2024

INSPIRATIONAL Cheese RETAILERS

SPONSORED BY

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Top of the Shops

Innovative, inspiring and unique: meet the fine cheese retailers to know now



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HAMISH JOHNSTON

Welcome

Welcome to the fourth edition of *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*, brought to you by the teams behind *Speciality Food* and Le Gruyère AOP.

In this latest round-up of the brightest and best independent cheesemongers, we highlight the heritage, traditional and modern pillars of the cheese-selling world across the UK. Representing every region of the UK, each of these indies has a story to tell – and I hope you find their profiles not only interesting, but inspiring to boot.

For the professionals profiled within these pages, selling cheese is a passion not a chore, a lifestyle not a 9-5 task, and we feel this attitude is worthy of applause. Please join us in celebrating the cheesemongers shaping the course of fine cheese in 2024.

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LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP



PARLOURMENTARY



THE LITTLE CHEESE SHOP
PIC: FIONA MORGAN



HAMISH JOHNSTON



JARROLDS

LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP





How We Put This Guide Together

Once again *Speciality Food* and Le Gruyère AOP have joined forces to proudly present *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*, now in its fourth year. Our teams have long championed independent cheese retail – both working hard to support the passionate professionals at the heart of the fine cheese industry – and we are proud to once again present this publication as a celebration of the dedication and expertise of the UK's best cheesemongers.

The people behind the establishments we highlight within these pages should stand as inspirations to us all. We all know how demanding running an independent business can be, yet these individuals stand out amongst the crowd and make it their duty to fire-up customers to appreciate well-made cheese. They are not simply retailers, they are champions and ambassadors of the produce they sell, which specialist sellers should all aim to be.

Thanks to their passion and appreciative customer bases, it wasn't hard to uncover these businesses. We put the word out across the fine food industry and beyond via an online survey, offering cheese lovers across the UK the opportunity to showcase their favourite indie cheese purveyor, and the countless nominations we received did not disappoint. Choosing a handful to highlight for this year's edition of *Inspirational Cheese Retailers* was quite the challenge, but the retailers we've featured are more than worthy of the spotlight.

We also had the pleasure of revisiting some of the indie cheese businesses we featured in the 2023 edition of this publication to see how they have fared over the past 12 months. From lessons learned to inspiring tips, these catch-ups are well worth a read.

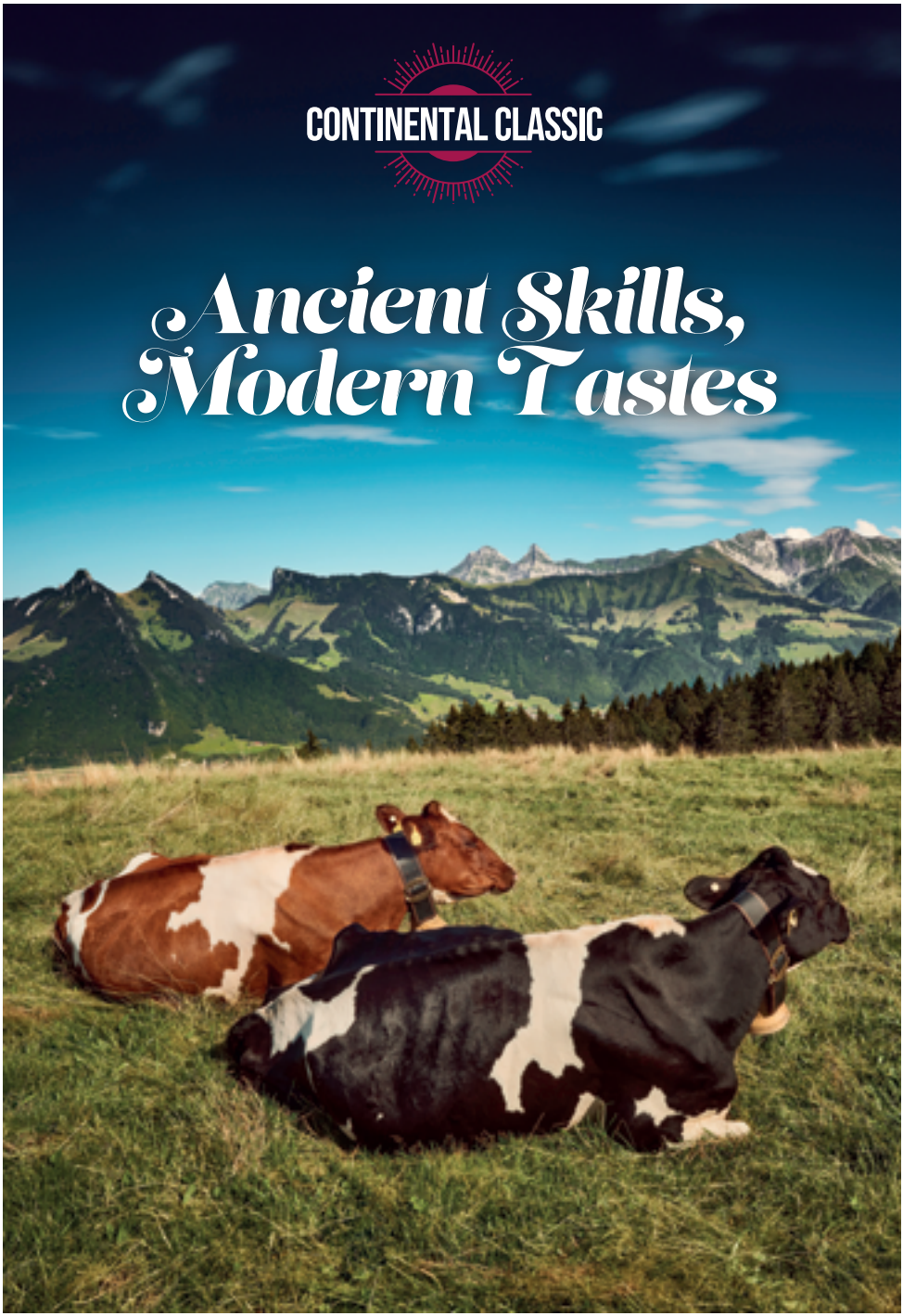
A gift from the *Speciality Food* and Le Gruyère AOP teams to yours, I hope you find this year's edition of *Inspirational Cheese Retailers* to give you a boost for the year ahead.

HELEN DAYSH

HEAD OF MARKETING UK AT LE GRUYÈRE AOP

LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP

The team at Le Gruyère AOP have long been inspired by the passion and determination the people behind independent cheese retailers have to champion truly great cheese from around the world. Just as cheesemongers help their customers to appreciate carefully crafted cheese, so we have supported the work that they do – and we are proud to once again work alongside *Speciality Food* on the *Inspirational Cheese Retailers* project, which shines the spotlight on these most deserving of food industry professionals.



LE GRUYÈRE®
SWITZERLAND AOP



CHEESE AFICIONADOS ACROSS THE WORLD ARE IMPRESSED BY LE GRUYÈRE AOP, AN ANCIENT CHEESE WHICH PERFECTLY SUITS MODERN-DAY PALATES

For centuries, the cheesemakers behind Le Gruyère AOP have worked tirelessly and passionately to create one of Switzerlands best-loved exports. Created in the Western cantons of the country to stringent AOP standards, the cheese has become an icon for cheese lovers across the world.

Le Gruyère AOP's history stretches far beyond the creation of protected food accreditations, however, all the way back to 1115AD when the inhabitants of five neighbouring Swiss regions – Fribourg, Vaud, Jura, Bern and Neuchâtel – transformed the milk from their cattle into cheese. In 1762 the cheese gained its now-famous name, yet without the quality standards which were set to be established across Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the cheese was often imitated which led to lesser-quality wheels. Once its AOP (Protected Designation of Origin) credentials were established across Europe, the quality of Le Gruyère AOP never wavered – no wonder it's one of the best-loved cheeses across the world.

The 160 dairies and 55 Alpage (mountain pasture) dairies which produce Le Gruyère AOP play a vital role in maintaining the quality of the cheese. The accreditation requires that they uphold the rigid specifications set at every stage of the process –



AN AWARD-WINNING CHEESE

Le Gruyère AOP is the winner of numerous awards, and no wonder – its consistently unique and perfectly balanced flavour, as well as its production by skilled cheesemaking experts who utilise knowledge and techniques passed down the generations, means that this ancient cheese has become a modern-day icon of the cheese counter. Indeed, it is the only cheese that has won the title of Best Cheese in the World at the World Cheese Awards five times.

LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP

DID YOU KNOW

Le Gruyère AOP and the town and region of Gruyères are named after a crane, orgrue in French, which purportedly landed on the shoulder of the warlord who founded the civilization. You can see depictions of the crane on the statues, flags, and doorways of every village in the area, as well as on several wheels of the cheese



from the production of the milk used to make the cheese to its ageing – in order to maintain the internationally-renowned flavour and quality of Le Gruyère AOP. Distance and speed are also key; milk must be produced within 12.4 miles of the cheesemaking site, and must have been transported from the farm to the vat within 18 hours.

Due to the simplicity of Le Gruyère AOP – its only ingredients are milk, salt and animal rennet, not to mention time and expertise – the environment from which the milk comes is of paramount importance. Thankfully, the Swiss pastures on which the cows graze are full of natural herbs and flora, imbuing the cheese with a unique taste of the Alps. This attention to quality doesn't pause during the colder seasons; instead of silage, the cows are fed hay when temperatures are too low for grazing.





HOW TO CUT LE GRUYÈRE AOP

To portion a wheel of Le Gruyère AOP, cut it in half using a cheesewire then into quarters using a double-handled knife. Halve these quarters into eighths, then cut the top half into three wedges and the bottom into six slices. Wrap the cut portions with clingfilm in order to avoid the cheese coming into contact with the air.



> DUE TO THE SIMPLICITY OF LE GRUYÈRE AOP – ITS ONLY INGREDIENTS ARE MILK, SALT AND ANIMAL RENNET, NOT TO MENTION TIME AND EXPERTISE – THE ENVIRONMENT FROM WHICH THE MILK COMES IS OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE

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Relish the Best of Switzerland

Thanks to its well-rounded flavour – think subtle sweetness perfectly balanced with complex savoury notes and a slight nutty note – Le Gruyère AOP has long been one of the world's most revered cheeses, making it a must-stock mainstay of any well-crafted cheese counter. Not only does it taste great, but Le Gruyère AOP is available in a number of different varieties (find out more below), meaning that every individual will find something to love about this ancient yet thoroughly contemporary cheese.

