

# Where a Top-Notch Cheddar Gets the Proper Respect

By FLORENCE FABRICANT

**C**OVENT GARDEN, a warren of streets and covered shopping areas catering to tourists, is London's version of the South Street Seaport in Manhattan or Quincy Market in Boston. But one shop here seems a throwback to the days when the area was London's breadbasket.

That shop, Neal's Yard Dairy, is London's premier purveyor of English, Welsh and Irish cheeses. The rustic store, where drab muslin-wrapped wheels of the finest farmhouse Cheddars, Cheshires and Caerphillys are stacked floor to ceiling, has a clientele that knows there is more to English cheeses than blue-vein Stilton. (There is plenty of Stilton, too, mostly cylinders of Colston Basset, the best there is.)

The cheeses are also exported and sold in places like Murray's Cheese Shop in Greenwich Village, Dean & DeLuca in SoHo, Zabar's and Fairway on the Upper West Side, Grace's Marketplace on the Upper East Side, Sutton Place Gourmet in Washington and Zingerman's in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Neal's Yard Dairy is driven by a passion for good cheese, a devotion shared by the owner, Randolph Hodgson, 40, the staff and the customers. And like its finest cheeses, the dairy has taken time to mature.

The company, originally on a street called Neal's Yard, started in 1978 making yogurt, ice cream and fresh curd cheese. Soon after it opened, Mr. Hodgson, who has a degree in food science and chemistry from the University of London, was hired as a clerk.

"The owners wanted to expand the line so they started buying cheese from wholesalers," he said. "It was anonymous stuff, contrasted to the great yogurt, which they made."

Mr. Hodgson began seeking out small rural cheese makers in Wales, Scotland and Ireland as well as in England. "There is a real thrill in buying directly, visiting the farms and tasting," he said.

Three months after being hired, Mr. Hodgson managed to buy the business. It now sells about 70 different cheeses, virtually all made in Britain.

"It's not a patriotic thing," he said. "I don't have the time to travel to other countries to taste and see how the cheeses are produced."

Most of the kinds of cheeses he carries were not made before 1980, he said. From 1954, when World War II food rationing was lifted, until 1994, most English cheeses were governed by the Milk Marketing Board, which set standards for hygiene and production in factories. A result was the standardization of dairy products.

In the early 1980's the demand for cheeses with more character began to grow, mirrored by a similar movement among small producers, especially of goat cheeses, in the United States. The Milk Marketing Board has been disbanded.

"In mid-century we lost the skills," Mr. Hodgson said. "Now it's coming back. When I went to school, it was consistency, not taste, that mattered. But what I care about is not something that 95 percent of the population would not object to, but something the other 5 percent would rave about."

Behind the counter is a wall of Cheddars, a staple for the dairy. There are some rarities, like Emlett,

an intense and creamy cow's-milk cheese. A tangy Beenleigh Blue and a very ripe Milleens, a Muenster-style cheese from Ireland, are also there.

In the basement of the 400-square-foot shop, which is on Shorts Gardens, a narrow street that radiates from the Seven Dials crossroads, is space for the tending and storage of softer cheeses. "This is the intensive care unit," Mr. Hodgson said.

Unlike the wholesale purveyors who moved to the New Covent Garden market when it opened in 1974, Mr. Hodgson has no intention of abandoning his historic location.

He does not buy the entire production of any cheese maker.

"You can go into supermarkets and find cheese from the same producers," he said. "Those are my rejects. There is a reason some Cheddars cost three times more than others."

At Neal's Yard they are around \$9 a pound. Some sheep's-milk cheeses can cost as much as \$16 a pound.

American cheese shops that buy cheeses from Neal's Yard Dairy are complaining about the prices.

"I have to charge \$12 to \$16 a pound for some of these cheeses and it kills me," said Steven Jenkins, the



Jonathan Player for The New York Times

Randolph Hodgson, the owner of Neal's Yard Dairy, the leading purveyor of English, Welsh and Irish cheeses in London.

cheese buyer at Fairway. "But I can't be without the Montgomery Cheddar, Appleby Cheshire and Kirkham's Lancashire. These cheeses are chosen, not just shipped, and they are undeniably exquisite."

Mr. Hodgson says the only way he can cut costs is to compromise on quality. "There are not many options open to me," he said. "I can wrap the cheeses in plastic so they retain

more moisture," which would prevent the cheeses from aging properly but would eliminate some waste, thereby lowering the price. That is an option he will not consider.

"I'd rather stop exporting than compromise," he said.

Neal's Yard Dairy, 17 Shorts Gardens, is open Monday through Saturday, 9 A.M. to 7 P.M., and on Sunday, 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. In addition to

cheese, yogurt, butter and eggs, the shop sells bread, preserves, honey and the Duchy Original line of products made on farms owned by Prince Charles.

The company does not do direct mail order but recommends that American customers who want to order its cheeses contact Zingerman's, which carries the most extensive selection; (313) 769-1625.