Keen says, standing beside the tiny copper vat his great-aunt used to make cheese with before World War II. "Prices were so low that most of the other makers closed down or turned into factories. It would have been simpler for us to sell our milk unprocessed. But slowly people became interested in stronger tastes, and we saw that we could get a premium price if we distinguished ourselves by providing something special."

This last-minute revival gave new life to the cheeses of regions beyond Somerset, as well: Deep red Cheshire, buttery Lancashire, and biting Double Gloucester, among others, have also managed to survive. Specialty shops have sprouted up around the nation, perhaps most notably Neal's Yard Dairy in London's Covent Garden, where Randolph Hodgson is a passionate advocate of these time-honored cheeses. Without question, in fact, Hodgson is the white knight who brought this farmhouse industry back from the edge.

"When I started in 1979," says the 37-year-old Hodgson, "there were really only a handful of farmers left. Everyone else had either given up or changed to making commercial products with pasteurized milk and wax coatings. The tradition was close to being lost."

Neal's Yard now sells a quarter of a million pounds of cheese a year—40,000 pounds of it to the United States. "You have to sell it properly. People have got used to the idea that Cheddar or Lan-

cashire is incredibly dull, so you must persuade them to taste it. Over the past five years, the makers themselves have got more confidence in their product. They can see people are enjoying it, and they're being paid properly."

The Keens have gained enough confidence to construct a brand-new dairy in a big 18th-century barn, where they make as much as 500 pounds of cheddar a day from the milk of their herd of 180 Friesian cows. "The point of making good cheese is that it has to

be done by hand," George Keen explains. "If you try to use too many mechanical aids or to modernize too much, it loses its character. My mother learned to make cheese from her family, and we're still doing it almost the same way, though on a larger scale."

Instead of the round copper tub designed for the lone housewife, for instance, the new dairy uses a 1,000-gallon vat. Starter and rennet are added to the milk, which is heated until it forms curds and whey. The mixture is churned, then the curd is put into a cooling tub where it's "cheddared"—continually turned to give it its texture, then allowed to solidify in blocks. Finally, it's put through a mill, salted, scooped into molds, and pressed for three days.

At virtually every moment, the human touch is required; this is as labor-intensive an endeavor as making sculpture. The Keens' cheese maker, Jack Parsons, and at least one helper are constantly checking the temperature of the milk, testing its acidity, and lifting and turning the curds as they gradually harden from runny junket into crumbliness. The slightest variation in flavor can tell a connoisseur precisely who made the cheese, from which pasture the milk came, and in what season.

The revival of farmhouse cheeses has made them fashionable at Britain's smarter restaurants and dinner tables. Yet they're still as rooted in farming life as they were at any time in the past. In Europe, cheese has always been a basic tool of the farm economy, giving milk added value—and it still is. Where a gallon of milk may sell for £1, the same amount converted into cheese can fetch upwards of £1.60.

Traditionally, cheese making was the province of the farmer's



*By sheer stubbornness,  
the Keens persist in  
making farmhouse  
cheddar with true  
character.*

**The Keen brothers' farmhouse in Lancashire, near Cheddar Gorge, top; above right, their crumbly and delicious cheese.**



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wife. The Keens' mother was inducted into the mysteries of the process by her aunt. Ruth Kirkham, on the other hand, started making her acclaimed Lancashire only after she married John Kirkham, a farmer from a neighboring village. Today, she sells to stores like Harrods and is famous enough to get fan mail from as far away as Africa that's addressed simply to "Mrs. Kirkham, Lancashire".

For 16 years, this indefatigable and cheerful mother of three has worked a 12-hour day, seven days a week, in her cramped, makeshift dairy in a particularly unpicturesque spot on the damp green Pennines near Preston. "If I didn't make cheese, we couldn't be in farming," Mrs. Kirkham says. "If you're in a small way like we are, with only 40 cows, you can win an extra few pounds like that. There's about 100 gallons to make into cheese—we add the new morning's milk to last night's in the tub. For 70 minutes, I'm going really hard."