THANKS TO ITS UNIQUE FLAVOUR AND DELICIOUS VERSATILITY, LE GRUYÈRE AOP IS AN ICONIC PRODUCT OF THE ALPS

TASTING NOTES

Whether your customers are seeking a perfectly balanced milder cheese or a punch-packing burst of savoury flavour, Le Gruyère AOP has it covered

- Le Gruyère AOP Classic - aged six-nine months: nutty, floral and sweet, this option is ideal for those who prefer milder cheese
- Le Gruyère AOP Réserve - aged 10 months and above: aromatic and flavourful, this variation boasts a unique complexity and slight crystalline crunch
- Le Gruyère AOP can also be purchased aged 18 and 24 months – both provide a strong yet expertly balanced flavour

A CHEESE FOR EVERYONE

Award-winning Le Gruyère AOP is suitable for all cheese lovers to enjoy, thanks to being naturally gluten and lactose-free – so nobody, including lactose-intolerant or coeliac customers – need miss out on this one-of-a-kind cheese.

HOW TO SERVE

Thanks to its carefully balanced flavour and optimum texture, Le Gruyère AOP is a versatile addition to your customers' kitchens and events. It can play a starring role on a cheeseboard, of course, or you can be inspired by its Swiss heritage and create a fondue.



LE GRUYERE AOP IS A DELICIOUSLY VERSATILE INGREDIENT; VISIT GRUYERE.COM/EN/RECIPES FOR A HOST OF SERVING SUGGESTIONS

Introducing 2021's Inspirational Cheese Retailers

> THESE BUSINESSES DEMONSTRATE THE BEST OF THE UK'S FINE CHEESE RETAIL SCENE

It is our great pleasure to introduce this year's most inspirational cheese retailers, all of which demonstrate the best of the UK's fine cheese retail scene. Not only do the businesses within this section of *Inspirational Cheese Retailers* provide ideas and inspiration for your own cheese counter, but they also share the challenges and trials that they have experienced – and successfully navigated their way through – to help remind us all that, as independent retailers, we are all in this together.

I hope you find the following pages to be an inspiring, informative and supportive read.

LONDON & SOUTH

CROSS-COUNTRY CHAMPION



Hamish Johnston

LOCATION: NORTHCOTE ROAD, LONDON **FOUNDED:** 1994
FOUNDER: WILL JOHNSTON

GREATEST CHALLENGE

Our greatest challenge was the loss to fire of our Suffolk warehouse back in 2022," says Jamie. "Keeping the wholesale business running whilst relocating to a new premises was incredibly challenging. The hard work of the wholesale team and the loyalty shown by our customers meant that we were able to get through this and re-emerge fighting fit.

While Hamish Johnston might well be a familiar name to independent cheese retailers for its wholesale operation, based in Suffolk, the business began at a retail premises in London's Battersea 30 years ago with Will Johnston at its helm. "It soon established an excellent reputation – both locally and across London – for its broad selection of artisan and farmhouse cheese," explains Jamie Collins, shop manager. "In 2001, Will moved to Suffolk and local resident Mark Newman joined the Hamish Johnston team. As co-owners, Will and Mark built up the Hamish Johnston wholesale operation, with Suffolk as its centre." Three decades on, the Hamish Johnston shop continues to thrive, and the wholesale operation currently supplies over 350 businesses.

Thanks to its longstanding presence in the area, the Hamish Johnston shop has developed a large and loyal following. Cheese enthusiasts in the area relish having such expertise locally, and the business's connection with its location doesn't end there – in fact, the majority of the shop's staff live nearby. Plus, Jamie says, "when it comes to seasonal workers, we employ a good number of our customers' children when they are back for the university holidays."

While a large proportion of the bricks-and-mortar Hamish Johnston site are local, that's not to say that they all grew up with British cheese on their tables. "Our customer base is mainly made up of local families with an interest in artisan cheeses," explains Jamie. "Many are French expats whose children go to the French Lycee on the other side of the river in South Kensington."

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> WHEN IT COMES TO SEASONAL WORKERS, WE EMPLOY A GOOD NUMBER OF OUR CUSTOMERS' CHILDREN WHEN THEY ARE BACK FOR THE UNIVERSITY HOLIDAYS

Thinking outside the box has served the team well, especially when it comes to a certain French cheese dish. "One service that we offer which goes down particularly well is the free loan of a Raclette machine when you buy a quarter of Raclette from us."

The shop team has exciting plans in the pipeline for 2024. "This year, among other things, we're looking to host more wine and cheese nights in the shop," says Jamie, "and we plan to further develop staff cheese knowledge through the excellent Academy of Cheese courses."



BEST SELLING CHEESES



RACLETTE
Dark beige rind, light yellow paste: melted the flavour is creamy and fruity.
hamishjohnston.com



CROPWELL BISHOP STILTON
Golden paste with fine ripples of veining; creamy with a nutty spicy blue flavour and a clean lasting tanginess.
cropwellbishopstilton.co.uk



BARON BIGOD
A slightly-mottled white rind and pale yellow paste; creamy, buttery with a distinctive aroma and an earthy hint of mushroom.
fenfarmdairy.co.uk





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CUSTOMER CONNECTION

St Giles Cheese

LOCATION: NORTHAMPTON **FOUNDED:** 2010
FOUNDERS: STEVE AND CAROLINE WARD

BEST SELLING CHEESES



NORTHAMPTONSHIRE BLUE
A creamy blue made with unpasteurised milk.
hamtunnfinefoods.co.uk



KINGSTONE DAIRY ASHCOMBE
A rich and savoury washed rind cheese with a striking layer of wood ash at its centre.
kingstonedairy.com



THE TRADITIONAL CHEESE DAIRY LORD OF THE HUNDREDS
A perfectly balanced savoury cheese with notes of caramelised hazelnuts and fresh grass.
thetraditionalcheesedairy.co.uk

The fine food industry is home to a great number of food lovers whose passion at first outweighs their industry expertise and professional prowess, but they often go on to found some of the UK's most inspiring businesses. Take Steve and Caroline Ward of Northampton's St Giles Cheese as an example.

Having returned home to Northampton from a trip to France and missing the delights of the country's fromagerie and deli scene, the husband-and-wife team decided to set up shop themselves. "It was all set up in a rush during the summer of 2010, with zero food industry experience – we were enthusiastic amateurs at best!" begins Steve. They may have been learning on the job, but that didn't slow their mission down. "From finding a suitable premises to doors opening took just 12 weeks. We opened on a shoestring budget, in the pit of a global recession in a declining town centre. We were doomed to fail." Spoiler: they did not.

A varied clientele

The fine food sector thrives on connections and customer experience, and at St Giles Cheese "it's all about the personal service," says Steve. "Over the years we have become friends with many of our customers. Each week, we remember what each of our regulars was up to last week, and what they like or are not fond of – one finds oneself building a mental flavour profile for each of these customers. There then comes a point when you can recommend a cheese without even given a taster, such is that customer's confidence you'll pick the right one."

Steve and Caroline's attention to detail clearly serves their varied customer base well. "Our customer base is the full spectrum. From teens to octogenarians, working class to landed gentry, those who want white cheese with fruit in (though we only relent to Wensleydale & Cranberry for Christmas) to those looking for Le Gruyere AOP Alpage. Local folks to those who travel some distance to visit."

Whatever their preference, budget or age, the St Giles Cheese team makes sure to always offer a friendly welcome. "It's surprising how many shops you can walk in and not get a simple 'Hello'," says Steve. Product knowledge allows the team to offer alternatives if the item on a customer's shopping list isn't available, plus tastings, recipe suggestions and sharing the background stories of products and their producers "boost confidence and improves the shopping experience," he explains.

Successful yet humble

While many retailers in Steve and Caroline's position would open a second site, this is a move that the pair firmly decided against some years ago. "When we finally began to turn a profit, some years, back, we considered opening another shop in one of Northampton's satellite towns. But a second shop would be a watered-down version of this one with additional staffing headaches," explains Steve. "We took advice from other businesses who told us it's very difficult to replicate the original shop and decided against it."

In this tempestuous time, "each year we're just grateful to have made it through another one, says Steve. "Every time someone walks through the door and tells us how pleased they are that we are here, or that we are still here, it's a great boost to a fragile ego but also a confirmation that we're doing it right."

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> WE WILL NEVER REDUCE THE QUALITY WHICH WE OFFER TO MAKE US MORE ACCESSIBLE. ONCE YOU FALL FOR THAT, YOU GO UP AGAINST THE SUPERMARKETS, AND THAT IS A BATTLE NONE OF US CAN WIN

GREATEST CHALLENGES

The 'C' word. Covid, oddly was kind to us. We stayed open, managed to avoid catching it, adapted to the situation by offering deliveries. We did steady business throughout. Cancer. Caroline was diagnosed with cancer in 2018. Initially it was awful, how could we get through it? But we managed. You have to. She is now five years clear. The 'B' word. Brexit. I don't care what you thought would happen, it's been nothing but bad news. So many price increases. We've had to reduce mark up on many lines, even drop some as prices went through the acceptable ceilings for that product. Even in our Christmas purchasing we've been more cautious. But our golden rule is 'never dumb down'. We stick to that, and we will never reduce the quality which we offer to make us more accessible. Once you fall for that, you go up against the supermarkets, and that is a battle none of us can win.

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EXPERT AFFINEURS

Rennet & Rind

LOCATION: STAMFORD, LINCOLNSHIRE
FOUNDED: XXXX **FOUNDER:** PERRY WAKEMAN



There aren't many businesses that can claim to be award-winning from when they very first opened their doors, but Stamford's Rennet & Rind is one such business. CEO and affineur, Perry Wakeman, was named the inaugural Affineur of the Year in 2022, and his "journey in cheese maturation" has led to the shop being a beacon for British artisan cheese.

"Our distinctiveness lies in our unwavering commitment to British artisan cheese," explains Perry. "We don't just sell cheese; we mature it, enhancing the unique flavours and honouring the traditions and innovations of British cheesemakers." The Stamford shop showcases a handpicked selection of British cheeses expertly matured in Rennet & Rind's Cambridge-based maturing rooms. Indeed, as Perry explains, "Our specialisation in affinage sets us apart in the cheese community."

It's not only in the field of affinage that Rennet & Rind stands apart from the crowd. Education is also key to the team's approach, with staff investing time in each customer to ensure that they come away with not only a top-notch experience, but knowledge too. "We surprise our new customers with our generous tastings, embodying our belief that everyone should have the opportunity to explore and learn about British artisan cheese," says Perry. "Our approach isn't just about selling cheese; it's about educating and sharing our passion. Each customer receives a one-to-one tasting experience, where a dedicated Rennet & Rind cheesemonger guides them through our selection, tailoring suggestions based on their preferences and building a profile of cheeses that suit their palate."



