HAUTE CULTURE

Britain's cheesemakers are tailoring clothbound cheddar to modern audiences

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Goat's Milk Clothbound Cheese

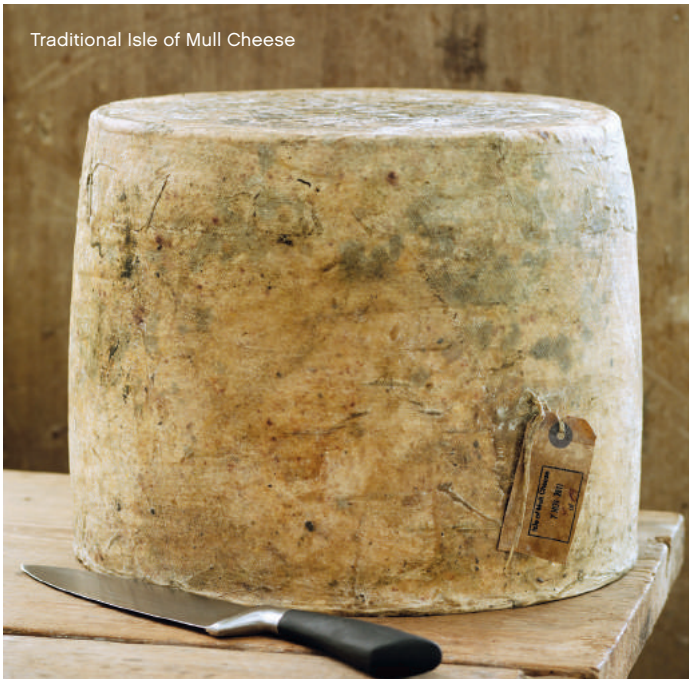
PHOTO: David Griffen Photography


Montgomery's Cheddar

For many people, nutty and creamy cheddar *is* cheese—the purest expression of milk's potential. Distinctive yet accommodating, cheddar can be either a cheese board's shining star or deli meat's back-up dancer between slices of rye.

It all started in southwest Britain's Somerset county. There the town of Cheddar is known for its brooding limestone gorge beneath which, in chilly caverns, the cheese was traditionally aged. Today it's most widely consumed in pasteurized, block form—sunny yellow and caramel sweet, with a bite in the short, sharp finish. However, this incarnation, which made up the majority of the 307,545 tons of UK cheddar produced in 2015, is only as old as industrialization.

It's clothbound cheddars that are the style's paragon. Cylindrical, made with raw milk, aged a minimum of 11 months, and bound with protective fabric that allows wheels to release moisture at the optimum rate to drive maturation, clothbound cheeses are direct descendants of the cheddar-like cheese that arrived with the Romans on British shores. They have long been the cheeses of choice among royalty: Henry II bought five tons of bandaged curds in 1170; Charles I had it on pre-order in the 1600s; and Queen Victoria received a half-ton on her wedding day in 1840 (sorry, Stilton).


Traditional Isle of Mull Cheese

Farmhouse cheddarmakers now hail from Britain's four corners, from Scotland's windswept Isle of Mull to the lush valleys of West Wales, all contributing to the country's estimated annual production of 1,100 tons of clothbound cheddar. Despite a healthy respect for tradition, they don't let it muzzle innovation: Some producers mine the past for fresh inspiration while others experiment beyond cow's milk.

HISTORY IN THE MAKING

"The cheese is alive," says Tom Calver of Westcombe Dairy. Dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, the 30-something explains the importance of aging cheddar in cheesecloth—a cornerstone of the artisan make process. "It needs to breathe," he adds. "If you vacuum-pack the cheese, it's like killing it."

Calver should know. Westcombe Dairy, situated in Somerset's leafy heartland, has been home to cheddar-making for over a century. In the latter half of its history, the dairy moved with the times and converted its production processes from farmhouse to industrial. Cylinders of golden cheddar became convenient, pasteurized ingots.

For farmhouse cheese production in Britain, the 20th century was devastating. Successive World Wars saw many makers abandon farms for the frontline, and very few veterans resumed their craft. In the decades that followed, chain supermarkets muscled out independent cheesemongers, butchers, and grocers—traditional outlets for farmhouse cheese—and the demand for factory-produced cheddars increased.

By the 1980s, the UK market was flooded with commercial cheddars, but offerings tasted the same, more or less. Fortunately, consumers began to wake up, especially as Brits abroad started comparing the blah blocks at home to exciting, pungent cheeses encountered in Swiss chalets and on antipasto plates.