The first task is to add the starter, a chemical culture prepared the night before and dunked in the milk. The starter stimulates the bacteria that give acidity to the milk and make it go cheesy. It's the trickiest and most mysterious part of the process, and every cheese maker has a secret tweak. Some even claim that a starter isn't necessary. A generous dose of starter, though, is guaranteed protection against phage, a bacterial infection—but too much will make the cheese acidic. Mrs. Kirkham uses only the tiniest amount, risking an expensive disaster, but usually getting a superb result.

After adding the starter, she heats up the 100-odd gallons in her bath-size tub to 86 degrees and adds some animal rennet, which helps the milk to form a junket; otherwise it would turn into a sort of crême fraîche. "You have to work it until it starts to set into curds," she says. "Then I drain off the whey from the top. This is when you can tell if the cheese is going to be good. It should be nice and springy."

The really backbreaking job is shoveling the compacted curds up from the tub into the drainer. "Then I crumble them up by hand. After each lot of crumbling, they have to be pressed to get out the last of the whey. This is important, and I do it three times. By the end of the day, I'll have handled that curd so many times that it feels as though I've been lifting half a ton."

The rest of the day is spent grinding and binding the cheeses into their molds and scrubbing them down. There are no short cuts in the process. Mrs. Kirkham's Friesians are nourished on home-grown chemical-free silage, and she has adamantly resisted all pressure to pasteurize: "It takes out all the enzymes and the individual flavor, which are what make each cheese different."

She responds the same way to suggestions that she expand: "People often say, 'Why don't you get someone to help you so that you can make even more?' But the result might not be the same. A lady from one of the supermarket chains came to watch me one day, and she said, 'You're the nearest thing the 20th century has to a slave!' It would be so nice to just have a day off each week."

Even when there's a larger pool of relatives to draw on, the cheese maker's life can be a strain. As Chris Duckett, whose family has been making Caerphilly for three generations, says, "My brother Philip and I are supposed to take holidays on alternate years, but we hardly ever manage." For consolation, he keeps llamas on the rambling Duckett farm near Wedmore. They, along with the Ducketts' herd of 120 Friesians, roam the eerie Netherlandish landscape of what the locals call the moors—the great expanse of wetlands stretching from the Mendip Hills towards Devon, mostly below sea level. All summer the cows are out among the pastures—followed by mobile milking units called bells and by a tanker that takes the milk back to the farm on higher ground.

When Chris's mother began making cheese in the 1920s, the milking was done by hand, of course. Otherwise, she says, the process has hardly changed. Unlike other hard cheeses, Caerphilly is eaten young and so must be made more rapidly. The two daily milkings are mixed together with starter and rennet—The Ducketts use a vegetarian one, which is slightly cheaper than the animal variety—and then four men work flat-out to churn and cut the curd and pack it into molds for pressing.

"This is a two-hour cheese," Chris Duckett explains. "You mustn't leave it too long or the curd solidifies, and you don't heat it as high as Cheddar. The whey is drained off after one and one-quarter hours. Then we pack it into these muslin-lined molds that have a special collar to make it easier to turn them out—that's why our cheese



*"It's the vision of the cheese maker that determines the quality of a cheese," believes Randolph Hodgson.*



Top, Hodgson, of Neal's Yard Dairy, tastes a cheese sample in his aging room. Bottom right, a selection of his cheeses.

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has that ridge round the top."

Filling the 120 molds takes about 40 intensive minutes. Then they're put under a pair of ornate cast-iron presses dated 1869. Dripping whey, they are turned and salted to develop a slight rind, then wrapped again and re-pressed until they're hard enough to spend a further 24 hours in the brine bath. Usually, the cheeses are eaten within ten days of their production. This young, they have an almost lemony flavor. Matured for about two months, they also develop a grassy tang—which Mrs. Duckett particularly likes.

It may seem an anomaly for a Welsh cheese, which Caerphilly was originally, to be made in England, but Chris Duckett has historical justification. "My mother's father was a cheese dealer near here and he realized that the Welsh could not make enough Caerphilly to meet demand. It was a miner's cheese—its freshness and nutrients made it perfect for eating down in the pit. There was plenty of spare milk in Somerset, so he took to making the cheeses and taking them over the Bristol Channel to Wales. I can remember them just sitting on straw. Later we used cardboard boxes."

