

JOE SCHNEIDER is not making a new Stilton. That is perfectly clear, as we stand in his dairy—located, as it happens, in Nottinghamshire, which, together with Leicestershire and Derbyshire, is one of the three approved Stilton-making counties. There are seven creameries that make Stilton, all from pasteurised milk. The last maker of raw-milk Stilton ceased production in 1989. There would be considerable excitement among the Stilton-eating fraternity if Joe's cheese, made with unpasteurised milk, were indeed a Stilton. It can't be, however. The use of pasteurised milk is specified, surprisingly, as one of the traditional characteristics of authentic Stilton. An unpasteurised Stilton is something that cannot exist under the Protected Designation of Origin (the EU equivalent of an Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée). Joe's cheese is called Stichelton. Totally different. Not a bit the same. Dig around in the Lincoln Rolls—which are legal documents and not to be spread with butter—and you might find that Stichelton is the ancient name of the town upon which Stilton is founded. Extraordinary. Can't be more than a coincidence, can it?

I have only found Joe with difficulty. The Welbeck Estate on which he is based used to be occupied by the Ministry of Defence, and is still classified as an official secret for satellite-navigation purposes. When I find myself outside the gates of a farm, I phone on the mobile to check it's right. I had been expecting a creamery, delivery lorries and a large sign. Instead, Joe—a ginger-haired, 40-year-old man wearing a blue apron and cap—appears from a barn opposite the milking parlour. Organic milk goes more or less straight from the udder into the dairy, via a short pipe. It couldn't be more of a farmhouse operation. A farmhouse Stilton—were that to bear any relationship to Stichelton—has not been made since the 1930s.

We go inside a stone barn. 'Do you want a demeaning hat,' Joe asks drily, 'or merely a ridiculous one?' I don blue hairnet, overshoes and white coat, and step over the bench that forms a barrier with the external environment. I enter a stainless-steel world. Order reigns. Hands are washed until you think they'll drop off. Steel equipment is hosed. We are in the equivalent of a laboratory for cheese.

Joe starts decanting starter bacteria into little bottles, one for each day of the week—the beginning of the alchemical process which may only end as crackers are popped around the Christmas dining table. Adding the starter culture to milk makes it become acid, and this stops it



NEW KING OF THE CHEESE BOARD

Creamy, powerful and friendly, Stichelton cheese is set to take Stilton's crown. CLIVE ASLET has a taste

King of the dairy: Joe Schneider displays a drum of his splendid cheese in the maturing room

going off. As it happens, there is a heritage to this starter. It's the one that Ernie Wagstaff, the last of the raw-milk Stilton-makers at Colston Bassett, used in the 1980s. When he stopped, the West Country dairy A. J. and R. G. Barber kept it alive. There is a sense of apostolic succession.

I witness the cutting of the curd. Rennet has been added to a long, deep trough of milk, and it has been gently metamorphosing since yesterday. 'Three thousand years ago, some guy got on his camel,' explains Joe, in the laconic accents of upper New York State. 'His wife packed him a lunch with milk in a cow's stomach, and it solidified.' The

curd in the trough is on the 'transitional edge, leaving the state of milk but not yet having become cheese'. It has the texture of a rather sloppy crème caramel. Joe takes a frame strung with wires and moves it along the trough, back and forth; then from side to side; and finally on the other plane, cutting the curd into wobbly, watery sugar-cube sized protozoa, from which some, but not all of the whey will be released. (A very hard cheese such as Parmesan is cut almost infinitesimally small; a soft cheese such as Camembert is not cut at all.) It is a slow, appropriately bovine ritual—a good time for talking.

'I fell into cheesemaking by accident,'

Joe tells me, or perhaps—from the softness of his voice—the curd. After acquiring a degree in agricultural engineering in the US, where he built houses for a time, he found himself in Holland. 'I started by making feta for a Turkish friend in 1996. Feta is a simple cheese. I became more interested in cheeses that required ripening.' After a spell on an organic community farm near East Grinstead, making cheese, cream and butter, he started the creamery at Daylesford. Randolph Hodgson, founder of Neal's Yard Dairy, saw Stilton sales rising and wanted to offer his customers a traditional, unpasteurised equivalent. So he and Joe went into partnership with the owner of Collingthwaite Farm to produce Stichelton.

The Stilton recipe is 'very challenging. This is a very counterintuitive thing to make; lots of room for mistakes'. It's the combination of empirical science and the intuition of the creative soul that appeals to him. Stilton (I give up; Stichelton is tantamount to being a Stilton) is unusual in the length of time required for the set. 'It's made to a slow and natural rhythm. Cheese was first made by farmers' wives, who were doing other things at the same time. They would go off, do something else and come back.' Menfolk commercialised the process in order to make something to sell. 'You don't want an army of people standing



Stilton or Stichelton, that is the question at Neal's Yard Dairy

around for eight hours waiting for the next thing to happen. They changed the recipes and speeded them up. Stilton seems to have avoided that.'

The curd settles, is milled with salt and put into forms. It doesn't taste of much at this stage beyond butter. We find Joe's wife, Audre, in a room with two other women, 'rubbing up' the sides of young cheeses, as if icing a cake. This closes up the cracks. It's something that can only be done by hand. 'When people wonder why it costs £22 a kilo,' laughs Audre, 'I ask them, "Do you realise what a craft it is?"'

Smoothing down the sides takes about seven minutes. 'It's very communal,' says Joe. 'Lots of gossip. These ones are nice,' he says of the pure white 8kg drums. 'Soft and springy.' It will be 10 weeks before their promise is revealed.

Before that, they will have released a lot of ammonia, developed a leathery crust or coat, and suffered the piercings that vein the finished product with blue. The blue is penicillin. Mould breaks down fats and proteins, transforming the chalkiness of youth into a creamy, powerful-tasting maturity. 'These are lovely

because they're just a bit pudgy in the middle—they're sticking their bellies out, which is good. We don't want them too straight.' It's almost cruel to see Joe plunge an 'iron' into gently swelling cheese to extract a plug, but my goodness, what a taste. It strikes the palate with the strength of the man in the old Rank logo, turning it into a gong that goes on reverberating long after the cheese itself has disappeared.

Stichelton has not been perfected as yet. Perhaps it never can be. The nature of a handmade cheese is that it changes. 'Each day, the milk is different, the temperature is different, my mood may be different; the result will be affected by whether I'm doing a good job that day. If you think of the process in terms of control, you're kidding yourself.' The result, at full production, will be 40 tons a year, compared to several thousand tons made by the six Stilton creameries.

Two-thirds of Stilton is eaten at Christmas. Stichelton's Christmas cheeses have already been made. Their little orange tummies are expanding with pride. There won't be any more. If you want to make friends with one of them, order now. For more information, telephone 01623 844883 or visit www.stichelton.co.uk. Stichelton is available from Neal's Yard Dairy (020-72405700; www.nealsyarddairy.co.uk) and the Welbeck Farm Shop (01909 478725; www.thewelbeckfarmshop.co.uk)

THE STICHELTON-MAKING PROCESS CONTINUED



Funnel the curd into hoops



Rub up the wheels by hand



Leave the cheese to mature



Finally, load the van with cheese



THE STAGES OF PRODUCING STICHELTON



First, catch the estate cattle



Bring them in for milking



Fill a gleaming tank with milk



Ladle off the curd by hand