



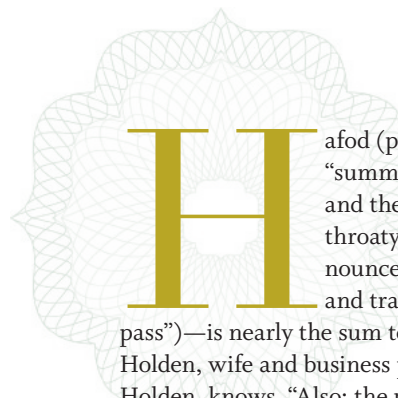
IN WALES, AN ORGANIC FARM RESURRECTS CHEDDAR FROM ANOTHER AGE





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WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY **CHRIS ALLSOP**



Hafod (pronounced “Havod”) means “summer pasture” in Welsh. That and the name of the farm—the throaty Bwlchwernen Fawr (pronounced “boolchwhelnen vow” and translated as “the large boggy pass”)—is nearly the sum total of Welsh that Rachel Holden, wife and business partner of cheesemaker Sam Holden, knows. “Also: the phrase ‘I’ve lost a pig,’” she adds. “Could be useful?” Unfortunately for Rachel, there are no pigs on the farm at the large boggy pass.

There is, however, a herd of 65 Ayrshire cows whose unpasteurized milk fuels Holden Farm Dairy, producer of Hafod traditional cheddar. This dairy boasts a reputation as the oldest organic farm in Wales; an



enviable hillside perch overlooking a shallow valley obfuscated by oaks, beech, and ash; and perhaps the most inefficient commercial cheddar production in the United Kingdom, if not the world.

ORGANIC ORIGINS

Holden Farm Dairy is enfolded between the lush Teifi and Aeron valleys of West Wales: dairy country, and home to the majority of Welsh artisan cheesemakers. I arrive just before dawn on a rare rain-free day and kill the engine, cutting the source of the only car noise for apparently miles around. Somewhere in the valley a single cow bellows.

Bwlchwernen Fawr is 130 acres of organic experiment begun in 1973 by Sam's father, Patrick Holden CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire), when he first moved to Wales. Sam, born in 1975 into the family known locally as the "hippies on the hill," was one of four siblings whose childhood was dominated by a carrot-weeding, calf-feeding rota indifferent to the scheduling of *The A-Team*.

