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Real Food Pioneer: Randolph Hodgson

The owner of Neal's Yard Dairies talks about his larder, making salami in France and growing up in Hong Kong.

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What's in your kitchen?

We have a larder about the size of a small bathroom, which is unusual for a London house. It's great coming back from our shops or Borough Market now. Before, I hated having to stuff all these lovely vegetables into a fridge.

Also, it changed the way we cook because you can go in and choose your ingredients differently. The larder functions really well for about ten months of the year, although it gets too hot in the summer.

Every February, we go to Auvergne in France to make salamis before bringing them back. There's an auberge there (www.aubergedechassignolles.com) run by a friend of ours who used to cook at the Anchor & Hope along The Cut near Waterloo, London.

Harry Lester and his partner Ali bought the auberge in the middle of nowhere and they open it from May to October and then a couple of weekends in the winter people come, like us. Harry sets it all up, he brings in the pigs: we each have a side and butcher it and make our salamis. We're only there for a few days. What else would you do if you've made six months' worth of salami? Having the larder really changes the way you think about food. You can plan ahead.

We're very lucky to have the larder; it's great to be able to put the cheese in there. Prior to having the larder, we would keep our cheese near the front door, where it's about ten to 15 degrees centigrade, which is perfect. Cardboard boxes, by the way, are very good to keep cheeses in. It keeps a nice microclimate. Cheese is prone to drying out, so temperature is one thing you need to think about when storing it and the other thing is humidity. For the most part, fridges are quite dry. Plus there's also the fridge smells, so a cheese kept in the fridge is likely to absorb the smells of other food kept there.

I'm not saying the larder doesn't smell, of course it does. You've got the salamis, the cheese; but it's a wholesome smell.

As for the types of cheese I keep, there are too many to choose just the one favourite. When we talk of cheese, people often mention the seasonality and what's happening with the cows, because it's emotive and evokes a lovely image and at the other end there's the question of how old the cheese is. But there are so many other factors to consider, like everything else in the middle and what the cheese maker is doing.

Cheese is something that's made every day and therefore everyday a cheese can be slightly different. For example, one of my favourite cheeses is Montgomery's Cheddar. There'll be as much variation from Monday to Wednesday as there will be from summer to autumn.

There's a certain cycle to the cheese that would make it different from one day to the next and that's quite fascinating. With cheese we taste every batch and we try and encourage our customers to taste before they buy. Sometimes you'll have someone come in and say "No, it's OK, I've had that before" and we try and explain that we've just cut a new one. It's something that people find difficult to understand, but if you think about it, it's a bit like making a vintage wine every day. The milk is going to be different, the head cheese maker may be having a day off so someone different is making it and they'll have their own style.

It's like with restaurant reviewing. You don't just say "These ingredients are great", you say "There's a great chef." It's the same with cheese making; you mustn't forget the all-important cheese maker.

Stichelton I love because it's a work in progress. My memory of raw-milk Stilton is of a cheese which was the finest cheese in the world, but it no longer exists, so remembering that flavour and trying to recapture that memory of texture, as much as the flavour, is always there. Of course, Stilton hasn't been made with raw milk since 1989. It was an absolutely sublime cheese.

Today, my desert-island cheese would still be one of the English traditional cheeses. Perhaps an Appleby's Cheshire or a Montgomery's Cheddar, if pushed.

How would you sum up your food philosophy?

We don't spend enough time thinking about ingredients. The way food is produced and farmed to me is the most important thing. Cooking it is about keeping all that in and not ruining it. Obviously, you have to know how to cook. There's an awful lot of cooking where you take ingredients, whether they are in or out of season, ripe or not, and you assemble them, as though the art of it all is in the assembly. Yes, there is a huge amount of skill in doing that well, but that's all that gets talked about. Whereas being able to create good ingredients in the first place is what it's all about for me. I like cooking that makes the most of those ingredients.

How has British food and our attitudes to it changed in your lifetime?