PHOTOS: Neal's Yard Dairy (Montgomery's Cheddar)


Organic Daylesford Cheddar

Westcombe Cheddar

Farmhouse Mature Cheddar

So, in the mid-1990s, a new wave of small producers reintroduced taste and variety to British shores. In 1998, Westcombe joined them, ignoring the siren call of mass production to return to its clothbound, raw-milk roots.

RULES AND INNOVATION

Westcombe Dairy produces about 120 tons of cheddar per year and is now one of a Somerset cheddar triumvirate—along with Keen's and Montgomery's—whose farmhouse ideals are codified in a Slow Food Presidium, an initiative that aims to preserve and protect traditional practices or endangered animals or foodstuffs. The presidium even dictates what the cheese should look and taste like: "Artisan Somerset Cheddar has a richly moldy brownish-grey rind and hay-yellow curd. The texture is firm yet buttery, and the curd has flavors of caramelized milk, hazelnut, and bitter herbs."

Presidium principles guide cheddarmaking, which, first and foremost, must be done in Somerset. Raw milk must be used from a farm's own cow herd, and traditional pint or heritage starters—comprising bacteria from old, local whey that create a microbial taste legacy going back decades—must be combined with animal rennet to create the curd. To reduce moisture, the curd is then "cheddared," or stacked multiple times to expel whey. After the curd is milled and salted, it must be pressed into cylinders, according to the presidium. These cylinders must then be wrapped in cheesecloth, traditionally affixed with lard (a substance that releases just enough moisture while encouraging typical molds), before aging for a stipulated minimum of 11 months.

Neal's Yard Dairy's founder Randolph Hodgson was behind the presidium's creation in 2003. He wanted to create a classification more effective than the EU West Country Farmhouse Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) already in place. Many cheesemakers—even some involved in its inception—felt the PDO was too loosely defined and potentially confusing in its outline (block cheddar is allowed under the PDO, for example, and there is no emphasis on the use of cheesecloth).

However, do such exacting parameters straitjacket imagination and creativity? Calver is bullish in his response. "We're innovating every day." To wit: The huge, freshly dug trench in his dairy's backyard is the site of a future underground cheese cave. Inside, Calver intends to mechanize the cheese-turning, inspired by a visit to Marcel Petite's Fort Saint-Antoine in eastern France, where a motorized system regularly flips wheels of the creamery's famous Comté. Fellow presidium member Keen's, which has been making cheddar by the same recipe since 1899, has also embraced automation. In 2014 the company installed the robotic Lely milking system. According to director Nick Keen, the herd is "happier, vet bills are down, and there's more milk."

For producers bearing the torch of heritage like Calver, innovation is an investigation of the past as much as a consideration of present technologies. Westcombe is currently studying a recipe from 1870 that earned 18-year-old maker Edith Cannon's cheddar the impressive-sounding "Best Cheese in the British Empire" award.

Elsewhere, Sam Holden of Holden Farm Dairy in Wales tore up a successful recipe to make his clothbound Hafod cheese according to the edicts of Dora Saker's book, *Practical Cheddar Cheese-making*, published in 1917.

Keen's Cheddar

Corra Linn

Clearly Holden is a fan of tradition, but because he doesn't produce in Somerset, he can't claim presidium status.

"It really doesn't bother me," Holden says. "I appreciate the argument for PDOs and presidia, how they're important to preserve traditional values in the face of industrialization. But I also love the fact that in the UK we aren't so restricted … and we have the lovely freedom to make a cheese in any way we want, wherever we want."

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Indeed, beyond presidium designation, the word "cheddar" becomes fuzzy.

"The term is used very loosely in the marketplace," says Neal's Yard Dairy export manager James Rutter, pointing to the presidium as representing what Neal's Yard labels, in the strictest possible terms, cheddar. "Personally, I see cheddar as cow's milk cheese." (Interestingly enough, current British food-labeling regulations for cheddar don't specify milk type.)

Comparing the rinds of the Westcombe Cheddar, left, and the Hafod, right.

The issue is a Gordian knot of marketing, culture, and technical quibbling, but it doesn't seem to be inhibiting cheesemakers, fortunately. "Cheddars made using alternative milks are something we're seeing more and more in the market," Rutter says, adding that they're more commonly referred to as "cheddar-style."

Mary Quicke of Devon-based Quicke's Traditional respects established positions. Her Traditional Hard Goat's Cheese, a true clothbound cheddar in all but milk, won Best English Cheese at this year's British Cheese Awards. "We're calling it—" Quicke says, then dashes out of the room to confirm the rebrand. "Quicke's Goat's Milk Clothbound Cheese," she says upon returning. "We're not very good at names."