This time-consuming approach doesn't always reap instant financial

A GRAND MISSION

Perry's plans for the coming year support his mission to be the region's best affineur and cheesemonger. "We aim to broaden our range of artisan cheeses, host more educational events, and fortify our connections with local cheesemakers, further establishing Rennet & Rind as a centre for British cheese excellence."

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rewards, but Perry's mission to champion the British cheese industry is unwaveringly supported – "this personal and educational approach ensures that even if customers don't leave with cheese, they have a deeper appreciation of the importance of supporting the British artisan cheese industry," he says.

A change of approach

While Rennet & Rind's passionate education of its cheese-loving customers is proving popular, that wasn't the original plan for the business. "Previously, we focused on supplying bespoke matured cheese to



Michelin-starred restaurants and fine dining establishments," explains Perry. "However, with these outlets closed due to the pandemic and a surplus of bespoke cheese on our hands, we questioned whether the public might be interested in our hyper-focused matured cheeses." This change of direction led to the creation of Rennet & Rind's flagship product – the Mystery Cheese Box – which changed weekly for over a year to support British cheesemakers during tough times. "The response was overwhelming," says Perry, "and this initiative snowballed. Within seven days, we built a logo and a website, and here we are today with a physical shop."

Rennet & Rind has certainly seen its fair share of plaudits, but two moments particularly stand out to Perry. "My proudest achievements include retaining the Affineur of the Year title" – awarded again in 2023 – "and launching our physical store. These accomplishments stem from relentless dedication to quality, a deep understanding of cheese maturation, and robust community support."

> "OUR PERSONAL AND EDUCATIONAL APPROACH ENSURES THAT EVEN IF CUSTOMERS DON'T LEAVE WITH CHEESE, THEY HAVE A DEEPER APPRECIATION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING THE BRITISH ARTISAN CHEESE INDUSTRY"

BEST SELLING CHEESES



PEVENSEY BLUE
Smooth, creamy and rich with perfectly balanced complexity and saltiness.
pevenseycheese.co.uk



TRETHOWAN'S DAIRY PITCHFORK CHEDDAR
Full-bodied and dense with a masterful creamy texture.
trethowanbrothers.com



ISLE OF MULL
A crumbly texture and complex profile with ale and whisky undertones.
isleofmullcheese.co.uk



BARON BIGOD
A complex Brie-style cheese with notes of mushroom, rich cream butter and pan-roasted parsnips.
fenfarmdairy.co.uk

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THE RESEARCHERS

The Cheese Hole

LOCATION: BURY ST EDMUNDS, SUFFOLK
FOUNDED: 2022 **FOUNDERS:** FRANCISCO AND SABINA PERELLO



BEST-SELLING CHEESES



ISLE OF MULL TRADITIONAL FARMHOUSE CHEESE
A hard Scottish cow's milk cheese, savoury and boozy.
isleofmullcheese.co.uk



HOFKAESERIE KRAUS ALP BLOSSOM
A sweet semi-hard cow's milk cheese with a rind of meadow blossoms and herbs from Bavaria.
hofkaeserei-kraus.de



SUFFOLK BLUE
A soft blue cheese with a seasonal light blue vein – lately tasting like a bright lemon curd.
suffolkcheese.co.uk

Everybody reading this will know the amount of passion, dedication and bravery required to set up and run a successful independent cheese business, but husband and wife team Francisco and Sabina Perello – founder-owners of The Cheese Hole in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk – went above and beyond even that when setting up their establishment. "We initially sought to purchase an existing business, but we want our customers to feel at ease and relaxed, and to have some fun."

Thankfully, there are plenty of cheese lovers in the local area keen to flock to The Cheese Hole. All are looking for clear quality and provenance, while many have gluten, lactose or cow's milk intolerances and are glad of the shop's wide range of products which are suitable for them.

Unparalleled customer experience

Research is key to the successful education and enjoyment of customers, and Francisco and Sabina spent seven years honing their skill to understand



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AN EVOLVING OFFERING

Francisco and Sabina plan to expand their offering as 2024 progresses. From new cheeses and complementary products to British and high quality Continental favourites, customers are in for an indulgent treat. "We may also look at hosting tasting events of some nature," suggests Francisco, "but that is still very much in the planning stage."

the cheeses they sell, their origins and flavour profiles, and to ensure they are always at their best. "We take time to study the cheeses we offer so we can confidently share the stories of them and their producers," explains Francisco. "Customers want to be informed about what they are eating these days, and we very much enjoy helping them to feel connected to the cheese and its origins." Sharing their knowledge with customers has paid off. "We now have many regulars who will ask for cheeses which may have been obscure before we opened," and the team are often asked to add "something else you know I'll like" to their purchases.

The customers asking for a surprise addition know they're in safe hands. "Our commitment to quality, by ensuring that our sourcing of cheese is only from the most reputable producers – emphasising quality of quantity – sets us apart," says Francisco. "We want our customers to have a delightful experience as they savour cheeses at their peak."

All customers, whatever their requirements or appetite, receive the very best service at The Cheese Hole. "We take time to understand customers' preferences, offer personalised recommendations, and share insights about cheese pairings and serving suggestions to create a memorable, fun and enjoyable shopping experience," says Francisco.

> "WE WANT OUR CUSTOMERS TO FEEL AT EASE AND RELAXED, AND TO HAVE SOME FUN"



THE EDUCATOR

Georgonzola

LOCATION: CLITHEROE, LANCASHIRE
FOUNDED: 2021 **FOUNDER:** GEORGE HAMMOND

After years of experience in the food and drink sphere, George Hammond opened his own cheese emporium – Georgonzola, located in Clitheroe, Lancashire – after losing his job at a local market butchers. "I decided that losing that job was the 'hint' I needed to launch Georgonzola," he says. George prides himself on the knowledge and passion shown behind the counter, as well as the customer focus and personalised service provided. "From remembering what the customer bought the last time they were in, to recommending a specific cheese to go with the drinks they have picked up in the past. Sometimes we will also contact specific customers when one of their favourite products comes back into season."

Educating the customer base

"We have quite a varied customer base, from young people only just venturing into the artisan cheese world all the way through to customers that are brand-loyal and want what they know." With careful education, the plethora of Georgonzola customers are gradually learning to branch out. "Since opening, the brand-loyal customers have become a bit more flexible with what they are willing to try," says George. "I think this is due to learning what I am about, and that I don't often offer them something to try that is a true wildcard." One customer had been exclusively buying Colston Bassett Stilton, Baron Bigod and Tasty Lancashire, but George opened their eyes and palate – Mayfield by Alsop and Walker, a recent discovery, is now one of their favourite cheeses and George makes them aware when it arrives in the counter.

Challenges and triumphs

George has put his customers in prime position when it comes to the evolution of the brand. "One of the main challenges we face at the moment is deciding how to develop the business without diluting the brand," says George. "We have worked hard in the last two years to create the Georgonzola brand and would





PLANS FOR 2024

The coming year brings new opportunities, with multiple tasting events planned and more to come. Georgonzola's drink selection is soon to be boosted, too. "We have plans to start extending our drinks selection with a move towards some more unusual natural wines." Keen to do a thorough job at introducing a new option to the roster, George is keen to educate himself first. "I want to learn a bit more about them first, so I plan on doing my WSET 2 course this year to build on my current knowledge, which is more about my tastes rather than what others may prefer."

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hate to take it in the wrong direction. We have been talking to our customers new and old to find out what they would like to see at Georgonzola – this has given us an insight into what our customers want when they visit us."

George has revisited the lessons he learned during his time working in





hospitality to develop a new side to the business: "bringing tables and chairs into the shop space, with the ability to seat 12 guests happily and 15 at a squeeze." The move has gone down well. "This gives our customers a space to enjoy some of our wares in a comfortable environment with a nice glass of something," explains George. Two draught beer lines and two house wines have been added to the roster, with the draught beer often being available in cans so customers can enjoy it at home.

> "WE HAVE BEEN TALKING TO OUR CUSTOMERS NEW AND OLD TO FIND OUT WHAT THEY WOULD LIKE TO SEE AT GEORGONZOLA – THIS HAS GIVEN US AN INSIGHT INTO WHAT OUR CUSTOMERS WANT WHEN THEY VISIT US"

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



BARON BIGOD
A creamy and mushroomy Brie-like cheese from Suffolk.
fenfarmdairy.co.uk



MONTGOMERY CHEDDAR
A traditional unpasteurised Cheddar from Somerset with rich nutty notes.
montgomeryscheese.co.uk



GREENFIELDS CRUMBLY LANCASHIRE
A fresh and slightly acidic cheese with a crumbly texture.
greenfieldsdairy.co.uk



COLSTON BASSETT STILTON
A rich, creamy and complex blue handmade in Nottinghamshire.
colstonbassettdairy.co.uk

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PRIDE OF IRELAND

The Little Cheese Shop

LOCATION: DINGLE, COUNTY KERRY, IRELAND
FOUNDED: 2010 **OWNER:** MARK MURPHY



BEST-SELLING CHEESES



GUBBEEN
A semi-soft, cow's milk cheese with a washed rind and a creamy texture.
gubbeen.com



ST TOLA
Full flavoured, sweet and floral with honey undertones that develop further as the cheese matures.
st-tola.ie



COOLEA MATURE
Made using an ancient Dutch Gouda recipe, this semi-hard to hard cheese boasts a well-balanced sweetness.
cooleacheese.com

When Mark Murphy took on The Little Cheese Shop in Dingle, Ireland, he was well equipped to know what he was in for. Having run the town's Cookery School as a qualified chef, he knew the foodie credentials that the town had to offer – as well as the loyal locals and booming tourist trade he would be catering for. During the tourist season, people travel from all over the world to visit the stunning Dingle Peninsula and sample the best food and drink Ireland has to offer.

"Irish food has made great strides in the past few years," Mark begins. "Our geography, climate and rich pastures here in Ireland are unique, and this allows our cheesemakers and dairy farmers to produce some of the best dairy products in the world."

Understandably, this shaped The Little Cheese Shop's offering. "For this reason, I decided that when I took over the shop I would try to focus on having as much Irish cheese on the counter as possible. I am proud to now say that about 98% of all cheese in the shop is made on the island of Ireland."

Mark sources his cheeses from every corner of Ireland and ensures a wide range at all times. By maintaining strong relationships with the cheesemakers he works with, he has access to some rare batches of cheese. "This can suit a small shop like mine as our selection can and



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PICS: FIONA MORGAN

> EACH OF OUR CUSTOMER BASES ARE DIFFERENT AND WE TRY OUR BEST TO UNDERSTAND THEM TO MAKE SURE WE BEST SUIT THEIR NEEDS

will change on a weekly basis. It also allows us to work with the cheesemakers and source their best products, and know as much as possible about them and what makes their cheese so special."