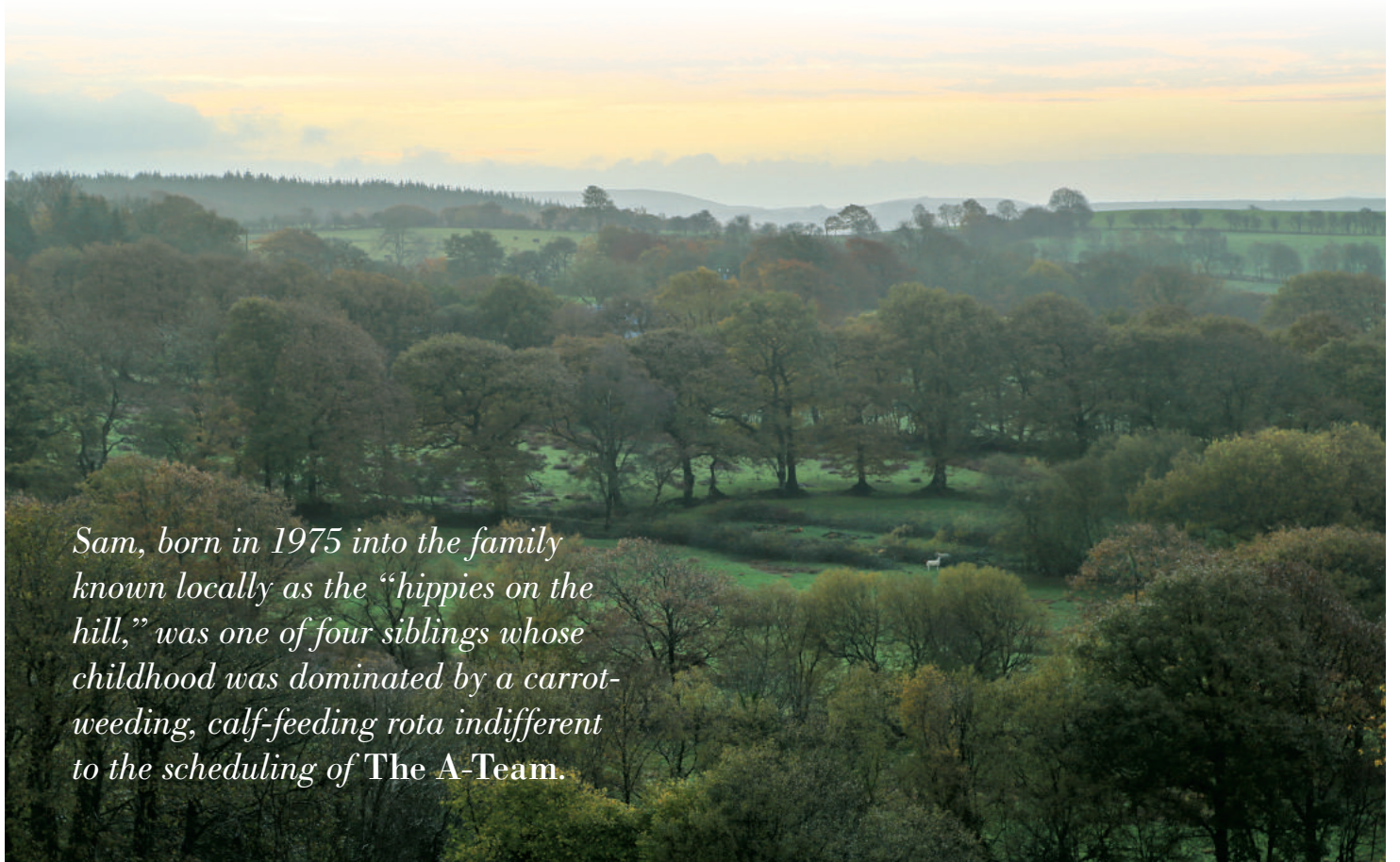
By '87, those carrots were the first organic product to be sold in UK supermarkets; today Patrick, 63, is a leading light in the organic movement and adviser to the Prince of Wales's International Sustainability Unit. Sam shares both his father's strong features and his philosophy that every farm "represents a cell that should be multifunctional, symbiotic, and resilient to external factors."

TRADING PLACES

Hafod's sophistication seems to suggest faded photographs depicting stony-faced Holden cheesemakers of yore, rather than an operation that began production in 2007. An on-site giveaway is the modern Welsh cedar-clad dairy, with its solar panels and glass wall allowing schoolchildren visiting on the same day as I am to gawk



THIS PAGE: Sam Holden, above, was raised on Wales's picturesque Bwlchwernen Fawr and, after a brief career in London, returned to pursue cheesemaking. His Hafod traditional cheddar, left, is more time-intensive than most. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** A dragon, the symbol of Wales, adorns an industrial sack at Holden Farm Dairy, top. Below, two of the farm's non-pedigree Ayrshire cows.



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THIS PAGE: The view from Bwlchwernen Fawr, above, gives a glimpse of the Cambrian Hills in the distance, with the Teifi river flowing between them.

Below, wheels of Hafod cheddar await sampling.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Sam Holden holds his copy of Dora G. Saker’s Practical Cheddar Cheese-making, from which he and Rachel drew inspiration for their Hafod recipe.

at the white-Wellington-shod cheese wizards within.

The business is a 50-50 partnership between silent partners Patrick and his wife, Becky, and the younger Holdens. In 2005 Patrick proposed the idea as a way to improve the return on their milk and as a possible new career for Sam and Rachel. At the time, disillusioned after four years of the London rat race, the pair had quit their careers in account management for a design firm (Sam) and public relations (Rachel) to “take a step into the unknown.”

“I thought there was no chance,” Sam recalls, still looking slightly amazed. “Rachel had already said that it rains too much in West Wales. But she said ‘yes’ ... I think she was drunk.”

Through grants and loans they scraped together enough capital to proceed. They decided to produce a cheddar because of its UK origins, the relative scarcity of traditional cheddar makers, and the variety’s broad window of maturity in which to sell (eight months to two years). Almost immediately, they encountered the characteristic solidarity of the artisan cheese community. Direct competitors from Scotland to Somerset opened their doors to the fledgling cheesemakers, allowing the Holdens to essentially retrofit those missing generations of stony-faced cheddar experts into their cheesemaking DNA.

