

Vicky Frost enters the mouth-watering and highly specialised world of the professional taste tester, where lucky people actually get paid to eat chocolate, sample different cheeses or simply sip champagne

Is this the best job ever?

What a job. Nibbling on organic chocolate. Savouring the finest cheeses. Quaffing the most delicious wines.

Could there be anything more wonderful than tasting food for a living?

I'm pondering this question as I stand in Neal's Yard Dairy at Borough Market in London, with its great wheels of golden cheddar, oozing brie and sharp goats cheese laid out on the slate counter. The cheesemongers are busy handing out tasty morsels of deliciousness and the air seems almost thick with the pungent waft of produce. I'm seriously wondering if there is any way I could force Bronwen Percival, a cheese buyer for the company who I'm here to meet, to hand over her job. Already today I have spoken to Dee Blackstock, a champagne buyer for Waitrose, and Micah Carr-Hill, the fabulously-titled head of taste for Green & Blacks chocolate. And now I have total career envy.

"I've always loved cheese," says Percival, "but I didn't realise cheese was my passion until I started working with it." Now she spends her time liaising with farmers, checking the cheeses that are gently maturing before being put into the shop and, of course, getting stuck into the good stuff. "A lot of what we do is what people call ageing cheese – some cheese we'll buy a few days old and mature it," she says. "Tasting in that sense is a huge part of the job. Every Thursday we get together as a group at the ripening facility and choose 10 or 12 cheeses and taste them together and decide if there's a problem or if they're ready."

Roll on Thursday afternoon, eh? Although most days will see Blackstock getting stuck

into a glass of something delicious. "I taste 20 to 30 wines every day," she says, "and we go to quite a lot of tastings – we taste at least 100 wines at one of them." Even though tasting, let's be clear, is not the same thing as knocking back a load of booze, wine fatigue can still set in by the end of the day: "Your palate is fresher in the morning," says Blackstock.

Aha! The p-word! Because while we'd all like to think we could be food tasters, there's more to it than gobbling things up and shouting, "yum!" Blackstock has a Master of Wines qualification, which she gained after a decade in the trade. "I just thought it would be nice to work in wine," she says. "I didn't really consider my palate, I just thought I wanted to learn. It must be reasonably good, but most people can be trained to taste pretty well – although there are people with fantastic palates."

How to taste chocolate

1. Do it blind, and you should test chocolates of a similar type – so several bars containing 70% cocoa for instance.
2. Start with the milkiest chocolate and end with the darkest – and never taste more than five or six bars at once.
3. When you put it in your mouth you're looking for the melt rate and the texture – how hard or soft it is. And the particle size is important: is it smooth or a bit gritty?
4. With dark chocolate you tend to get a range of flavours – and not just of the cocoa. You get a really big burst of flavour first and then a slow build. It's a bit like a wine. Savour it. **Micah Carr-Hill**

Similarly, Percival spent six months as a cheesemonger for Neal's Yard, following academic study in food. "It was a great way to be trained – we'd work our way through all of the cheeses every day, so we got to feel we knew them pretty well without someone teaching you how to taste. It's about practice."

Carr-Hill has certainly put the practice in – this is his ninth year with Green & Blacks. Disappointingly, when I reach the company's offices I don't find a Willy Wonka chocolate dreamland – but that doesn't mean Hill is afraid of getting his hands dirty. "I basically develop all the new products and ensure that the taste of Green & Blacks stays as it should or gets better," he says. Practically, that means Hill will spend time in the kitchen developing a new recipe, before getting someone to scale it up to factory level. By February, he was already developing two bars for this year's Christmas market.

Carr-Hill says that when he was about 20 he considered becoming a chef, "but I didn't want food not to be a hobby any more, and if I was cooking the same thing for long shifts, I thought it might be a chore". Instead, he went to work in the wine industry, "which is how I started to learn how to taste". After going back to university and doing a food science degree, he started working for Green & Blacks.

