



STICHELTON DAIRY

Cuckney, Nottinghamshire

Joe Schneider and Randolph Hodgson share a dream: to recapture the flavour of a long-lost cheese that was once the most highly esteemed in Britain. Blue Stilton has been famous since it was discovered in a Huntingdonshire coaching inn by Daniel Defoe in 1722. But its most authentic incarnation – a blue-veined farmhouse cheese made with raw milk – has not

been tasted since 1989. That was when the last raw-milk Stilton producer in the Vale of Belvoir switched to pasteurised milk, completing a transformation in the Stilton-making industry that began after the Second World War. When Stilton received PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) status in 1996, which ensured cheese of that name could only be made in the region, the use of pasteurised milk was enshrined in European law.

“This quintessential English cheese is not being made in its traditional form any more – it’s extinct,” says Joe, who founded

Stichelton with Neal’s Yard Dairy owner Randolph less than two years ago. “Randolph wanted to sell an unpasteurised Stilton, because raw milk offers more complexity. He was searching for the big, seductive flavour that he and other cheese enthusiasts could remember but because of the PDO none of the registered Stilton dairies could make one for him. So he decided to make it himself. One day, over a beer, he asked me to help him.”

A US-born cheesemaker who got to know Randolph while running the organic creamery at Daylesford in Gloucestershire,

Joe found the idea of bringing back raw-milk Stilton “a mouth-watering prospect”. And although they couldn’t legally market their cheese as Stilton – Stichelton was chosen since it’s an ancient name for the same Huntingdonshire town – they were determined to base production in Stilton’s heartland (the genuine article must be made in Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire or Derbyshire).

When a contact put them in touch with the Welbeck Estate

“A well thought through revival of a great cheese. Taste it once and you’ll have to buy it again.”

in Nottinghamshire, they knew they’d found their base. “It had a small organic dairy herd, which was critical for me – organic milk tastes better and I like the idea that there are no pesticides or fertilisers in it,” Joe explains. “It also has a fantastic herdsman, Mick Lingard, who really understands what we are trying to achieve in terms of milk quality. There’s an emphasis on consistency in modern food production, but cows are living creatures and they change throughout the year. Milk doesn’t come out the same every day, and the art of what we do is

dealing with those differences.”

One of the crucial factors in the complexity Joe strives for is the use of the starter that was rescued from Nottinghamshire’s last raw-milk Stilton producer and kept alive for nearly 20 years. “At first we used a basic starter culture, but once we switched, the difference in flavour was phenomenal,” says Joe, whose tiny annual production of 40 tonnes allows him to tweak and tinker with each batch. “We’ve got a long way to go, but we’re getting buttery, creamy notes and a melting texture that’s cool and clean on the tongue. One of the things about raw milk is the long finish – ten minutes after you’ve eaten Stichelton it still tastes fantastic. At the end of the day the name doesn’t matter. All I’m trying to do is make something that tastes lovely.”
Stichelton Dairy (01623 844883; www.stichelton.co.uk)