Spreading the love

As well as having a small shop in Dingle – frequented by local residents, business owners and tourists – Mark is able to send cheese throughout Ireland via his website. "This has proved to be a good extra revenue stream," he explains. "I am fortunate to have built up an online customer base consisting of regulars and new customers, but unfortunately it is only on the island of Ireland due to logistics and customs." He has also launched an online monthly cheese subscription, where members receive a box of four cheeses, crackers and a chutney, plus notes about the cheeses and their makers on the last week of every month.

While every customer shopping with The Little Cheese shop is keen to learn about and enjoy great Irish cheese, that's not to say that a one-size-fits-all approach is suitable. "Each of the above customer bases are different and we try our best to understand them to make sure we best suit their needs. For example, a local looking for cheese for a cheeseboard to share with their friends may get different cheese compared to an international visitor who is travelling and staying in a hotel or guest house and wants a small selection to travel with."



PLANS FOR 2024

Exciting plans are afoot for The Little Cheese Shop over the next 12 months. Having offered a picnic basket service for visitors for a few years, Mark intends to grow the concept into an experience for visitors. "The idea is that you can order a picnic basket from us, filled with plenty of good food and drinks, a blanket, glasses, cutlery and so on, and all that is needed to create a memorable experience on the Dingle Peninsula. When the customer is finished with is, they have the option to return the basket and its contents to the shop or return it to their accommodation." Next in line is a one-of-a-kind experience run in collaboration with the world-famous Dick Mack's pub in Ireland. "This iconic pub has been running since 1899 and in the past few years opened a brewhouse with a range of beers. The cheese and beer experience sees the guys from Dick Mack's give a tour of the small brewhouse and tell their story, then we tell the story of Irish cheese and pair their beers with a selection of cheese in the tap house."







THE EXPERIMENTER

Star Plain

LOCATION: HOLT, NORFOLK
FOUNDED: 2021 **FOUNDER:** TOM BRADY

While Star Plain didn't have the most auspicious start – missing shelves, a location at the 'wrong end of town' and staff learning how to wrap cheese the night before opening – the business has gone from strength to strength and has gone on to help create a local food and shopping destination in Holt, Norfolk.

"The shop opened in May 2021 as a brand new start-up, initially with just a cheese counter with eight cheeses, a small provisions section and a coffee machine for takeaway coffees," begins Tom Brady, founder and owner of Star Plain. "The unit had stood empty for four years but had a beautiful structure and an eye-catching exterior – an old pub from the 1600s." In time, Tom and his team added an alcohol licence and more provisions, and in the last year branched out into hospitality with a new cafe bistro with space for 20-30, offering cheese-based dishes, wine by the glass and speciality coffee.

The journey continues. "We are constantly evolving and making improvements as we learn," says Tom. "Our customers have been patient and enjoyed the journey we've been on." An open mind has been key to the business's success. "No products are off the table so we aren't fixed in to one idea or sector, so with a relatively small space to operate everything that arrives here is tried and tested first and has to be the absolute best."

A combination of local and European cheese has proven successful thus far – "taste is always the priority when selecting" – while having a hospitality

CHEESEMONGER BECOMES CHEESEMAKER

"I intend to make my own goats cheese," says Tom, "so actually formulating a plan this year on how and when to launch that is the goal... not being erratic and just buying some goats and creating a plan afterwards!"

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arm on-site has meant that customers can try before they buy. "We sell what we cook and cook what we sell, so customers can understand the deli products on our lunch menu and purchase some cheese for home after trying it."

With customers ranging from true locals, Londoners moved to Norfolk 'locals', Airbnb owners and their guests, plus visitors from Norwich and elsewhere, Tom and his team are proud to host "well travelled and fun people who are open to new food and drink. They love cheese and embrace everything we put on the counter." For his customers, Tom will go above and beyond. "I've managed to source everything customers have asked for; I even picked up a Brillat Savarin Truffle for a regular on a quick London visit as we had sold out of our Christmas allocation and I knew it was their favourite."

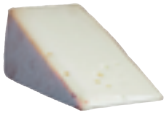
> "ONLY WORKING WITH NICE PEOPLE FROM THE START WAS PART OF A LOOSE BUSINESS PLAN THAT REWARDED ME WHEN I NEEDED IT"

Having a number of loyal customers despite being entirely new to the cheese-selling game is one of Tom's greatest triumphs. "I had zero experience of running a food and drinks business [before opening], so to be approaching our third year and seeing the same customers again and again for weekly cheese, Christmas cheese, and picking up anything new we post on Instagram as they trust us is hugely rewarding."

2022: a challenging year

A professional mantra to only work with good people came good when a personal crisis impacted Tom and the Star Plain business. "My mum suffered a brain haemorrhage in September 2022, just as food and drinks prices were being hit by inflation and energy bills were rising, so with her in a London hospital and my family keeping a constant bedside vigil for months, I was hugely distracted and didn't adjust prices or support my team," says Tom. "Luckily, my suppliers supported me as I traded through the period of extremely tough cashflow. I was fortunate not to have to close owing to their patience and understanding. My last role was head of sales for a fashion brand so I knew being open and honest with suppliers was imperative, and only working with nice people from the start was part of a loose business plan that rewarded me when I needed it."

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



MONTGOMERY'S OGLESHIELD
A soft, rich and pungent cheese made from the milk of Jersey cows.
montgomerycheese.co.uk



NEALS YARD CREAMERY DORSTONE
A fresh goats cheese boasting a mousse-like texture, a lemony-fresh flavour and just a hint of goat.
nealsyardcreamery.co.uk



STICHELTON DAIRY STICHELTON
With a rich, crumbly texture and an unparalleled depth of flavour, Stichelton delivers a rollercoaster of tangy, spicy and nutty notes.
stichelton.co.uk



SINODUN HILL
The yoghurt like flavour of this cheese is complemented by a delicate, almost red-fruit flavour from the rind.
nortonandyarrow.co.uk

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LOCAL CHAMPION

Jarrolds

LOCATION: NORWICH, NORFOLK
FOUNDED: 1823 **FOUNDER:** JOHN JARROLD



With a history spanning over 250 years – with 200 situated in Norwich – Jarrolds is an icon of the Norfolk retail scene. While the store houses a range of departments including fashion, home and lifestyle, its food offering is made it a true destination for local and visiting food lovers.

"In 2022 we took on a large project to develop our food hall, located on our Lower Ground Floor," begins Stephanie Crowe, marketing manager. As well as showcasing an eclectic range of food and drink from the local area and beyond – including a stand-out Italian ambient selection – the site boasts a specially equipped Cheese Room.

"The Cheese Room is dedicated to artisanal, handmade cheeses," continues Stephanie, "and features an aged-to-perfection array of local as well as further afield cheeses." To guide cheese lovers on their quest to find the perfect cheese for any occasion, "knowledgeable experts are always on-hand to offer advice and tips for the perfect cheeseboard."



BRAND REVAMP

The launch of Jarrold's Food Hall in September 2022 was "a big headline," says Stephanie. "It was a project which brought together so many of our teams with some big layout changes and the implementation of areas all based around customer experience.
We rose to the challenge because we all had faith that this was going to excite and delight our customers."

It's with good reason that Jarrolds has become a go-to for cheese aficionados as well as those seeking out great food and drink from across the board. Indeed, within the Food Hall itself are a number of places to eat and drink including two wine bars, a coffee bar and The Exchange: a 40-seat restaurant offering a menu of pizza, pasta and salads alongside an "extensive" wine list.

Customer service is the name of the game at Jarrolds, and The Cheese Room is custom-built to delight customers – to turn the shopping experience into an event in itself. "A customer comes in looking for a treat for a Friday night or something to wow their dinner party guests, for example, and they can talk to our cheese connoisseurs and come away having had a wonderful bespoke experience which only adds to the enjoyment of the items," explains Stephanie.

Despite its impressive heritage, innovation and customer experience is the name of the game at Jarrolds. "Our dedication to stay relevant and innovate based on the customer today on the future [is key]," says Stephanie. "We understand the importance of experience – be that through our services, restaurants or colleagues who seek to ensure that everyone who visits Jarrolds has the best possible time."

The Jarrolds customer is a discerning shopper who respects the business's family values, says Stephanie – and the business is only to happy to pull out the red carpet. "Our customers

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are a wonderfully diverse mix of people who have an appreciation for quality and a love of Norfolk, and take pleasure in the experience of shopping." Communication between the team and the customers they serve is important. "We take the time to listen to our customers and what they want from Jarrolds. The values of our colleagues are the same across the store; doing the right thing in style while also seeking out opportunities to really wow and delight our customers. Jarrolds is a family business at its heart and we understand the importance of family in all we do for our customers."

It may be a large-scale local retail icon, but Jarrolds was not immune from the shock of Covid-19. "It was a challenge but we saw it as that, and questioned: What can we do better for the people of Norfolk? How can we come out stronger? How do we make sure our customers are comfortable? What can we do unlike anyone else? This has led to some exciting changes over the past few years and hopefully more in the future."

> "JARROLDS IS A FAMILY BUSINESS AT ITS HEART AND WE UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY IN ALL WE DO FOR OUR CUSTOMERS"

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



FIELDING COTTAGE NORFOLK MARDLER
This waxed, mature goats' cheese has a rich, creamy flavour and melts very well.
fieldingcottage.co.uk



BARON BIGOD
Aged for up to eight weeks, it has a mushroomy flavour and silky, oozing texture.
fenfarmdairy.co.uk



ST JUDE CHEESE ST HELENA
Made with raw milk from the Montbéliarde cows at Fen Farm Dairy, it has a fudgy consistency, warm flavour and thin, edible rind.
stjudecheese.com



MRS TEMPLE'S BINHAM BLUE
Made with milk from the Swiss Brown dairy herd at Copy's Green Farm, which runs on renewable energy using innovative biomass technology.
mrstemplescheese.co.uk

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THE REVAMPERS

Birkdale Cheese

LOCATION: BIRKDALE, SOUTHPORT **FOUNDED:** 2021
OWNERS: JOHN CLARKE AND MARK MOSS





For John Clarke and Mark Moss, who took on the running of Birkdale Cheese – a business which had been servicing local cheese lovers for decades – it was important to offer customers a wider variety of options than that they previously enjoyed. "Birkdale village has had a speciality cheesemonger for 45 years and has always focused on offering a wide range of the very best British and Continental cheeses available, begins Mark. "We took over the business in May 2021 with the aim of not only continuing to provide high quality cheese, but to expand the shop's offering of exciting deli products – including pate, rillettes, charcuterie and fine wines."

