



Kind of blue: Stichelton cheese at Neal's Yard Dairy, Borough Market, London

Daniel Jones

In a different vein

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Two men had a dream: the result is a new, unpasteurised blue cheese, writes
Nicholas Lander

Alongside a decanter of port, some nuts and a roaring fire, Stilton, the venerable blue-veined cheese, has become synonymous with Christmas. It seems fitting, therefore, that the discussions that eventually led to the production of Stichelton – made to the same recipe as Stilton but with unpasteurised milk – took place in a pub just before Christmas 2004.

At the bar of The Wheatsheaf by London's Borough Market that day were Randolph Hodgson, whose Neal's Yard Dairy has been the saviour of so many British farmhouse cheeses, and Joe Schneider, a US cheesemaker.

In spite of only eating Kraft slices and Velveeta block cheese as a child, Schneider used his degree as an agricultural engineer to become a cheesemaker, working in the Netherlands and then the UK.

Both had a dream. Schneider's was to use his training and love of cheese to do something on his own. Hodgson's was to recreate the creamy, gentle flavours he associated with unpasteurised Stilton, flavours that were still firmly

lodged in his memory bank but that had been unavailable since 1990. That Stichelton has emerged in such a short time is a tribute to many factors and individuals but principally, as Schneider put it, to Hodgson's role as the cheese industry's equivalent of Johnny Appleseed. "Randolph goes round planting ideas," he explained, "and pretty soon there are cheeses everywhere."

Stilton is the most protected cheese in the UK. Since the 1930s, it can only be made in a certain way and only in three counties, Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire.

Additionally, from the mid-1990s, it has had a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO, the equivalent of a French *appellation contrôlée*). This backs up its earlier certification and makes one significant new stipulation: that it can be made only from pasteurised milk, the result of various food-poisoning incidents that appeared to be linked to Stilton in 1989, though none of these was proven.

From the beginning, Hodgson appreciated that the seven different companies that make up the Stilton Cheesemakers Association would object to his using the same name for his cheese. However, he had hoped he could persuade them before production began.

"I can appreciate their concern if raw milk cheeses were found to cause food poisoning. But the whole debate has moved on from where it was 17 years ago and I think many now appreciate that

there can be more risk involved in large-scale as opposed to small-scale cheese production and that listeria is more likely to occur in soft, pasteurised cheeses than hard, unpasteurised ones."

The project had an early break when Hodgson was, somewhat circuitously, introduced to the owners of the 17,000-acre Welbeck Estate near Worksop in Nottinghamshire.

Although the estate already included a café, farm shop, garden centre and gallery, its owners were looking for additional uses for their extensive buildings and saw food production as a logical

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extension of their business. Milk from a herd of 150 Holstein-Friesian cows on the farm had been certified organic several years before and a 250-year-old barn was available to be converted into a dairy.

By October 2006, production had begun and now 6,000 cheeses a year come out of what is effectively a two-man operation comprising Schneider and dairyman Mick Lingard. Milk is run through an underground stainless steel pipe to the dairy, which is no more than

two large, open stainless steel vats. There, thanks to little more than Schneider's muscle, it is transformed into Stichelton.

Schneider could not have been more effusive in his thanks for the cheesemakers at Colston Bassett, the last producers of unpasteurised Stilton. "They not only sold us these two vats second-hand at a great price but also came over and helped with the layout, made cheese with us on our first day and then came back regularly to help us tweak the recipe," he says.

The process is simple: 2,500 litres of milk come into the first tank and stay there for 24 hours, after which they become 1,200 litres of solid but soft curds that are transferred manually to the second tank alongside. Then the cheese is milled, salted and placed in hoops, giving it its distinctive shape.

From there it moves into three different drying rooms where, most importantly, six weeks later it is pierced to allow the blue veining to form inside. After a further six weeks maturing in Neal's Yard's cellars in somewhat less bucolic Bermondsey in south-east London, Stichelton is ready.

Stichelton, with a production of 80 tons a year and capacity for only another 20 per cent, will never make its investors rich, according to Hodgson. But, even at a 25 per cent premium to Stilton, it is already making an impact on cheese counters, not only in the UK but also in the US, Italy, Germany, Spain and, most unexpectedly, given the plethora

of its own blue cheeses, in France.

Yet, even as Hodgson begins to enjoy in Stichelton the flavours he has not tasted for 17 years, he is, like a winemaker reviewing his vineyards, reflecting on what the future may hold.

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Cheese, please

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Colston Bassett Village Store, Colston Bassett, tel: +44 (0)1949-813 21; www.colstonbassettstore.com

Zingermans (US mail order), www.zingermans.com

Cowgirl Creamery, San Francisco, Washington and mail order, tel: +1 866-433 7834; www.cowgirlcreamery.com

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