Everyone must want his job, I suggest, and get the feeling that Carr-Hill hears that line rather a lot. Perhaps chomping down loads of chocolate every day rather spoils the pleasure of eating it outside work? "I probably eat the equivalent of one 100g bar of chocolate a day," he says, "and after a while you can get sick of it – and you have to leave it to the next day if you've got to do a lot at one sitting."



Say cheese... Bronwen Percival at Neal's Yard Dairy

But he still manages to fit in the odd square for a treat at home. "I never eat a lot – just small amounts of the good stuff. But I do still have a bit if I feel like it – if I've eaten less during the day I might have some," he smiles. "If there's a bar open I might get involved."

Percival says she also eats cheese outside work – although not always if she's spent all day tasting. "My husband really, really likes cheese," she says, "and I can come home thinking 'if I see another bit of cheese...' and he'll want to have some before dinner."

How to taste cheese

1. Let the cheese come to room temperature before you taste it; cold mutes the flavours and aromas in the cheese and can also interfere with its texture.
 2. If you are tasting several cheeses, start with fresher, milder ones and work up to stronger washed-rind or blue cheeses.
 3. Eat the rind if it tastes good, but don't feel compelled to.
 4. Bread, chutney or other accompaniments can be a nice companion to a cheese board or course, but use them sparingly: they can easily obscure the delicate flavours of the cheese itself.
 5. Cheese can clash with the tannin and acidity in wine. If you're serving wine with a cheese course, a white wine with a bit of residual sugar is the best all-around choice.
- Bronwen Percival**

PHOTOGRAPH: GRAHAM TURNER

But it's different eating cheese at home from eating it at work. I have tasted cheese in my job and thought, 'this is what is wrong with it...' But then I have taken it home and eaten it surrounded by the right things and thought, 'this is wonderful!'

Of course, too much of a good thing is, well, not really very good for your health. All the tasters say moderation is key. "I try not to drink during the week – but there are, of course, exceptions," says Blackstock.

And, presumably, there comes a point when a taster must work their way through products they don't really like. "I don't like certain wines but that doesn't mean I don't know what makes a good one," says Blackstock. "If a customer, say, wants a Chablis, they want to know that it will taste the way they expect it to."

"You have to have some objectivity," agrees Carr-Hill. "It isn't always about what you like. I'm not a great fan of mint chocolate, for instance, but it's not me who is eating it really – so it's got to be something that mint chocolate lovers like. It's about playing with it, ensuring that people like it."

But they must all have their favourite products – the ones they really, look forward to tasting? "My favourite wine is champagne," says Blackstock. "In the winter I like a blanc de noir, which comes from red grapes, and in the summer a blanc de blanc. But I do like a champagne with a bit of age to it."

Carr-Hill says he plumps for Green & Blacks milk chocolate with almonds: "I'm lucky I work somewhere where I was a consumer

How to taste wine

1. Look for colour, texture and smell as well as taste. Slurping (drawing air through the wine in the mouth) can help pick up the full range of flavours using nasal receptors as well as tastebuds. And spitoons are not compulsory – sometimes only swallowing can help you get the full picture of the finish and length of the wine.

2. Red wines are usually served at room temperature, though light Beaujolais can be fantastic chilled. Try and open heavy reds about an hour before tasting (if it's corked the wine smells 'musty' but cork in the wine does not mean the wine is corked).

3. When matching wines with food, acidity and sweetness are important – avoid oily fish with tannic red wine. Tannin is a natural ingredient from red grape skins that helps the wine age, but too much too young and it can be slightly astringent.

4. There is no official order in which to taste wine, but convention says to start with the lighter whites and finish with heavy reds. **Waitrose's wine experts**

before I joined the company, so it was my kind of brand already."

And if Percival had to choose just one cheese? "If I had to have an all-rounder, I'd choose Montgomery's cheddar – it has so much richness and depth of flavour. I wouldn't want to have it as my only cheese, but it does what it needs to do so well. It's amazing" ●



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