This decision wasn't made lightly. "Each new range introduced to the shop has to have the approval of the full team," he says. "We have all tasted everything before it makes it to the shelves." Customers can enjoy these products on-site as well as at home. "We are lucky enough to have some alfresco seating where we offer an extensive range of dishes, all based around cheese, from cheeseboards to grazing platters and all in between."

It is this wide variety of products which sets Birkdale Cheese apart from other businesses. "With over 150 cheeses there really is something for every palate. Plus, we are totally focused on the customer experience – so many people are intrigued by cheese but are frightened to brand out and try something new," he begins. "Customers are free to try any cheese from the counter, and the 'try before you buy' concept builds trust and allows us to build relationships with our customers." The team is passionate about constantly evolving its selection. "We are continually revising our selection as it's vital we keep things fresh and exciting. New cheeses and products are a thrill not only for us, but for our customers too; we aim to make the experience of coming to Birkdale Cheese Co an interesting and exciting one, rather than simply a mundane trip to the shops."

Another stand-out move has been the creation of four cheeses made locally that carry the business's name: Birkdale Cheddar; Birkdale Cheddar Smoked; Birkdale Cheddar infused with Chilli & Lime; and Birkdale Blue, a rich cave-aged blue.

Birkdale Cheese's eclectic range attracts a wide range of shoppers. "Our customer base is very varied," says Mark. "When we took over the shop the

PLANS FOR 2024

"2024 is going to be an exciting year for us," begins Mark. "As well as continually looking for new products, we will be launching regular cheese and wine pairing evenings with another local business in the village. This is something that we have been asked to do by many of our cheese loving customers. In addition, we will be expanding our cheese 'celebration cake' offering as these bespoke cheese cakes are a great alternative to a regular cake for those who don't have a sweet tooth."

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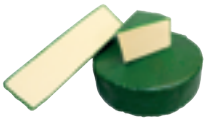
majority of customers were regulars who have remained loyal for a number of years, with many recounting stories of how they first came to the shop as children. We wanted to breathe new life into the shop and attract new customers, especially the younger generation." Understandably, social media played an important role in achieving this goal. "We actively embraced social media, which has become such a strong tool for us to reach out to a wider audience."

Revitalising an established shop

Taking on a business which already boasts an established reputation and regular customer base isn't for the faint of heart, but it's a challenge that Mark and John completed with aplomb. "One of our biggest successes is the re-brand of the business in the year we took over," Mark begins. "The shop had been known as Birkdale Cheese Centre since its establishment and carried a rather outdated logo. We wanted to bring the shop up to date and refresh what was already a successful business. A simple tweak of the name meant we maintained the business's integrity and gave it a new lease of life, a new floor and lighting finished everything off. The re-brand also included a re-design of our website, which has seen a significant increase on our online marketplace."

> "WE WANTED TO BREATHE NEW LIFE INTO THE SHOP AND ATTRACT NEW CUSTOMERS, ESPECIALLY THE YOUNGER GENERATION"

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



BIRKDALE CHEDDAR
A mature, creamy Cheddar individually blended for Birkdale Cheese.
birkdalecheese.com



FROMAGERIE LINCET DELICE DE BOURGOGNE
A rich and buttery triple cream cheese with a bloomy rind.
fromagerie-lincet.net



GARSTANG BLUE
A smooth and creamy cheese with a mild blue flavour.
dewlay.com



INGLEWHITE BUFFALO
Rich, savoury and creamy, this hard cheese is clothbound and aged for at least six months.
carronlodge.com

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COMMUNITY SUPPORT

grate Newcastle

LOCATION: NEWCASTLE **FOUNDED:** 2020
FOUNDER: MOZ MURPHY

For Moz Murphy, founder of grate Newcastle, the inspiration for opening the shop was to plug a gap she saw in the city; to provide great service alongside excellent cheese from Britain and Europe. "I opened the cheese shop that I wanted as a customer as I felt Newcastle was missing out," she begins.

Far from being a deli with a complementary cheese counter, grate is "first and foremost a cheesemonger," says Moz. "We champion British and Irish cheese first, with some Continental cheeses thrown in for good measure." While the shop also sells locally made chutneys and pickles, crackers and oatcakes, and bread from local bakers at weekends, cheese has long been and will continue to be Moz's focus.

"Lots of people have suggested diversifying into more of a deli, selling charcuterie and oils etc; we have dabbled in some charcuterie from time to time but ultimately my background is in cheese and that's my passion."

This passionate focus has seen grate grow a sizeable fanbase of all ages and persuasions, as Moz explains. "My customer base is really family orientated – we have so many regulars who come in week on week with their parents or children. We get lots of foodies, and plenty of local chefs and restaurant people too."

A challenge shared...

From the position grate holds in the community today you wouldn't know that it had a less-than-ideal start, but Moz and her team have demonstrated that timing is everything. "We opened in October 2020, right in between lockdowns. I'd planned to open

CONNECTING ONE-TO-ONE

"I'm really looking to work with smaller producers rather than wholesalers," says Moz. I'd like to have a really direct relationship with them and build on what we've done so far - I feel like I actually know what I'm doing now!"

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May Bank Holiday that year, but the pandemic got in the way," she says. "Obviously the pandemic was incredibly tough, but I opened at the exact right time, when people were allowed to go shopping and didn't have much else to do!"

Since the threat of Covid lockdowns has faded, other challenges have taken its place. "The increase in energy costs in a constant worry," Moz says, "and it's tough balancing everything with the cost-of-living crisis."

The grate team recognise that financial challenges are a universal issue in 2024, and have made great strides in the community to support those suffering. "When the Government decided to withdraw funding for school lunches during school holodays, we partnered with a local restaurant to feed kids," says Moz. "They made pies (so many pies!) and we distributed them. We've also raised money for lots of local charities, most notably Maggie's Centre at the Freeman Hospital, and the Rainbow Trust."

As well as supporting her wider community, Moz is particularly proud of the network she and her team have built and maintained closer to home. "We've built a great little community feel in our shop and it's lovely to be a part of," she says. "The very fact that we are still open is definitely something I'm proud of, too!"

> "WE'VE BUILT A GREAT LITTLE COMMUNITY FEEL IN OUR SHOP AND IT'S LOVELY TO BE A PART OF"

BEST SELLING CHEESES



MONTGOMERY CHEDDAR
A traditional unpasteurised Cheddar from Somerset with rich nutty notes.
montgomeryscheese.co.uk



DODDINGTON
A British territorial cheese, similar to a Cheddar or Red Leicester with notable sweet nuttiness.
doddingtoncheese.co.uk



STICHELTON
Made from unpasteurised milk, Stichelton is a rich, creamy and nutty blue cheese.
stichelton.co.uk



DODDINGTON DARLING BLUE
A mellow and buttery blue cheese with savoury saltiness.
doddingtoncheese.co.uk

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LOCAL PASSION

The Cheese Box

LOCATION: WHITSTABLE, KENT
FOUNDED: 2007 **FOUNDER:** DAWN HACKETT



Having enjoyed a childhood where her ex-farming family were fans of quality, locally-produced food, it was perhaps only natural that Dawn Hackett would go on to create a business sharing the joys of artisanal cheeses from her region. Nearly 20 years ago, she set up a mobile British cheese van – The Cheese Box – in South London, which brought traditional regional cheeses to people in her local area. "When I was busy earning money freelancing and raising children, I would take orders from locals and deliver cheeses to their homes. It's how I learned how personal this food is to people, and how important it is to share stories and passion with them over such a simple but immensely important food. As a specialist retailer this is what can set you apart from others and also create a supportive community around you," says Dawn.

17 years ago, Dawn moved to Kent's Whitstable and opened a bricks-and-mortar shop. "It was a big move for me," says Dawn. "I wanted the customer to feel like we were still outside with the van or on a market, and be welcoming to all." Partially thanks to this open-minded attitude, The Cheese Box boasts a varied clientele. "We have a diverse customer base as the town has many visitors at certain times, and local weekly footfall can be erratic in most places these days."

Education is key to The Cheese Box's mission. "We focus on being available to all and take great joy in dispensing cheese history and cheesemaking information, and connecting it to the cheeses we sell." Offering tasters of the cheeses on offer has also proven to be a valuable exercise, as has flexibility. "We open at times accessible to locals wanting to pop in for Cheese Boxes or platters to take home, so early evenings are great. The option of having a great cheese board and filling the gap around restaurant times, prices etc has worked very well in our area."

Keeping it unique

By keeping an eye on the status quo of the local businesses and making sure that her offering complements what they do, Dawn has made a smart business move. "I think one has to assess what your area already has to compliment your cheese," she says. "We have found by being by the sea and being lucky enough to have produce shops on our main street, we are able to focus very much on selling cheese and a few locally-made accompaniments. This

> "IT IS VERY EASY TO OVER DIVERSIFY AND ALWAYS STOCK FAMOUS CHEESES OR OVERSTOCK THE COUNTER. WE HAVE FOUND AND CHAMPIONED CHEESES THAT WORK FOR US AND WE ABSOLUTELY LOVE"

A NEW VENTURE

"I now have a personal story developing behind the shop: working on a micro dairy for my small nubian goat herd near the local marshes," begins Dawn. "It is obviously a labour of love, but the customers feel a real connection with the cheese journey and the trials and tribulations that go along side making and the animals. This connects the shop like a portal to the cheese experience and journey. I am aiming that this may become a social enterprise project with therapeutic benefits for the community."

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helps focus the customer very much more on what we are offering and why we are different."

"I don't think one rule fits all with a specialist shop," continues Dawn. It's been very important for The Cheese Box to stay very focused on its message of selling British cheeses and offering great local Kent and Sussex cheeses." By offering a range of ways to get this message across, The Cheese Box has flourished. "We have a great following with cheese wedding cakes and we have always used collaboration to keep momentum going with pop ups, cheese tastings, a cheese bar and all the fun things. Our original delivery of The Cheese Box has stood its ground and this is still a great way to have a personal service."

Sticking to the cheeses that Dawn and the local area have a genuine connection with has been key to the success of the business. "Over the years I've worked alongside new and developing cheesemakers who have been creating a diverse range of recipes, and it is mostly these cheeses as the extras to the traditional regional makes that I love to supply to the customers – having aged and got them just right. It is very easy to over diversify and always stock famous cheeses or overstock the counter. We have found and championed cheeses that work for us and we absolutely love."

