





Randolph Hodgson's new blue cheese Stichelton is not a Stilton. It looks like one and is made in a Stilton county, it smells and tastes like a Stilton, but it can never be one. It is 'a cheese no one wants us to make', said Hodgson, the owner of Neal's Yard Dairy, and it has landed him and the cheesemaker Joe Schneider in a fierce battle over consumer choice and risk.

The controversy over their new project originated with a lost cheese; one that has not been made for 17 years. In 1989 Colston Bassett, the last of the Stilton cheesemakers to use raw, unpasteurised milk, ceased to do so. There had been food-poisoning cases after some Christmas parties and its Stilton got the blame. Colston

Bassett is one of the trademarked Stilton cheesemakers in Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Derbyshire. Creamy, with veins of blue-green tinged in places with channels of peachy sweetness, the outer rind of its raw-milk Stilton sometimes oozed with a fruity liquid. For those who knew their cheeses and loved those that stood out among their industrially made counterparts, this cheese is now just a memory.

The trademarked Stilton cheesemakers banned the use of raw milk to preserve their reputations, reasoning that it was too risky. No evidence ever linked the Colston Bassett cheese to the outbreak; the authorities had swabbed everything in the dairy and found nothing. Raw-milk Stilton had had its last Christmas. But perhaps not...

War of the cheeses

When Randolph Hodgson proposed making Stilton from unpasteurised milk, he met with fierce opposition from the cheese establishment.

Rose Prince charts his journey. Photographs by **David Crookes**

Left Randolph Hodgson and Joe Schneider at Collingthwaite Farm on the Wellbeck Estate in Nottinghamshire where they are making Stichelton. **Above** Hodgson and Schneider hand-ladle the Stichelton from one vat to another

Hodgson's Neal's Yard colleague Charlie Westhead obtained and saved the MT36, the liquid bacterial 'starter' that was used to turn the Colston Bassett raw milk to curds. Westhead sent it to Ray Osborne, a 'starter' producer who kept it alive, like a time bomb. Fifteen years later, Hodgson arranged to meet a fellow cheesemaker for a pre-Christmas drink in London. He suggested making Stichelton cheese. The name itself is a provocation. Stichelton is the earliest recorded name for the town of Stilton, and Hodgson's plan was to make the original Stilton cheese.

December 2004 Hodgson put his idea to Joe Schneider, the brilliant American-born cheesemaker. Schneider had a good job, making award-winning cheese for Daylesford Organic. 'When Randolph started talking about a raw-milk blue cheese, I thought the idea would go away, but



The name of the cheese itself is a provocation. Stichelton is the earliest recorded name for the town of Stilton

Above Hodgson (right) believes that hand-ladling the cheese creates better texture. **Below** a tool used to cut the curds

it didn't,' he said. The concept of a raw-milk Stilton was too tempting.

You can make a delicious cheese with pasteurised milk but it does not have the long-distance flavour that lingers after a bite of a raw-milk cheese. In the past 20 years, Hodgson has helped many artisan dairies develop beautiful cheeses. In 2006 he was awarded an OBE for services to the dairy industry. There are now 200 artisan dairies and of that an estimated 95 use raw milk in their cheese. Hodgson has fought to return character cheeses back into the British menu, persuading the authorities that raw milk, handled correctly, is safe.

Environmental Health Officers no longer faint at the suggestion and raw-milk cheddar, Caerphilly and Lancashire cheeses are now sold in supermarkets. They are not made in large quantities (we still eat a lot of blander, generic British cheese) but they have been proudly accepted into the new British food vernacular.

Suggesting, however, that raw-milk Stilton should be revived is viewed by the Stilton



Cheesemakers Association – which owns the trademark – as subversive talk. The SCMA, a trade association, cites safety as its reason. Its members include small dairies like Colston Bassett, but also giants such as Hartington, where Stilton is made on a conveyor belt, monitored by computers. The members of the SCMA produce 10,000 tons of Stilton per year.

February 2006 Schneider and his family left smart Gloucestershire for Nottinghamshire in mid-winter. It was necessary to find a dairy farm in one of the three counties where Stilton is made (the other two are Leicestershire and Derbyshire). They chose to live near Clowne, a town still depressed by the 1980s pit closures. 'There's nothing funny about Clowne,' Schneider remarks. He's not joking at the town's expense. When he advertised for workers, more than 200 people applied, many asking if the farm could be reached by public transport.

