

PLANET FOOD

June 2002

HARD CHEESE

Deleted: ¶

Did you know?

GM rennet was one of the first GM foods introduced in this country. The enzyme 'chymosin' can be produced using GM rather than scraped from a calves stomach and so is used in many vegetarian cheeses. Organic cheeses do not permit the use of GM enzymes.

1. EDITORIAL – HARD CHEESE

One of my nick-names as a child was 'biscuits, butter and cheese' because I was such an enthusiast for the combination. I am sure it was possible at that time (I am 40!) to get more than just Cheddar or Stilton, but unless my parents had been to France we didn't. I still don't like Stilton – or any blue cheese - but have expanded my taste for cheese well beyond Cheddar.

And the choice today is vast. Clearly lots of cheese is imported from France, Italy or elsewhere. But there is also a thriving and expanding local cheese market. In the West Country, there are zillions of delicious cheeses available – both soft and hard. To name but a few:

- Cornish Yarg is wrapped in nettles – my eldest son, Connor, loves it
- Curworthy, a creamy Devon cheese coated with black wax,
- Devon Oke, a more mature Curworthy
- Double Gloucester, a mature waxy creamy cheese
- Dorset Blue Vinny, a popular full flavoured blue cheese, but not for me
- Jersey Shield, a new cheese made by the award winning Montgomery cheese-makers, which is really delicious
- Ticklemore, a hard goat's cheese and
- Woolsery, another goat's cheese, which used to be made in Devon, from pedigree goats milk produced in Wiveliscombe, in Somerset. But the goats were wiped out in the foot and mouth crisis and Annette Lee, has moved to Dorset. She still produces Woolsery, cream cheeses and even feta from goat's milk.



All these cheese and many more are widely available, including in local shops. We are lucky enough to have a real cheese expert in our nearest market town - Roger Biddle and his wife, runs Provenders in South Petherton. It is an excellent delicatessen and also has an internet site where you can buy produce and find out more about it. Roger says "General de Gaul questioned how you can rule a country (France) with 600 different cheeses and now the UK is getting that way too!"

2. CHEESE PRODUCER

CHEDDAR BY BLOCK

Graham Fry, Commercial Director at Coombe Farm

“We want people to feel they are picking up our cheeses straight from the farm into their supermarket trolleys”

I talked to Graham Fry, the Commercial Director at Coombe Farm, just moments after he had heard that they had won the *Gordon Perry Organic Cheese Perpetual Salver*, at the Bath and West show. This was an award for the best overall organic cheese in the show and he was clearly delighted.

Graham, joined Coombe Farm, only a year ago. He was our host, when I, along with a group of other food journalists, visited the farm earlier this year. It was a particularly interesting trip for me because I had been to the farm about 30 years ago, as a child. I can't remember what prompted my original visit, but I do remember that it was a very different place to Coombe Farm today.

Then, there were few outbuildings and I remember long lines of large Cheddar truckles wrapped in linen. Now Coombe Farm is a modern food processing company, making block cheddar amongst other things. Everything is sparkling clean stainless steel, with pipes and dials and conveyor belts. Each of us had to don disposable white coats, hats and shoe coverings before we were able to enter the food areas. We then waved at an electronic eye, which started the hot water jets, so we could wash our hands.

Not everything produced at Coombe Farm is organic. But that is clearly the way things are going. And what Graham is particularly proud of is the traceability of their systems. Every product coming out of Coombe Farm can be traced back to source – even the fields where the cows have grazed. Although this is done through computerisation, Graham says that he wants to bring the farm and the consumer so close together that they feel they are picking up the cheeses from the farm right into the trolley at the supermarket!

Making Organic Block Cheddar Cheese at Coombe Farm

Apart from the fact that organic milk is used in organic cheese, there is no difference in the cheese-making process itself. If it does have a richer taste, it is because of the cow's diet affecting the taste of the milk.