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



LYBURN VINTAGE OLD WINCHESTER
A 24-36 month old Gouda recipe. Full of nutty toffee-like flavours.
lyburnfarm.co.uk



ALSOP & WALKER MAYFIELD
A deep, creamy Swiss-style cheese. This is always popular in the counter due to its style, locality and dramatic visual.
alsopandwalker.co.uk



KINGCOTT DAIRY KENTISH BLUE
An unpasteurised blue cheese with a crumbly and yet creamy texture to the paste.
kingcottdairy.co.uk



SUSSEX HIGH WEALD DAIRY DUDDLESWELL EWE
An organic ewes milk cheese. Light and nutty, it is a must in our offering of recipes with alternative milks.
highwealddairy.co.uk

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CHEESE CARE

Newlyns Farm Shop

LOCATION: WARNBOROUGH HOOK, HAMPSHIRE
FOUNDED: 2004 **FOUNDERS:** ABBY, ROB, JUDY AND DAVID JANAWAY AND EMMA HIGGENS (NEE JANAWAY)

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



BARON BIGOD
A British Brie-style cheese made using milk from Montbeliarde cows.
fenfarmdairy.co.uk



BARKHAM BLUE
Rich, smooth and buttery in a distinctive ammonite shape.
twohootscheese.co.uk



COLSTON BASSETT
A creamy Stilton with a complex, savoury flavour.
colstonbassettdairy.co.uk

Like many farm shops, Newlyns began life in order for The Janaways to sell the livestock reared on their family farm. Starting off with a small shop focusing on butchery – plus fruit and vegetables, a small deli counter serving homemade products from the kitchen, and British cheese and charcuterie – the business soon grew.

"Over the last 20 years the shop has grown considerably," begins Jo Moody, assistant store manager at Newlyns Farm Shop, "and in 2018, when space became available, cheese moved into its own purpose-built room." Despite not coming from a cheese background, Jo was determined to set herself – and the cheese room – up for success. "Although I had worked with food before, my knowledge of cheese was week so I set myself a challenge to learn everything I could so I could talk confidently to customers," she explains. "When you start to learn about the world of cheese you quickly become passionate about it, and I love passing this on to both the customers and staff."

Newlyns Farm Shop is luckily to have some of the very best British cheeses made locally. "Tunworth and Winslade by Hampshire Cheese Co; Spenwood, Wigmore Waterloo, Maida Vale, Waterloo and now Barkham Blue from Village Maid; Winchester and Stoney Cross from Lyburn." The Cheese Room also hosts a handful of iconic Continental cheeses which there aren't quality UK-made alternatives for.





Cutting edge cheese care

The room itself has been specifically designed to care for the artisanal products within – to ensure that they are kept and presented at their best. "The room itself is unique," explains Jo. "It is temperature and humidity-controlled to give the perfect conditions for keeping cheese. During the day it is set to a nippy

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but customer-friendly 10-12 degrees centigrade, and this allows us to have all our cheese unwrapped and cut to order. At the end of the day everything is carefully wrapped up and the room drops to normal fridge temperature overnight."

In addition, says Jo, "the Cheese Room has a ripening chamber which allows us to nurture cheeses so they are ready to eat and enjoy as soon as the customer gets home." With such care and attention to detail bestowed upon the cheeses in their care, no wonder Newlyns Farm Shop's reputation precedes it. "We pride ourselves on the quality of our cheese and how we take care of it, and this has helped us gain a reputation for being 'the' place to get cheese in quite a wide area," Jo says.

With a varied range of customers seeking out great cheese, customer service comes front and centre at Newlyns Farm Shop. "We have a very mixed customer base in both age and spend," explains Jo. "It is important to talk to the customer and gain their confidence in what you are selling. If they are new, find out what they would normally buy, even from the supermarkets, as it gives you an idea on what to guide them towards." Of course, everyone appreciates connection in a retail environment, and building these bonds has proven fruitful for Jo. "Recognising regular customers and remembering their favourites is also important as you can always tempt them with something new."

> "WE PRIDE OURSELVES ON THE QUALITY OF OUR CHEESE AND HOW WE TAKE CARE OF IT, AND THIS HAS HELPED US GAIN A REPUTATION FOR BEING 'THE' PLACE TO GET CHEESE IN QUITE A WIDE AREA"

The restrictions put in place as a result of the Covid pandemic were the greatest challenge that Jo experienced since opening the Cheese Room. "The room is small and to adhere to guidelines we could only take one customer at a time in the room, which slowed down our ability to sell." With some strategic moves, Jo and the team were able to make it work despite the challenges. "We closed the room to customers, displayed as much as we could in the windows, placed tables at both doors and served the customers from there. It worked – with the team based in the room we could help three to four people at a time. However, the customers were very pleased to come back into the room when life returned to normal."

MAKING AN OCCASION OUT OF CHEESE

"One of our greatest successes is the rapidly growing Cheese Wedding Cake side of the business," says Jo. "It is something we offered before we had the Cheese Room, but demand has increased and we are lucky to be recommended by several local wedding venues. Developing and streamlining this side of the business is a plan for this year as well as Newlyns Cheese Club!"



LOCAL POWERHOUSE

Secretts Farm Shop

LOCATION: MILFORD, SURREY
FOUNDED: 1977 **FOUNDERS:** CHARLES SECRETT



It takes a lot of hard work, determination and passion to become an independent retail destination, and a whole lot more besides to become a go-to for Michelin-starred chefs amongst other local foodies. "Having opened in 1977 to meet the needs of the local community, it has become an important food hub for Milford and the surrounding villages," begins Mel Whythe, buyer at Secretts. Today, the shop is a must-visit for locals and visitors thanks to being "referred to by Surrey Life Magazine as a Surrey Powerhouse and revered by Michelin Star chef, Steve Drake."

Key to Secrett's success has been its humble yet quality-driven approach to being a valuable community resource, as well as a carefully curated selection of more adventurous options. "It's an inspiring one-stop-shop," says Mel. "Secretts provides everyday food ingredients such as fresh bread, eggs,

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



WOOKEY HOLE CAVE-AGED FARMHOUSE CHEDDAR
This Cheddar offers a unique blend of rich and tangy plus earthy and nutty flavours.
caveagedcheddar.co.uk



BARON BIGOD
A mushroomy Brie-style cheese made in Suffolk.
fenfarmdairy.co.uk



APPLEWOOD
A tangy Cheddar complemented with the flavour of woodsmoke and a dusting of paprika.
applewoodcheese.co.uk



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meat and cheese, as well as dairy, fresh produce – much grown here on our farm – and gourmet food ingredients."

No wonder it has a varied yet loyal following. "Our customer base is made up of different demographics. We have customers who have been with us since we opened, new arrivals to the community from London and other larger cities, plus day trippers." Building relationships with existing customers while attracting new ones, while simultaneously evolving the shop's offering, has proven to be a recipe for success. "We know our customers really well and meet new-to-the-farm-shop visitors all the time. Plus, we constantly innovate with new products and always respond to customer requests whenever possible," says Mel.





Evolving the service

Having Surrey's largest and best-stocked cheese counter – "with a fantastic range of British and imported cheeses"– is worthy of applause, that's not to say that running it has been stress-free. Of course, Covid-19 impacted the Secretts Farm Shop team as it did many other independents, but by thinking outside the box the team was able to evolve their offering to suit the demands at hand. "During the pandemic we started cutting and wrapping our cheeses to reduce queues and keep customers apart. This was really popular, and we have continued to do this long since the pandemic restrictions ended."

The future for Secrett's winning cheese counter looks bright. "Our plans include increasing our range of cheeses and deli foods and making sure our customers love our product ranges," says Mel. "We are always on the look-out for new cheeses especially if they are made in the South East."

AWARD-WINNING SERVICE

"We have won several awards for best farm shop in Surrey, which is brilliant for our hard-working farm shop team," says Mel. "Plus, we very rarely get Google reviews that are less than five stars."

> "OUR CUSTOMER BASE IS MADE UP OF DIFFERENT DEMOGRAPHICS. WE HAVE CUSTOMERS WHO HAVE BEEN WITH US SINCE WE OPENED, NEW ARRIVALS TO THE COMMUNITY FROM LONDON AND OTHER LARGER CITIES, PLUS DAY TRIPPERS"



FOODIE EXPERIENCE

Parlourmentary

LOCATION: SOUTHBOURNE, DORSET
FOUNDED: 2019 **FOUNDER:** JAMES FOWLER



With his longstanding love of eating cheese and charcuterie platters with friends, it was only a matter of time before James Fowler – founder of Parlourmentary – had a cheese shop to his name. The roots of the business began in his restaurant first opened in 2011, The Larder House. "As we got recognised for our cheeseboards I had the idea of setting up a small cheese table out the front of the restaurant during December," explains James. "Each year it grew bigger and bigger, to the point it would take two hours to set up and pack down each day."

As space became an issue, fate stepped in. "In 2019 a shop became available across the road and Parlourmentary was born!" While Covid presented an unexpected challenge, it offered a great opportunity for the Parlourmentary team. "It was a good time for the shop as we were able to offer the local market interesting cheeses, cured meats, and local fruit and vegetables at a time when the supermarkets struggled to keep up."

Another opportunity was presented by the shop's sister restaurant. "Teaming up we were able to offer takeaway meals and dinner packages, which were great

NEW FOR 2024

Next up on the To Create list is a line of Parlourmentary-branded products, created by utilising the creative and culinary skill set of The Larder House's chefs. "We want a range of condiments, crackers, pâtés etc that you can only buy from us. We want to be the intimate place to go to create that very special table, be it at the start or end of your meal."



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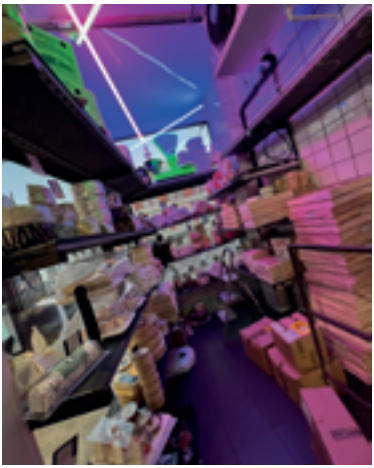


> WE WANT TO BE THE INTIMATE PLACE TO GO TO CREATE THAT VERY SPECIAL TABLE, BE IT AT THE START OR END OF YOUR MEAL

for those wanting something different when isolating at home."

Parlourmentary stands out from the crowd in terms of its display, too – no doubt drawing hungry crowds. "I like to think the shop has a fun and approachable design to its cheese offering, as customers can view all the cheeses in the front windows before coming to the counter – I feel this takes away any nervous requests," James explains. Seasonality plays a valuable role – "we really follow the seasons, showcasing ingredients that are at their very best, be it from the local farms or further afield in Europe" – plus cheese and whisky tastings, fondue nights and 'Squeek-easy' cocktail and cheese nights provide further opportunities for cheese lovers from near and far to get a taste of what Parlourmentary has to offer.

Parlourmentary's customer base runs the full gamut, "from avid cheese fans to those wanting to learn about what cheese is," explains James, although his favourite customers are the children that lead the family cheese board. "We have several young children that dictate what they want to try by style and flavour – it's inspiring and makes us really feel that we are something special."