Hodgson (who would be based in London) and Schneider planned to make the cheese at Collingthwaite Farm on the Wellbeck Estate, which lies on the northern borders of Sherwood Forest. The estate, a 17,000-acre ducal estate at the heart of coal-mining country, is also Hodgson and Schneider's third shareholder. It is a remarkable location. There are still two

working mines on the land and a slag heap lies in full view of the new dairy.

May 2006 Before the first cheese was made, Hodgson wrote to the Stilton Cheesemakers Association asking for an amendment to the Stilton Cheese Trademark and PDO (Production of Designated Origin) regulations, to include a raw-milk Stilton so that he could call his cheese by that name. Nigel White, the secretary to the SCMA, replied on June 21, saying he had consulted the members and they had no desire to change the rules.

White reasoned that where raw milk is used in cheese, it must be guaranteed that the presence, introduction, growth and survival of pathogens will be controlled to the point that the cheese is safe. 'The received wisdom with Stilton is that the risk is just too high,' he said. Justification for



If Hodgson succeeded and made a good safe raw-milk cheese, the reputation of Stilton, monarch of British cheeses, could splinter

Above left farm buildings on the Wellbeck Estate. **Above right** Hodgson checks the quality of new batches with a cheese iron. **Below** the rind of Stichelton has a characteristic orange and yellow bloom

pasteurisation seems to be strong. Heat treatment of milk has contributed to better public health.

It is true that the risks with Stilton are higher because in the early stages of the process the milk acidifies slowly. For example, cheddar takes five and a half hours to make (or acidify), Stilton takes 23. 'Slow acidification drives out the moisture in the curds, leaving a soft, silky texture,' Randolph said. 'This is what makes Stilton different from other cheeses.'

The makers of raw-milk cheese make the case that their dairies take even greater care with hygiene than those who blanket pasteurise. 'If we have to give up on raw-milk, we have to give up on primary food safety,' Hodgson said. 'As long as it is used, cheesemakers will always be looking at how to make it safe.'

Hodgson remained optimistic. 'This is only the first stage of the course and we hope to convince them in the future,' he said. If he succeeded and made a good safe cheese the reputation of Stilton, monarch of British cheeses, could splinter. I asked Nigel White if the Stichelton process



is the same as that used to make the original Stilton, pre-pasteurisation. 'It is similar,' he replied, adding that the SCMA was not in conflict with Hodgson. 'I take my hat off to him, but you are not going to call it a Stilton,' he said. 'The people who spent millions on their dairies, who have helped Randolph Hodgson get where he is today, have said that he cannot call it Stilton.' White added that he believed that consumers like Stilton as it is and that qualities such as shelf-life were important. It was an interesting shift in the argument, away from food safety and towards securing the future of Stilton as a commodity.

October to November 2006 On October 9, Schneider made the first batch of Stichelton with milk from Collingthwaite's organic herd, milked by the herdsman Mick Lingard and Les Troop. 'What we like about Mick and Les is that they are converted organic-sceptics,' Schneider said. 'They can see the link between the cows' health and the milk quality.' He added that a healthy herd always makes a safe cheese.

By November, several batches had been made and the wooden shelves in the maturing room had slowly begun to fill. The cheese-making began with the morning's milk. Poured into one of the vats it was heated to 28C – and the starter was added. They were not yet using the liquid

starter saved from the Colston Bassett dairy. 'The one we are using is a "direct vat starter" that most people use,' Hodgson said. 'It is not very subtle but we need to pin down the recipe – then we will try the liquid starter.'

The whey was drained and then began the laborious work of hand-ladling the curds into neat scalloped layers, like a tiled roof, in the second vat. 'The purpose of handling is not to interfere with the natural shape of the curds,' Hodgson said. 'We think it is better for the texture that way; we are trying to achieve a dense, creamy cheese and this is how it is done.' Of the SCMA dairies, only Quenby and Colston Bassett still hand-ladle the curds.

After moulding, the new cheeses are turned daily to remove the moisture. The 'rubbing up' is also an important process. Tracey Scotthorne and Margaret Richardson, Schneider's assistant cheesemakers, use blunt knives to smooth the surface of the cheese, creating a natural seal that will one day be spotted with the red, yellow, white and orange yeast and mould that characterise the rind of Stilton. The piercing of the cheese with wires is done twice. This allows channels of air through to the centre of the cheese, where the distinctive blue-green veins form.