I grew up in Hong Kong so my memory is based on a completely different food culture, which is far more centred around the idea of sourcing good ingredients. Going to the market there, you would encounter some very palpable foods, smells and tastes.

The thing that struck me when I came to England to study in the 1970s was that food was about packaging. Everything was very contained, not just in the obvious sense.

In Hong Kong, there was a woman who would come in from the new territories with two baskets on a bamboo pole over her shoulder on a back of a truck. She would squat on the floor selling what she had produced that day. You would make your selection, this would be weighed before being wrapped in some newspaper and tied with a bamboo twine. It was raw in that you were completely in contact with that product, knowing what you had just bought.

So in the late 1970s, when I first started buying food for myself, I couldn't really tell a Cheshire from a Double Gloucester, from a Lancashire or Caerphilly. I laboured under the misapprehension, for a long time, that I just didn't have a sophisticated enough palate to be able to discern the difference. It was only when I got into the business some ten years later that I realised that many of these cheeses would have been made in the one same factory. There just wasn't that much difference between them, apart from slightly different shades of colouring. That's what we had done to our cheeses.

I was told I would never make a living just selling British cheeses as nobody was interested. Everybody just wants French and Italian. I kept thinking why would they just want that?

People were reluctant to say it was simply because they just tasted better. While it was possible to get a good Stilton or Cheddar, you couldn't get all these other cheeses and yet they were being made, they just weren't getting to London.

What annoys you about Britain's food culture?

I think we've reached a huge disconnect between food production and food consumption. I think we're going somewhere to try and address that, with farmers' markets and all the programmes currently on television that focus on production – that's all helped – but I still think there's a huge gap, where we've lost contact with food.

The ability to go in to a shop or market and understand what the difference is between this carrot or that carrot, or that pack of butter or this one, those are the skills that we really need to teach.

If you think about cheese – I mentioned Montgomery's earlier which many people have heard about – 20 years ago it was sold alongside farmhouse Cheddar. Where we were in the 1980s, no one was differentiating between one farmhouse Cheddar and another. The price paid and the recognition given to the producer for doing something really special wasn't there.

So what was the future? If you're not going to be rewarded for it or recognised for it, why bother? There was this idea where if you could make it cheaper, you would sell more. You could scale up from a farm to a factory. So what about the quality? Well, it's got to be good enough.

What is Britain's best-kept food secret?

Staffordshire oatcakes. Oat pancakes from Staffordshire are floppy, not the crispy, biscuity sort people normally associate with oatcakes. People roll up what they have, whether sweet or savoury; it's quite similar to a French crepe.

The irony of having to explain to your English customers that a traditional English food - which they've never heard of - is like something made in France. That just about sums up our relationship with British food. We have this thing that's of native origin that so many of us are unaware of.

Do you prefer eating in or out?

I love eating in, because I love buying meat and vegetables from people I know. I will eat out a fair amount, but I eat in far more.

When I do go out I tend to like simpler restaurants. I love the Anchor & Hope on The Cut; it's lovely, pub food. So, even though you can't reserve a table it fits with my timetable very well. I leave work around 4.30pm, I go sit there and have a pint and then I'm out just before I fall asleep, which is early.

What is the next big food trend?

I hope there isn't one. I hope people don't follow trends but rather think about the foods that they're eating rather than follow what's in the papers or on the television. Just think about what you're buying and what you're going to do with it. That's it.

[Neal's Yard Dairy](#) stores:

17 Short Gardens, London WC2 (020 7379 7646)

6 Park Street, London, SE1 (020 7367 0799)

Weekly Markets:

Chelsea Market (Duke of York Square, King's Road) Saturdays
10:00am - 4:00pm

Hampstead Community Market (Hampsted High Street NW3)
Thursday, Fridays & Saturdays 10:00am - 4:00pm

Neal's Yard Dairy & Monmouth Coffee Company (34 Maltby St SE1) Saturdays 9:00am - 2:00pm