

THE CURIOUS COOK

A Blue Blood New in Name Only



Jonathan Player for The New York Times

Over there Joe Schneider, an American, makes Stichelton cheese in Nottinghamshire, England.

By HAROLD MCGEE Published: December 5, 2007

London

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Jonathan Player for The New York Times

The cheese is sold at Neal's Yard Dairy in London.

IT'S December in England, and Stilton rules the cheese board.

Long celebrated as the king of English cheeses, festively veined with blue-green mold, Stilton is the holiday cheese of choice here. Something like half of the year's production is sold in November and December.

On Monday, I attended an intriguing tasting of this year's Stiltons — intriguing because it included a new aspirant to the throne. This upstart young cousin can't use the royal name, even though it aims to be the most traditional Stiltonian cheese of all. It's called Stichelton.

Stichelton is the creation of Randolph Hodgson, the proprietor of Neal's Yard Dairy and a major force in the renaissance of British specialty cheeses, and the cheesemaker Joe Schneider, a native of Syracuse, N.Y., who started cheesemaking a decade ago as "an American making Greek feta for a Turk in Holland." Mr. Hodgson convened the tasting at his home in west London.

This wasn't my first taste of the new English blue. I had sampled an earlier version in September at the Stichelton Dairy in Nottinghamshire, a three-hour drive north of London and 75 miles northwest of the village of Stilton. Stilton was a convenient stop on the old Great Northern Road between London and Scotland, and lent its name around 1700 to farmhouse cheeses made throughout the region that were brought there to be sold to travelers.

On our journey up to the Stichelton Dairy last September, Mr. Hodgson explained how cheese quality

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progressed for centuries, then declined in the age of mass production and supermarkets.

"I think of it as a Darwinian process," he said. "People make cheeses many times a year, in many ways, and all kinds of factors — accidents, chance, laziness, intentional changes — cause variations in the result. In the past, the changes that caused an improvement survived because consumers selected the better cheese. The problem today is that there's very little selection pressure to improve quality, because people don't get to taste cheeses and compare them before buying. So instead they choose on the basis of price, looks and advertising."

For more than two decades, Mr. Hodgson has worked to restore selection pressure for excellence in British cheeses. Customers at his shops in Covent Garden and near Borough Market are encouraged to taste before they buy. Then he visits the cheesemakers "as the customer's proxy," tasting through their cheeses with them, buying selectively, and working with them to improve consistency and quality.

Mr. Hodgson is a proponent of cheeses made with raw milk. Many scientific studies have confirmed that they have an especially full flavor thanks to the ripening activity of harmless bacteria present in the milk. Pasteurization eliminates these bacteria.

So Mr. Hodgson tried to convince some makers of Stilton to use raw milk, as they had for more than 200 years, and as makers of other cheeses still do here. But his pressure was no match for the rigidity of the Stilton Cheese Makers' Association. This certifying organization has required the use of pasteurized milk since 1989, when an outbreak of food poisoning with symptoms suggestive of staphylococcus was linked to raw-milk Stilton. Samples of the suspect cheeses were later found to be free of staph, but the legal definition of Stilton still forbids the use of raw milk.

Thwarted, Mr. Hodgson decided to develop his own raw-milk version of Stilton, but his cheese would need a pseudonym. He chose Stichelton, the original name of Stilton village as it's given in the 11th-century census known as the Domesday Book.

"Our goal for Stichelton is the unpasteurized cheeses made before 1989 by Colston Bassett, which were supremely rich, with the texture of butter," he told me at the dairy. "They had a milky, buttery, rounded-up front flavor, a syrupy sweetness, blue flavors that were cool rather than peppery, and a good long finish."

Since last December, Joe Schneider and two assistants have been making about 30 drums of Stichelton a day.

Their handiwork is available in New York at Bedford Cheese Shop, 229 Bedford Avenue (North Fourth Street), Williamsburg, Brooklyn; and the Whole Foods market at 95 East Houston Street (Bowery).

The cheesemakers work just yards from the milking parlor at Collingthwaite Farm, where 150 Holstein-Friesian cows are fed the farm's organic grass silage.

In addition to using raw milk, Mr. Schneider and Mr. Hodgson adopted other traditional methods that most Stilton makers have abandoned. To deepen flavor, Mr. Schneider curdles the milk with rennet enzymes from calves' stomachs rather than factory-grown molds. To create a delicate structure, he adds very small doses of starter bacteria and rennet, then ladles curds by hand into a trough where they mature slowly overnight. And he doesn't wrap the cheeses in plastic, so yeasts and bacteria can create an outer rind and add flavor.

In September I joined Mr. Schneider and Mr. Hodgson as they sampled dozens of cheeses in the aging room. Most were too acidic and brittle. Later that month, Mr. Schneider realized that the maturing curd was staying too warm. He adjusted temperatures, and noticed new aromas of butter and raspberries in the curd and a light, "fluffy" structure. "This was a real breakthrough," he said.

Last Monday I bought six different Stiltons in London shops, and that evening we tasted them alongside three Sticheltons. Two mass-produced cheeses had an elastic texture and little flavor. Another of the six had so much blue mold that it was powdery and unpleasantly sharp. Two were not bad.

But the Sticheltons were in a class of their own. The new "low-temp" September cheese was immature but tasty, and so finely open-structured that an overhead light caused it to glow through the side. A superb July cheese melted on the tongue into a balanced, full, lingering flavor. And an August cheese had a few drops of the syrupy fluid that Mr. Hodgson has been after, sweetly fruity and like nothing I've had in a cheese.

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Stichelton's creators have applied for an official designation that would allow the name for Stilton-like cheeses made with raw milk. They wittily describe Stichelton as a "traditional new cheese."

"The point is not to try slavishly to reproduce a traditional cheese," Mr. Hodgson explained. "It's to use a scientific understanding of tradition to make modern cheeses that taste fantastic."

He and Mr. Schneider are doing just that. If Stilton's makers don't follow suit, then regime change may come one of these Decembers, when true-blue Stilton loyalists will say, "The king is dead: long live the king."

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