Since Stilton (see box) is the only cheese protected by an appellation of origin in Great Britain, such practices are legal and quite common. "We made Cheddar in the war," Duckett says, "and you could make Cheshire here. But it would taste different because of the different plants and minerals in the milk and since we're lower down."

By these lights, the quirkiness of the Appleby family's choosing to make Cheshire cheese in Shropshire seems positively reasonable. Lucy Appleby moved to Hawkstone Abbey Farm from Cheshire before World War II to join her husband, Lance, with whom she started the business. At 86, Lance is still making deliveries; and Lucy still pops into the dairy to lend an expert eye and hand.

The farm itself is actually only ten miles over the Cheshire border and still on part of the Cheshire Plain—whose soil seasoned with alum and salts gives the cheese its punch. Though the house was never part of an abbey, it was gentrified a century or so ago with monastic-looking windows to make a pleasing vista from the picturesque park opposite.


In the 1930s, there were more than 400 farms producing real, unpasteurized, cloth-bound Cheshire. Today, the Applebys' farm is

the only one. Though Mrs. Appleby still looks in, the dairy is now in the hands of the couple's two sons, Edward and Robert; their respective wives, Christine and Elizabeth; and Dave Collins, the sardonic cheese maker who spent seven years as Mrs. Appleby's assistant. Here, too, there has been little attempt at automation, although the rest of the farm has very up-to-date equipment.

One thing that has changed is the ingredient that gives Cheshire its distinctive red color. In the old days, says Collins, farmers poured in carrot juice. Today a natural dye made from annatto seeds is added with the starter. The coloring is an aesthetic touch that makes no difference to the taste; the Applebys also produce an unblushingly white version of the cheese.

Otherwise, the cheese is made much like Cheddar and Lancashire, with a few variations. Like Mrs. Kirkham, the Applebys introduce a tiny amount of starter. Indeed, it's probably this delicacy that protects the cheese from the overacidity that spoils some Cheshires. An Appleby Cheshire can always be picked out by its opulently mellow, rounded taste.

One vat of milk makes about 750 pounds of cheese at the Appleby farm. The cheese is compressed in one of 14 Victorian cheese presses alongside the dairy—a magnificent collection salvaged from neighbors who retired. Each cheese is wrapped in calico smeared with an edible paste, rather like wallpapering, to make it stick tight. A saggy wrapping means cracking and blueing later on. That would be a fatal flaw in a cheese that boasts a long shelf life. It has to be turned every day for the first couple of weeks to stop the moisture from sitting at the bottom. Then it's matured anywhere from two months to a year—growing ever richer and saltier, but never losing its juiciness.

These are the authentic flavors of an earlier time. The dairy farmers who have taken up old ways, resuscitating them for the modern age, are far from self-conscious anachronisms putting on a show for visitors. They are genuine artisans, giving us, with every succulent morsel of cheese they create, a vivid illustration of the continuity between these authentic food products and the great cultural inheritance from which they sprang. 

## The Stilton Revival

**T**he first traditional British cheese to be marketed with a high price to match its air of exclusivity was Stilton. In 1966, it became the only cheese in Britain to have its own trademark, when a High Court ruled that only Stilton-style cheeses made in the counties of Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, and Derbyshire were entitled to carry that name.

Still, Stilton's quality has suffered over time, as its producers have gone over entirely to pasteurization. Yet the small Colston Bassett and District Dairy, Ltd. in Nottinghamshire makes creamy Stiltons comparable to the old ones. Ernie Wagstaff, Colston Bassett manager, argues for the advantages of pasteurizing. "We don't have to start processing all the milk every morning," he says, "and there are still plenty of variations in each batch of cheeses." Some good Stiltons also come from the Cropwell Bishop dairy in Vale of Belvoir.

Stilton's curds are milled and thrust into molds, hand-turned daily. At five weeks, the cheese goes into a blueing machine, a drumful of spikes that pierce it to let in oxygen, which stimulates the mold that makes the veins. After ten weeks, the cheese is shipped.

*Despite the fact that  
all Stilton is now  
pasteurized, sometimes  
it still retains its  
blue-veined luster.*



**Creamy, ivory-hued Stilton, above, first made as early as the 1720s, has long been known as "the king of English cheeses."**