'Hodgson organised a tasting at his London shop that had a counter-cultural feel, like being a part of an underground movement'

Above Schneider and Hodgson hold a tasting session of Stichelton at various stages at Neal's Yard Dairy, Borough Market, London. **Below** young Stichelton cheese

We tasted a young cheese in the maturing room. It had overtones of lemon, and a slight sickly sourness. 'I think we are low on salt,' Schneider said.

January 2007 Stichelton had been on sale over Christmas, but neither Hodgson nor Schneider was happy. They described the cheese as 'dry and tight, and highly acidic'. But they were about to make a breakthrough. 'The batch made on December 13 [not ready until after Christmas] had blue'd nicely and was creamier,' Schneider said. 'We were closer. That was the first time I thought, we can do this.'

During this period, and for the following few months, Hodgson put the politics to one side. It was important to get the cheese to a stage where Stichelton could arguably be presented as a real Stilton, not an embarrassing second best to Colston Bassett, which, while pasteurised, is still hailed as a class cheese.

June 25, 2007 Schneider used the 'saved' natural starter MT36 for the first time. Its subtlety had a dramatic effect. 'It's very milky, buttery and slow to work,' he said. There were problems – the cheese was hard and dry, a factor put down to the effect of spring grass on milk – but then a dramatic improvement as summer went on. 'The cheeses became beautifully soft and buttery. It was another big milestone when we came out of that bad period,' Schneider said.

September 2007 By the end of the summer, talk about Stichelton was fairly constant. Hodgson's provocation may be insignificant on the scale of major world events, but to the food-curious a storm was brewing over consumer choice. Interest in the concept that a raw-milk Stilton is a real Stilton had taken hold,

Hodgson and Schneider took the Stichelton to the Slow Food cheese festival in Bra, Italy, where there was talk of the cheese becoming a 'presidia' – the term for a protected food. For Schneider the trip was a time to reflect on his methods. By November he wanted the world's press to be tasting a cheese that would justify his and Hodgson's project, and the trouble that it had started. 'I had time to think in Bra and I worked out the last piece of the puzzle,' he said. 'It is temperature control. If we get the temperature in the early stages right, we would get a much fruitier curd.' He was another step closer.

November 1 Hodgson organised a tasting at his shop in London's Borough Market that had



a counter-cultural feel, like being a part of an underground movement. Among those gathered were several who remembered the Colston Bassett raw-milk Stilton, including the former head of the Specialist Cheesemakers Association, Tim Rowcliffe; Jane Scotter, the biodynamic farmer and former Neal's Yard worker; Bob Colman of Neal's Yard; and the food writer Matthew Fort. Schneider was also there.

There were various pieces of cheese from different batches of Stichelton. One especially appealing piece had an orange bloom close to the rind and the blue veins. Scotter was impressed. 'It resembles more the raw Colston Bassett of our memories than it does Colston Bassett now,' she said. (There was a piece of pasteurised Colston Bassett there to compare.) Fort was typically eloquent. 'The raw Colston Bassett was perfectly balanced, creamy, grassy, herbal with residual sweetness,' he said. 'This [Stichelton] is getting very close.' All of them talked about the 'ooze' of a raw-milk Stilton, a golden liquid that would run down the rind. It was not yet there on Schneider's cheese. 'It has a soft malty sweetness, but not the syrup,' Fort said.

The general consensus was that the cheese will 'get there'. Schneider was beaming. Hodgson was hatching further plans. 'It would be great to spawn another Stichelton in another dairy. And maybe five more,' he added. The Stilton Cheesemakers Association has a problem if pasteurisation is to remain part of its philosophy. It can not be seen to be protectionist, or hide behind the political tool of food safety when the authorities and 100 makers of fresh and hard cheeses have updated their attitudes towards the use of raw milk.

Days later, just as we went to press, Hodgson rang to say that Nigel White had told him that he would talk to the members of the SCMA again about Stichelton. The following day, Schneider said that Britain's food heritage should not belong to a trade organisation. 'Stilton belongs to the British. If they want to try unpasteurised, raw-milk Stilton, they can.'

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