

Stuck on Stichelton*

(Stichelton: the Saxon name for the village of Stilton)*

Stilton is a fixture at the festive table, but even the King of Cheeses ought never to rest on his laurels. **Nikki Haynes** presents the young pretender to Stilton's crown

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CHEESE plays an important part in any self-respecting foodie's Christmas arrangements. Some may even look forward to the appearance of the cheeseboard with more excitement than the turkey. With such high expectations, it can be difficult as a food writer to think up a new angle on the old classics every year. Glaringly obvious choices like Brie and Cheddar are deservedly famous but such cheeses pop up on the pages of **fresh** year round, working just as well with

light summer salads as festive favourites. Not wanting to shortchange any regular readers, I was determined to find something new for December's cheese of the month. Fortunately the conundrum was solved for me back in July. As the **fresh** team marched its way through the Christmas press shows, one name kept popping up time and time again. Stichelton is a new blue cheese similar to Stilton, but made with unpasteurised milk, which doesn't abide by the Stilton PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) guidelines.

New blue on the block

If you're a fan of Daylesford Organic Cheddar (as we at **fresh** most certainly are) you may have heard of its revered creator, American cheesemaker Joe Schneider. It is Joe, along with Randolph Hodgson of British cheesemongers extraordinaire Neal's Yard Dairy, who can claim credit for the new cheese. Randolph explains, "I met Joe several years ago but it was three years ago, when we were having a pint in the pub, that we decided that we should make an



unpasteurised blue cheese – we got very excited about it!” It took them a year and a half to find a suitable place to make it, finally settling on the stunning Collingthwaite farm on the Welbeck Estate in Nottinghamshire. The farm organically maintains around 150 Friesian-Holstein cows, and although they have the Soil Association’s stamp of approval, Randolph “would rather sell the cheese on its flavour than the fact that it’s organic. People should be buying it for its flavour.”

Amazingly, given the buzz surrounding it, Stichelton is still a very new cheese; the first batch was produced only a year ago. Randolph says that “the cheese is from a very difficult recipe and is a tricky one to make. It’s a very long process, and it’s a long time before you see the results of what you’ve done, and then if it’s wrong you have to start



What makes Stilton Stilton?

In 1936 the Stilton Cheese Makers’ Association was formed to maintain the quality and protect the name and legacy of Stilton cheese. Stilton is a trademark and so is certified by the European Commission as a PDO. This means that the cheese can only be made in the three counties of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire. Today, there are only seven creameries authorised by The Stilton Cheese Makers’ Association to make this King of Cheeses.



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over again. It’s been a long process but it has been absolutely fascinating – we’re slowly, slowly improving it, and I can’t stress enough that it’s still under development. We’re doing this soft opening which has lasted two years!”

A play on tradition

The cheese is made in the time-honoured fashion, with a very slow acidification process which means that the curd is so delicate it must be ladled by hand into a trolley where it’s milled and salted the very same morning the milk has set. It isn’t a pressed cheese, but sits in hoops (the mould the curd goes into) in a warm room called a “hastener”. On the fifth day the hoops are taken off and the outside is smoothed by hand using kitchen knives – a process known as “rubbing up”. The cheese is then left to mature for 12 to 16 weeks.

The traditional, hands-on nature of the process is essential to the texture and flavour of the end product, Randolph says, “because it’s made on a small scale and the process is done by hand, I think it’s the key to making it a really creamy cheese. It’s about having a really delicate curd, and because of this you can’t mechanically manipulate it, you have to hand-ladle it. And that gentle handling should give you a really beautiful, creamy texture.” He thinks that what sets Stichelton apart from other blues is their use of raw milk; “it gives you a different dimension in the flavour and on top of that you’ve also got an amazingly complex rind on this cheese – the rind contributes a lot to the flavour, whereas a lot of other blue cheeses only get their flavour from the blue inside. There’s an excitement behind traditional cheeses and traditional cheesemaking which is very important, but there is also a reinventing, a creating of new things which is what this is about – drawing on traditions but making

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something new. Whilst we’re still tweaking the recipe, hopefully within a year or so we’ll be up with some of the best blue cheeses.”

It’s all in the tasting

Stichelton has a full, punchy flavour, and a succulent buttery texture, although because, as Randolph says, they’re still developing the recipe the texture and flavour may well vary from batch to batch. Despite this (exciting!) uncertainty, the cheese that is currently wowing the critics is an absolute delight. You can enjoy it with port of course, but this complex cheese would also suit a medium wine or even a rich ale. For Randolph “what typifies raw milk is that the flavours might not come out initially, but once it’s swallowed and gone the taste lingers, and you’re left with a really nice long flavour.” He diplomatically adds, “we don’t want to overhype Stichelton whilst it’s in its development stages, so people won’t be disappointed. And we’re begging people to give it time to develop. But I did taste a very young cheese the other day that had really great promise for what we’re aiming for. It’ll be ready at Christmas time so I’ll be looking forward to that.” As will we Randolph!

Contact details

Stichelton cheese is available from Neal’s Yard Dairy, Welbeck Farm Shop, Paxton & Whitfield and Selfridges. For more information call 01623 844883 or visit www.stichelton.co.uk.