Although pasteurisation is essentially used to get rid of the harmful pathogens in the milk, it also helps give consistency in terms of cheese making bacteria. And this means that the end product is more predictable. This is the first stage in the process.

The milk is then put into vats and a starter culture is added, which gets the bacteria to start working like crazy and increases the acidity of the milk. Rennet is then added. This is traditionally made from an enzyme gathered from a calf's stomach. However GM technology has made it possible to replicate this for vegetarians.

Another vegetarian alternative is microbial rennet, which is used in most organic cheeses. Graham Fry of Coombe Farm dismisses the concern that this adds a bitter taste to the cheese, as 'myth. But Roger Biddle, from Provenders (see above) says that most traditional Cheddar makers swear they can not replicate the flavour of their cheese using vegetable rennet and that

the gold medals in cheese shows seem to bear this out. This is clearly a controversial issue in the cheese world.

The rennet coagulates the solids in the milk to give curds and whey. These are then scalded to get the moisture out of the curd particles. After being pitched into coolers 90% of it in the form of whey is drained off. A small amount of this can be used to make butter and cream and the rest either goes for pig feed or to make whey powder, used in many processed foods.

The remaining curd is manually pulled to the sides of coolers, whilst the whey drains down the middle. The chaps doing this then take knives and cut the cheese into blocks, which they then turn. They then cut them again into smaller blocks so they can be stacked. This process is known as cheddaring and the idea is to squeeze out the whey and to texture the cheese – a Cheshire cheese would not be cheddared because it keeps a crumbly texture.

After the cheddaring process the cheese is diced up and salt is added to stop the bacteria from multiplying. It is then put into moulds, pressed and vacuum packed before being stored at 8-10C. The critical thing at this point is the maturation, which is entirely dependent on how long the cheese is stored – mild cheese for 3-4 months, medium for 6-7 months and mature for around 12 months. During this time the bacteria continues to work – at a slower pace – and releases the flavour of the cheese. Block cheddar tends to mature quicker than traditional cheddar and this is a major factor in why it is cheaper.

This bacteria is also good for aiding digestion, which is why people tend to eat cheese at the end of a meal!

3. TOO MUCH ORGANIC MILK

Amazingly, the supply of organic milk currently exceeds demand by such an extent that about half of what is produced gets mixed in with standard milk. Many dairy farmers are likely to move out of organic and in a year or two we may find that there is not enough to meet demand. And sadly it is often the smaller farmers who fold first.

The Organic Milk Suppliers Co-operative (OMSCO) is working for its members to promote organic milk. Omsco director, Sally Bagnell, says that there is currently meltdown in relation to oversupply of all milk. However, supermarkets have generally not dropped the prices for customers, even though farmers are getting so little. And supermarkets insist on getting higher profits from organic produce – their key interest in the area is that it is top of the market, where consumers are willing to pay a premium. But in June 2002 Tesco reduced the price of organic milk by 15%. This might be good if it encourages more people to buy the milk but bad if it merely results in Tesco paying less to organic producers.

OMSCO say that one of the real benefits of the organic system is that there is complete traceability, which means that it is possible to identify the farmers for every batch of milk. Most organic milk is also not homogenised (but not all). Homogenisation is where the milk is forced through very fine sieves which reduces the size of the fat globules thereby making the milk the same consistency throughout, rather than having the cream rise to the top.

If we want to maintain the supply of organic milk (and cheese) we need to be prepared to pay the premiums charged. Cheap food is cheap to make and you get what you pay for!

4. CHEESE CONTACTS

COOMBE FARM

Graham Fry, Marketing Director, Coombe Farm on 01460 279500

Website in development at time of writing

ORGANIC MILK SUPPLIERS CO-OPERATIVE (OMSCO),

Sally Bagnal, 01934 750 244

www.omSCO.co.uk

PROVENDERS Roger Biddle, 01460 240 681

www.provender.net

SOIL ASSOCIATION 0117 929 0661

www.soilassociation.org