

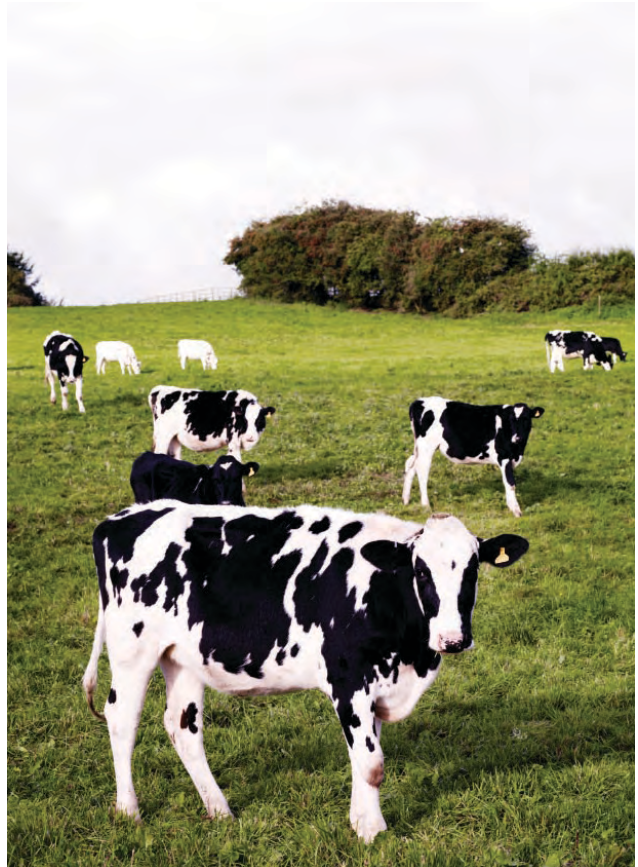
Stichelton Dairy partners Joe Schneider (left) and Randolph Hodgson at Collingthwaite Farm, in Nottinghamshire, with wheels of their aged cheese.



ENGLAND

# FOOD ENGLISH REVIVAL

Ever heard of Stichelton? Follow Paul Levy on his quest to find the artisans who are bringing the classic cheese (formerly known as Stilton) back to life.



Stichelton, a British raw cow's-milk cheese made on Collingthwaite Farm, above left. Right: A herd of Holstein-Friesian cows grazing on the farm.

**W**HY AM I HERE IN NOTTINGHAMSHIRE, wearing blue plastic overshoes, a matching plastic raincoat, and a hairnet? I am standing in a near-sterile dairy, on a mission to find one of Britain's greatest delicacies, a cheese that I thought had become extinct. This is a tale of loss and rebirth involving an expatriate American, a stubborn Brit, and a cheese filled with history.

In Britain, Christmas used to mean turkey, plum pudding, and a course of creamy, blue-veined Stilton, a raw cow's-milk cheese with a whispered tang of acidity. But in 1989 there was a food-poisoning scare, and all the victims had in common was that they'd eaten Stilton.

It turned out the cheese wasn't the culprit. But it was too late—the quasi-governmental Milk Marketing Board persuaded farmers of Colston Bassett, a farm cooperative that had become the sole producer of raw-milk Stilton, to buy expensive pasteurization equipment, and the Minister of Agriculture threatened to prohibit the sale of all unpasteurized cheese. So the last true unpasteurized Stilton was sold in 1990. After that, genuine Stilton disappeared; my

tastings of "artisanal" renditions such as Colston Bassett and Cropwell Bishop confirmed it. The cheese had become dry and crumbly in the center, not moistly unctuous and buttery, and the subtle, fruity flavors that marked the aftertaste of old Stilton were gone, replaced by a one-dimensional salty note. As if this weren't bad enough, thanks to lobbying by the Stilton Cheesemakers' Association, the genuine article could never be made and marketed again under the name Stilton because only pasteurized milk could be used.

Three years ago at a birthday party given by a friend in London, dinner finished with a cheese that not only looked like Stilton but was also buttery and fruity. And, goodness, the fragrance. It reeked of Old England.

Our host said it was an experimental new cheese named Stichelton (pronounced stitch-el-ton). My curiosity was provoked. I had published a story back in 1990 mourning the death of true Stilton, and now it appeared to have been resurrected. I had to find out how this triumph had come about.

I shouldn't have been surprised to find that Britain's most renowned cheese monger, Randolph Hodgson, owner of



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Neal's Yard Dairy, had a hand in the renaissance. In 1989, he had fought the government's proposed ban of unpasteurized cheese and won. Then in 2004 Hodgson ran into someone he thought could help him revive his cherished Stilton. Joe Schneider, a charming American with a Cornell degree in agricultural engineering (and who had grown up on Velveeta, like most Americans of his generation), was intrigued by cheese making. He had moved to Holland, where his Ohio-born wife, Audre, had a job, and there he found work that allowed him to learn from local artisans

who were making some excellent small-batch cheeses. The couple drifted to Sussex, where Joe worked on a biodynamic farm in East Grinstead before moving on to the Cotswolds to create the wildly successful Daylesford cheddar, a sharp and nutty cheese with a cult following.

One more piece was missing from the puzzle. To make organic cheese you need a steady supply of organic milk, which in turn requires that you have a farm with a closed and regularly tested herd of cows. Serendipity struck: Hodgson met William and Alison Parente, the owners of the stately pile Welbeck Abbey and its 17,000-acre estate, near Nottingham in the Dukeries.

That's how my wife, Penelope, and I ended up on a three-hour journey from our Oxfordshire house to Sherwood Forest (yes, the one from Robin Hood), a part of the English



On the Farm Clockwise from below right: A bread-making class at the School of Artisan Food, on the Welbeck Estate, in Nottinghamshire; the Harley Gallery, Welbeck Estate's art museum; Isaac Howett holds fresh curds in the cheese-making room of the Stichelton Dairy.