Thanks to his restauranteur background, culinary experimentation is the name of the game at James's establishments. "I always like to do experimental products," he begins. "This year I took some younger Stoney Cross from Lyburn and matured it in fermented grape pomace. The pomace was sourced just up the road from a biodynamic winery. Once the Pinos Gris grapes were crushed the fibrous pomace was separated and I placed it in a sealed vat all around the cheeses. After two months of ageing it gave the cheese a real bright and tropical, wine-y finish – I thought it was great, and luckily so did others!" This experimentation was a celebratory coming together of three local businesses: a local cheesemaker, a local winery, and Parloumentary.

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



PICOS BLUE
A stunning maple-wrapped cheese from Northern Spain.
bascofinefoods.com



BOOK & BUCKET CHEESE COMPANY SHAKESPEARE
A white bloomy-rinded cheese with rich creaminess and mushroomy notes when matured.
thebookandbucketcheesecompany.co.uk



AFFINEUR WALO RED WINE FARMER
A semi-hard cheese, matured with red wine for six months, strong and spicy with a hint of red wine.
affineurwalo.ch



WESTCOMBE CHEDDAR
A deep brothy flavour and mellow lactic tang with notes of hazelnut, caramel and citrus.
westcombedairy.com

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FRIDAY STREET FARM

Inspirational Cheese Retailers 2023: Revisited

> READ ON TO LEARN HOW THE INSPIRATIONAL CHEESE RETAILERS PROFILED IN OUR 2023 EDITION ARE NOT ONLY SURVIVING BUT THRIVING

While creating this year's edition of *Inspirational Cheese Retailers* has been as enjoyable as it has been since it was first published in 2021, a particular highlight has undoubtedly been checking in on previous winners to see how their businesses have been shaped by the past 12 months.

We have found that, while Covid-19 is to some a relic of the past, its impact is undoubtedly still being felt by many across the fine food industry. Many independent retailers, with their grassroots relationships and focus on passion over profit, are still experiencing the afterburn of the pandemic in amongst plenty of contemporary challenges also keeping them on their toes.

Despite these choppy waters, Inspirational Cheese Retailers keep shining through – working hard to celebrate the best of great cheeses and their makers, and sharing their love with everyone they can. This is why this section is an especially inspiring read; because these familiar faces, despite the challenges they face, are continuing to plough new paths with passion and excitement.

Read on to learn how the Inspirational Cheese Retailers profiled in our 2023 edition are not only surviving during these challenging times, but thriving.

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Love Cheese

While financial challenges have been causing issues for independents across the country for the past 12 months, York-based Love Cheese has been able to keep spirits and bottom lines high with its new on-the-road approach. "We have had a moderately successful year, having turned a profit despite all of the financial pressures the country is now facing," begins Jordan Thomson, company director. "We have tried to keep up the laid back cheese and wine tastings and taken Love Cheese on the road for events across York, which has definitely introduced new customers to our offering."

Providing a brilliantly cheese experience continues to be top of the agenda for 2024. "This year I would really like to push our Speakcheesey to be a must-visit location in York. We are fully booked most weekends, so it's time to try to figure out how to do the same on weekdays!"

A new presence at markets and events have also fared well, although the Love Cheese team came across a learning curve when it came to pre-ordering stock – "these have been challenging in terms of making sure we aren't stuck with loads of leftover produce at the end."





It's not only in-person events that are experiencing a boost. "It's really amazing to see so many people returning to our virtual tastings, especially our Port & Cheese tasting which sold out three times – we were lucky to be able to up the produce until our suppliers had pretty much been wiped out by us!"

Event success aside, keeping prices right in the store has been a challenge. "It's definitely been a tough 12 months trying to keep pricing down for our customers as everything has risen so dramatically," says Jordan. "But we have managed to keep many products at an affordable price point or replace them with something equally delicious and more affordable."

DON'T LET SOCIALS SLIP

"We have learned to keep a keen eye on our social media calendar and not allow it to drop off," says Jordan. "We can see a steep drop in orders if we forget to post for even a few days. It's been a learning curve trying to make posts that are relatable to quite a vast age range; unlike most businesses that can hone in on a specific age group, we know we can cover 18-80+ as we have such a diverse clientele."

> "WE HAVE LEARNED TO KEEP A KEEN EYE ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA CALENDAR AND NOT ALLOW IT TO DROP OFF. WE CAN SEE A STEEP DROP IN ORDERS IF WE FORGET TO POST FOR EVEN A FEW DAYS"

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The Norfolk Deli

DISCOUNTING PAYS

Discounting pays "We introduced a Residents Discount Card as we worked out that if we can get a customer to shop with our more often, even if their spend is relatively small the increase in sales turnover would counter-balance a discount given when they shop with us," explains Mark. "All it takes is a small up-tick in the number of local residents to shop with us more regularly to have a longer-term impact on our financials."

Like many independent retailers, The Norfolk Deli's Mark Kacary found 2023 to be a challenging time. "The combination of the cost-of-living crisis, higher energy costs and reduced footfall is not the ideal recipe for any small business," he says. "Having said that, we are still here and looking forward to the next 12 months where we are looking to do new things to introduce new revenue streams."

"A general reduction in footfall has been one of our main challenges," says Mark, "but we have overcome that by trying to be a bit smarter in everything we do. For example, we are doing a lot more in terms of digital marketing which has resulted in an increase in online sales." Events have played their part in keeping spirits high. "Cheese tasting evenings which were slow to get started have become part of what we do. Footfall is still not quite what it was before Covid, but we can only work with what's in front of us and find new avenues of revenue."

Valuable lessons have been learned at The Norfolk Deli. "Stay alert to situations around the world. Do not over-spend, keep tight control over your costs and maximise your revenue earning potential." When it comes to introducing new ideas, Mark recommends developing them gradually. "Try something new but develop it in stages – see if it works and if it does build on it little by little. Build demand and make people want more." Plus, Mark has found that it pays to show attention to your customer database; "these are people who have shown faith in your business and have come into your shop or online and spent money with you. Do not ignore them."

> "FOOTFALL IS STILL NOT QUITE WHAT IT WAS BEFORE COVID, BUT WE CAN ONLY WORK WITH WHAT'S IN FRONT OF US AND FIND NEW AVENUES OF REVENUE"

Mark's position on a local body which aims to increase footfall in the centre of Hunstanton has brought about the idea of The West Norfolk Seasonal Food & Drink Festival. As well as supporting small local producers and increasing footfall during quiet seasons, The Norfolk Deli will have stall on-site. "I am obviously not shying away from the fact that we are the organisers and that most of the products sold at the market are/will be available to buy from our shop when the market is not in town."



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The Bristol Cheesemonger

For The Bristol Cheesemonger, the past twelve months have been a corker. "We've grown a fair bit and are currently on our biggest ever year in terms of turnover," says Oliver Smith, who owns the business with his wife Jenny Howell.

That's not to say that, like businesses of all sizes, Oli's team haven't experienced their fair share of challenges – both in terms of local issues and larger-scale problems. "The past 12 months have been a bit of a rollercoaster in terms of the economy, and to add to that we had a local footbridge that provides a lot of the access to our shop closed for most of the year."

Thankfully, 2023 most certainly brought triumphs too. "Being included in the Inspirational Cheese Retailers list was a really proud moment for us and the team." Arguably the highest accolade came from political circles, as the team was invited to No. 10 Downing Street for the Christmas Fair.

In terms of home-grown opportunities, the Cider & Cheese Festival "was a big hit," says Oli, "with almost 1,400 people attending." Plus, the team's home cheesemaking lessons are proving to be a triumph.

Perhaps most important is the relationship that Oli and his team are fostering with producers. "The cheese we sell gets better and better as we continue our policy of working closely with a small number of exceptional producers and getting the very best of what they make for our customers."





2024 is looking bright for The Bristol Cheesemonger, with the team putting great effort into growing the connections with cheesemakers. They recently held their first trade open day – "we invited a bunch of the best cheesemakers in the area and beyond to come to Bristol and taste out cheese to our current and prospective wholesale customers," explains Oli. "It was terrific to keep building a sense of community between producers and customers. We plan on building this ethos to grow our wholesale customer base."

LESSONS LEARNED

"Things can be so unpredictable that all we can do is keep building on the quality of the product and service we offer," says Oli. "It's a bit of cliche but trying to work out what we are actually in control of and focusing on that has often been the best policy for us."

> "IT'S A BIT OF CLICHE BUT TRYING TO WORK OUT WHAT WE ARE ACTUALLY IN CONTROL OF AND FOCUSING ON THAT HAS OFTEN BEEN THE BEST POLICY FOR US"



PICS: HALIUS



Friday Street Farm Shop

THE POWER OF LOYALTY

"Over the past year we have invested in our loyalty card system to give our customers a more personal shopping experience," begins Toby. "I have always been against a Clubcard-style system, but have been proven wrong. We gave our customers more personal offers and general offers to encourage them to shop with us more, and it has been a great success!"

For Toby Edwards, deli and cheese room manager at Friday Street Farm Shop, 2023 went by in a flash. "I just don't know where those past 12 months have gone," he says. "Business has been fantastic!" A hugely busy Christmas, following a "very positive" summer has meant that the quantity of the cheese room has at least doubled. Customer recommendations have helped, and trialling different cheeses have aided this success.

As well as "smashing Christmas 2022's sales by 60%", one of Friday Street's most successful endeavours were its tasting events. A Valentine's Day event co-hosted with local brewery Adnams, where the producer's wine was paired with local cheeses, was a stand-out success and inspired a return for the brewer in September. At this second event, local cheesemaker Fen Farm Dairy – of Baron Bigod fame – delighted customers. Towards the end of the year an inaugural Christmas tasting event was held, which is now set to be an annual event. In fact, the first one went so well that the team is planning a similar one to run in the summer months".

> "OVER THE PAST YEAR WE HAVE INVESTED IN OUR LOYALTY CARD SYSTEM TO GIVE OUR CUSTOMERS A MORE PERSONAL SHOPPING EXPERIENCE"

IN MEMORY OF PHIL MARTIN



Unfortunately, this past August we lost a key member of our team. Phil will always be remembered in many ways, a legend, a gentlemen, and truly down to earth bloke. He always listened to your problems and make he would me you feel like you could overcome them with just a few simple words. He was always the first one in and the last one out, even towards the days when he was getting unwell, you knew Phil was going to be there. Some would say he was to dedicated to his work and it was like talking to a brick wall trying to convince him to go home! But we loved that about him! Sometimes we would be working away not talking then all of suddenly he would come out with something that would have you laughing all day!