It paid off. Nine months after the dairy had been officially opened by the Prince of Wales (a “surreal day,

showing Prince Charles the cheese,” recalls Sam), Hafod was taken on by eminent London-based cheese purveyor Neal’s Yard Dairy. But in 2011, after four years of awards and satisfactory sales, Sam and Rachel found that they weren’t entirely happy with their “clean, consistent” product.

VINTAGE THINKING

The Holdens are warm and welcoming—quick to laugh—but they are dedicated foodies and serious about their cheese. Their motivation from the outset had been to produce something truly special. “But we



Practical
Cheddar Cheese-making

BY

DORA G. SAKER, N.D.D., B.D.F.D.

(Instructor in Cheese-making under the Somerset County Council)

Price 2/6

were rarely very proud of the cheese,” says Sam, “and that spoke volumes.”

They consulted Neal’s Yard chairman, Randolph Hodgson, explaining their desire to create something more expressive of Bwlchwernen Fawr’s diverse pastures. Sensitive to his supplier’s organic sensibilities, Hodgson handed over Dora G. Saker’s *Practical Cheddar Cheese-making*. Published in 1917, the book carries detailed cheddar-making guidelines from that period—and omits nearly a century’s worth of efficiency problem solving and shortcuts. Such was not a detail to worry Sam, however, who has since spliced Saker’s advice with the original recipe for Hafod (the Lincolnshire Poacher update of UK artisan cheese pioneer and Holden family friend Dougal Campbell’s T’yn Grug).

The tweaks to the recipe can seem subtle, but they have a profound effect on the finished product. Producing only 33 tons of Hafod per year (eight to eleven 22-pound rounds daily), either Sam or one of his assistant cheesemakers, Matt Davies or Joseff Jones-Lionel, will make the cheese (although Sam is always present).

In place of industry-standard freeze-dried direct vat inoculation (DVI) starters, Sam now uses pint starters made from the farm’s milk, and just a quarter of the amount of starter culture than would be usual. It’s a precaution against the potentially dominating flavors produced by the culture, and a method by which the conversion of the sugars in the milk is eased to take place over the course of a gentler two hours (rather than the previous 20 minutes).

Also gentler is the cooking of the curd at 38°C (100.4°F), six degrees lower than before. The cooking time has been slashed by 45 minutes, as Sam prefers the cheddaring—in which slabs of curd are repeatedly piled up—as a method to extract whey. Too much moisture can cause unwanted blueing or present complications to the flavor profile during maturation.

“The theory,” Sam explains, wrapping the rounds in cheesecloth and lard (less than before, to release even more moisture while it ages), “is that the slower process develops more stable structures within the cheese. It’s like the difference between a fast-growing softwood tree and a slow-growing oak. More time also allows aromas to develop, which produces flavor.”

THIS PAGE: The farm’s 65 Ayrshire cows are milked inside the handsome dairy. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Rachel and Sam Holden quit their jobs in London in 2005 to pursue cheesemaking. At right, wheels of cheddar mature inside their dairy’s store room.





A TRUE MODERN CLASSIC

The result—besides 11-hour days that have become “less stressful” than the previous nine-hour shifts—is a cheese that is expressive in flavor much earlier. Six months after they produced their first batch, the Holdens went confidently into full production with the new recipe.

The first cheese, Rachel explains, had the attributes of modern cheddar: harder, drier, sweeter—with a tangy bite. “The new cheese is nutty, buttery, and mellow, with less acid—elegant and long. The taste experience carries on rather than just delivering that punch.”

The possibility of a profit (previously unknown) for Bwlchwernen Fawr dangles enticingly this year like an organic carrot—although the organic element is a hindrance more than a help: While it raises the cost of the Holdens’ milk, Sam says that charging extra for the organic part of the process seems to be a nonstarter for consumers when applied to the already high price of an artisan cheese. But there are things more important than profit: the quality of life for a young family (Sam and Rachel’s children, Honey and Charlie, were born in 2008 and 2010, respectively); a sustainable future secured for a small farm; and cheddar the Holdens can be proud to call their own. **c**

Chris Allsop is a freelance writer based in Bath, England. He waxes lyrical about artisan cheese at fromology.wordpress.com.