The three-room Browns Bed & Breakfast, above left, a mile from Welbeck Estate. Right: The estate's Limehouse Café.

Midlands completely unknown to us. Here we checked in to Browns Bed & Breakfast, where the gregarious Joan Brown runs three one-bedroom lodges, each with a four-poster bed, views of the manicured garden, and fresh flowers every day. The next morning, a huge breakfast of local eggs, bacon, sausage, grilled tomatoes, and mushrooms fortified us for the cheese adventure ahead.

After breakfast, we drove a mile along a rural, single-lane road to the dairy and toured the estate with Alison Parente. Looking for uses for their many vacant buildings (they already had an art gallery, garden center, and a café), the Parentes offered Schneider a tenancy on Collingthwaite Farm, with its existing organic herd of 150 Holstein-Friesian cows, and the challenge of converting a 250-year-old L-shaped barn into a modern dairy.

Schneider's family now lives in a large Victorian house on the Welbeck Estate, not far from the vast stable block where the Parentes built the School of Artisan Food, which teaches baking, brewing, butchery, preserving, and cheese making to amateurs as well as students of the University of Derby.

Over the course of two days, Schneider showed us how Stichelton, said to be a historic name for Stilton, is made using the original raw-milk method of Colston Bassett.

In the first room, with its titanium-clad fire door, were two stainless-steel vats bought secondhand from Colston Bassett, which was also generous about sharing its know-how. In the first vat a minimal amount of coagulating rennet and a bit of blue mold culture starter are added to the milk and stirred in with an oarlike paddle. "The curd is very fragile," Schneider explains. "We ladle it by hand into the second shallow vat." This is only part of the skilled handwork that distinguishes Stichelton from the larger makers of Stilton.

The curds are then milled, salted, and scooped into cylindrical drum molds. Never pressed, the cheese's buttery texture is achieved purely by the force of gravity. Five days later its outside is smoothed to make the distinctive rind—this is achieved with nothing more high-tech, Schneider shows us with a small grin, than the blade of a Sheffield kitchen knife.

During our visit, builders were just putting the finishing touches on a second maturing room to »

accommodate the 40 tons Schneider hopes to produce this year. Meanwhile, Colston Bassett will make 400 tons, and Cropwell Bishop about 1,000. Though worldwide demand for artisanal blue cheeses such as Stichelton is increasing, you can see no one is ever going to get rich from making it.

The revival of this old British cheese is restoring a vital part of food culture in the British Isles, giving them something to be swaggeringly proud of, as even some French people adopt the tradition and put Stichelton on their tables at Christmas. After all, as the gastronome Brillat-Savarin once said, "The discovery of a new dish confers more happiness on humanity than the discovery of a new star." How much greater the contribution to human happiness, then, to

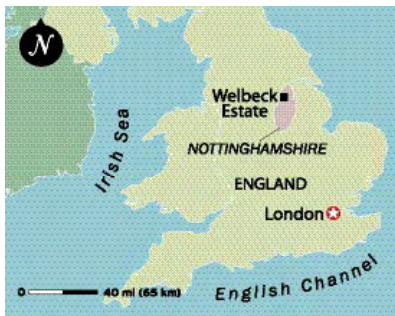
have rescued this fabulous cheese from extinction. ✚

Paul Levy is an Oxfordshire-based writer and food critic, and a frequent T+L contributor.



Alison Parente and Hodgson at Welbeck Abbey, in Nottinghamshire.

## GUIDE NOTTINGHAMSHIRE



### GETTING THERE

Virgin Atlantic and British Airways fly nonstop from New York and Los Angeles to London's Heathrow Airport. Rent a car with Sixt ([sixt.com](http://sixt.com)) and take the three-hour drive north to Nottinghamshire.

### STAY

**GREAT VALUE** Browns Bed & Breakfast Holbeck Lane, Holbeck, Worksop; 44-1909/720-659; [brownsholbeck.co.uk](http://brownsholbeck.co.uk); doubles from \$117.

### EAT

Limehouse Café There's always something on the menu made with Stichelton. Welbeck Estate; 44-1909/542-704; lunch for two \$25.

### DO

Creswell Craggs Museum & Education Center Learn about the area's rich prehistoric legacy through guided visits to

nearby sites, such as a network of 13,000-year-old cave paintings discovered in 2002. Craggs Rd., Creswell; 44-1909/720-378; [creswell-craggs.org.uk](http://creswell-craggs.org.uk).

Harley Gallery The Portland collection, which includes the work of Van Dyck, is on display here. Welbeck Estate, Worksop; 44-1909/501-700; [harleygallery.co.uk](http://harleygallery.co.uk). School of Artisan Food Lower Motor Yard, Welbeck Estate; 44-845/520-1111; [schoolofartisanfood.org](http://schoolofartisanfood.org).

Stichelton Dairy Collingthwaite Farm, Welbeck Estate, Mansfield; 44-1623/844-883; [stichelton.co.uk](http://stichelton.co.uk).

Welbeck Farm Shop Buy Stichelton and other local products, such as sourdough bread and pork pies. Welbeck Estate, Worksop; 44-1909/478-725; [thewelbeckfarmshop.co.uk](http://thewelbeckfarmshop.co.uk).

### SHOP

Stichelton is available at Artisanal ([artisanalcheese.com](http://artisanalcheese.com)), in New York City, and Zingerman's ([zingermans.com](http://zingermans.com)), in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It's also available by mail order; for a complete list of shops, visit [stichelton.co.uk](http://stichelton.co.uk).

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