Primarily a producer of traditional cow's milk clothbound cheddars, Quicke's has also experimented with a sheep's milk cheddar-style as well as a cow's milk elderflower cheddar. "Them's the rules," Quicke says about her decision not to characterize her decorated goat's milk cheese as a cheddar—an attitude shared by Errington Cheese's Angela Cairns, who produces the sheep's milk cheddar-style Corra Linn. At the same time, Quicke is motivated by a reverence for history, demonstrated by her whole-hearted support of a presidium that she can never join.

While artisan cheddar production—with its complex interactions of traditional microflora in the milk and mold gardens interacting mysteriously across the rind—remains, to some extent, unknowable, at least the presidium identifies and protects the historic flavor of Somerset Cheddar. As for the rest of clothbound devotees: Semantics aside, it might all come down to taste. **c**

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TASTING **NOTES**

Montgomery's Cheddar
PDO/Artisan Somerset Cheddar
J.A. & E. Montgomery, Somerset, England
Raw cow's milk

Perhaps the world's most lauded cheddar, Montgomery's epitomizes the raw-milk farmhouse style: dry in texture with balanced flavor at once savory and sweet, rounded out with fruit notes and a long caramel finish.

Keen's Cheddar
PDO/Artisan Somerset Cheddar
Keen's Cheddar, Somerset, England
Raw cow's milk

The Keen family has been making cheddar with raw milk in the same verdant Somerset pastures since 1899. The cheddar's firm yellow paste is complex on the palate, with a tangy bite and rich, bitter finish.

Westcombe Cheddar
PDO/Artisan Somerset Cheddar
Westcombe Dairy, Somerset, England
Raw cow's milk

Described by cheesemaker Tom Calver as a "five-mile cheddar" (as in, you're still tasting it five miles down the road), this structured, firm cheese has a mellow lactic tang and extended notes of citrus, hazelnut, and caramel.

Farmhouse Mature Cheddar
PDO
Batch Farm Cheesemakers, Somerset, England
Pasteurized cow's milk

A member of the West Country Farmhouse PDO, the Gould family uses pasteurized milk from its herd of 260 Friesian cows to produce a smooth cheddar with a distinctive nutty, woodsy flavor.

Organic Daylesford Cheddar
Daylesford Organic, Gloucestershire, England
Pasteurized cow's milk

Created by expert cheesemaker Joe Schneider in 2001, Daylesford cheddar is clothbound and matured for eight months, resulting in a chewy, rich cheese. Toffee notes and hints of the estate's organic pastures are present in the persistent finish.

Traditional Isle of Mull Cheese
Isle of Mull Cheese, Isle of Mull, Scotland
Raw cow's milk

This memorable Scottish cheddar is ivory in winter and cream-colored in summer. Aged up to 18 months, it's relatively soft with farm and fruitiness accompanied by an alcoholic tang (contributed, perhaps, by a whisky distillery's leftover barley husks that are mixed with the cows' feed).

Hafod
Holden Farm Dairy, Ceredigion, Wales
Raw cow's milk

Produced by Sam and Rachel Holden on the oldest organic farm in Wales, Hafod is a variation on Dougal Campbell's T'yn Grug recipe that incorporates Dora Saker's cheesemaking guidelines from 1917. Golden yellow and with a close-knit texture, this elegant cheese is nutty and buttery with a mellow finish.

Goat's Milk Clothbound Cheese
Quicke's Traditional, Devon, England
Pasteurized goat's milk

Home Farm has been in the Quicke family for more than 450 years. Their cheddar-style goat's milk hard cheese has a subtle goaty taste, fresh acidity, and an aromatic almond tang.

Cairnsmore Ewes
Galloway Farmhouse Cheese, Wigtownshire, Scotland
Raw sheep's milk

Millairies Farm is committed to organic cheese production and owner Alan Brown—with an eye to his animals' welfare—milks his Friesland sheep only once daily. This yields the creamy cheddar-style Cairnsmore Ewes, which has a mellow flavor and grassy finish.

Corra Linn
Errington Cheese, South Lanarkshire, Scotland
Raw sheep's milk

Initially the Errington family—makers of renowned Lanark Blue—was nervous about switching to hard cheese production with Corra Linn, which is rubbed with rapeseed oil before maturation for a minimum of four months. The gamble paid off: The resulting cheese has an earthy, hazelnut flavor matched with engaging sweet notes.

PHOTOS: Neal's Yard Dairy (Keen's Cheddar)