All I know is that the Cheese Room wouldn't be where it is today without Phil being there! Miss you buddy!

Toby, Dean and the rest of the Friday Street Team

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The Cheese Locker

Founded by Alex Hunt in 2021, The Cheese Locker – located in Abbots Bromley, Staffordshire – has been going great guns since we last visited in early 2023. "Over the past 12 months there has been a substantial growth to local trade and via the website," begins Alex. "I have started to gain a real loyal following of customers who wish to support me from all over the country." Alex has begun to travel the UK thanks to the purchase of a converted horsebox, which also allows him to take part in local events.

The Cheese Locker has experienced some struggles as a result of this growth, thanks to space being at a premium. "Many of the challenges we have faced have linked to the growth of the business. At Christmas we did amazingly well, but we struggled for space as it is a smaller shop. Luckily, we bought a few small fridges last minute which allowed us to serve all customers that visited."

Alex's new travelling premises has brought some problems amongst the joys, too. "Fitting the catering horsebox has been filled with technical issues, but we should be ready for the road soon."

As well as promoting great cheese to food-loving consumers across the region and beyond, Alex is a passionate spokesperson for autism. "I have completed a talk for the Staffordshire WI about growing my business and about Autism Spectrum Disorder and how it has influenced my decisions on this journey."

Valuable lessons have been learned over the past 12 months. "I have learned about the significance of online marketing," Alex says, "and how it is important to have a good ambient range to support and pair well with cheese and charcuterie."

The coming year brings big plans. "Growth and increasing the range of products for the store as well as looking to grow the size of the shop if possible." Additionally, Alex plans to visit markets across the country. "I also plan to do more talks for other WI's and organisations for local schools so as to market myself more and to show that you can achieve what you would like, even if you have a condition that can be a barrier at times."



AWARD WINS

Despite it only having been in action for a couple of years, The Cheese Locker is already gathering national plaudits. "I have received nominations for two Rural Oscars and another for Retailer Award by the Farm Shop & Deli 2024," says Alex.



> "I PLAN TO SHOW THAT YOU CAN ACHIEVE WHAT YOU WOULD LIKE, EVEN IF YOU HAVE A CONDITION THAT CAN BE A BARRIER AT TIMES"

Indie Fude

KEY LESSONS

The most important lesson learned by the Indie Fude team, says Johnny, is the value of provenance. "Quality and provenance are not only important to us but our customers as well," he says. "By not compromising we have happy food-loving customers as well as strengthening relationships with our wonderful artisan producers."

While many independent retailers pride themselves on the relationships they have with their suppliers and the producers who fill their shelves and displays, not all were founded with the mission to wholly celebrate the work these makers do.

Indie Fude, located in Belfast, Northern Ireland and founded by Johnny McDowell in 2014, prides itself on the relationships the business has with the stand-out producers of the region.

While Indie Fude's mission is noble, the team has experienced its fair share of challenges over the past 12 months – but the local network it has developed since it was launched has more than come through. "Like many small businesses the past year has been challenging, particularly with regards to rising costs – particularly energy costs and rising supply costs – however we have continued to gather support of our local communities who really have embraced our ethos of supporting and shopping local." These additional costs faced by the business have been passed on to customers in the form of higher prices, yet the passion of shoppers to support local producers remains steadfast.

With such an important mission at its heart, it is vital that staff members believe in the business's ethos. "Great staff are everything," Johnny says, "and having staff who are as passionate as we are as owners about our ethos really comes across to our customers." Keeping these "brilliant" staff in employment is a proud achievement for Johnny, as is keeping to their strong ethos around supporting only local producers. Plus, "Winning the Slow Food delicatessen for Northern Ireland again was a lovely bonus for all of us," he says.

The future looks bright for Indie Fude. The team's plan, says Johnny, is to "build on what we have through our stores and bring more of the Indie Fude goodness to our online offering." The Indie Fude network is growing; "we have some wonderful mini food tours in the offing, based in the areas around our stores, that will hopefully help us shout about the other great independent food businesses around us as well."

> "HAVING STAFF WHO ARE AS PASSIONATE AS WE ARE AS OWNERS ABOUT OUR ETHOS REALLY COMES ACROSS TO OUR CUSTOMERS"





LE GRUYÈRE SWITZERLAND AOP





The Cheesery

For Hilary and Steve, owners of Dundee's The Cheesery, a dedicated team and growing customer base have been key to weathering 2023. "It has been a better and more positive 12 months compared to previous years with challenges such as Covid," begins Hilary. "We have a very strong team in both shops and we continue to learn and grow together."

The period has brought unprecedented challenges, including the cost of cheese rising by around 30%, with The Cheesery's team refusing to pass this rise on to their customers. "To make up for the shortfall, we have managed to increase the number of customers and are seeing new faces in the shop more and more," says Hilary. This tangible growth is the result of a myriad of new ideas from the team, she explains. "This has been as a result of developing our brand through our cheese subscriptions and cheese celebration towers; varied and more regular content on social media platforms; and reaching new customers directly with cheese and wine events."

Arguably the most challenging season of them all, Christmas, is showing positive signs of growth year-on-year. "We feel that each year we improve on our service and organisation," says Hilary, and pats on the back from publications such as Inspirational Cheese Retailers and pieces in local press have given the team's confidence a well-deserved boost.

"This year, we plan to push our cheese and wine events," says Hilary, "We are looking into the possibility of holding private, more intimate cheese tastings in the shop, out of hours." The corporate industry also holds opportunities for The Cheesery. "We are keen to take our events to the corporate industry as food bonds people – we feel that what we can deliver could work really well for businesses for their teams and clients alike: a different and interesting experience."

KEEP IT FRESH

Valuable lessons were learned at The Cheesery in 2024, while tried and tested methods have been reaping rewards. "We will continue to keep things fresh and interesting for customers whilst maintaining their favourites," explains Hilart. "Samples have worked really well in the shops and it's nice to showcase our other products alongside the cheese."

> "WE ARE KEEN TO TAKE OUR EVENTS TO THE CORPORATE INDUSTRY AS FOOD BONDS PEOPLE – WE FEEL THAT WHAT WE CAN DELIVER COULD WORK REALLY WELL FOR BUSINESSES FOR THEIR TEAMS AND CLIENTS ALIKE: A DIFFERENT AND INTERESTING EXPERIENCE"

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Knowles Green

KEEP IT POSITIVE

In the context of the many large-scale challenges faced by independents up and down the country this year, Mark and his team at Knowles Green have a simple philosophy: "positiveness". A positive and proactive approach is the name of the game, he says: "you must do the things you think you cannot do."

Evolution has been the name of the game for Cheshire's Knowles Green, headed up by Mark Dent and Dagmara Sztompka. When we last profiled the site, Mark described it as a "unique take on a corner store", where customers could peruse the shop's stock of cheese, wine and provisions with a glass of great wine in-hand. "In the past 12 months we have put most of our energy into developing our business model into more of a cheese and wine bar," begins Mark. "We wanted to initially review how we could grow Knowles Green, getting more footfall through the front door and generating more loyalty to the brand." Some out-of-the-box thinking led to the current incarnation of the business; "This made us look outside the box on how we turn a traditional looking butchers shop with easy-clean white walls into a comfy-cozy warm wine and cheese bar," he says.

> "STAY POSITIVE. YOU MUST DO THE THINGS YOU THINK YOU CANNOT DO"

The relaunch of the premises in 2023 – "offering extended hours on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays and initiating Knowles Green Social - till 8pm or late" – is one of Mark's proudest achievements of the year. The team has evolved alongside the shape of the business. "We have gone from two members of staff running a small cheese and wine deli over a six-day period, into what is now seven members of staff serving cheese boards, small plates and glasses of wine in an ever-growing cheese deli and wine bar, seven days a week."

Quality is key, with locals and visitors alike making the most of the team's expert take on perfect cheese and wine pairings since the site first opened in 2021.

Serving fine food and wine in a cosy, convivial atmosphere is on the cards for the Knowles Green team in 2024. "Our immediate future is all about fine tuning and building on what we have already created," explains Mark. Events are also on the cards in an attempt to grow awareness and appreciation of the business in the local area and beyond. "[We will also be] focusing on our events calendar and introducing more in-house tastings, strengthening the brand."



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Cheezolo

For Eleanore Deneuve, founder of London-based Cheezolo, 2023 proved to be a fruitful year – even with the backdrop of inflation and the cost-of-living crisis. "Customers were still present to treat themselves to great cheeses and wine," begins Eleanore, "principally due to eating more often at home than going out." The post-Covid return of workers to offices has also helped footfall at the shop, as has the demand for event catering.

Unfortunately, plans for a second premises are currently on hold partly due to inflation, and the rise of operational costs as well as those of dairy and deli products has been a challenge; Eleanore has successfully proposed alternative products which offered better value for customers. Another smart move was becoming extra vigilant on short-life products – for example soft cheeses – to limit wastage.

Smart accounting has also fed into a successful 12 months. "Changing suppliers and looking at their promotions and offering has also been key to avoid significantly raising my prices for the end customers; it may slightly be more work at the end of the month in terms of accounting, but worth it in terms of profitability."

Growing Cheezolo's online market is top of Eleanore's list of priorities. "London is a wide city with a customer base keen on obtaining great quality cheeses and delicatessen products at just a click, so changing the website and offering is part of the strategy of development for Cheezelo.

"The catering side of the business is also a focus of redevelopment, and proposing various type of menu for events on-site/offsite is on the agenda," says Eleanore. The UK's growing appetite for learning about the food and drink they consume feeds into this. "Customers want to have an experience with fine cheeses and wines and gain knowledge on fine foods and pairing," she explains.

Providing great products and services to customers underpins the Cheezolo business plan. "I have increased the customer base by proposing loyalty cards for lunch takeaway, and other types of deals for retaining customers," explains Eleanore. "Maintaining a high customer service is key, also obtaining great reviews and recommendations which allow Cheezelo to perform well and gain new customers. The reviews of the business are high and satisfying."





PROUD MOMENTS

"Maintaining a presence online and on social media is key for small business to keep a visibility to the cheese lovers out there," says Eleanore. "Proposing events like cheese and wine discovery evenings with the producers on-site has been good to promote new and existing products. Similarly, to hosting networking events or thematic events has allowed Cheezelo to be known and discovered by new customers.

> "PROPOSING EVENTS LIKE CHEESE AND WINE DISCOVERY EVENINGS WITH THE PRODUCERS ON-SITE HAS BEEN GOOD TO PROMOTE NEW AND EXISTING PRODUCTS"





Cartmel Cheeses

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Steady steps are the name of the game for Cartmel Cheeses in 2024. The team plans to "look for new suppliers and producers," says Steph. Perhaps most importantly, she and the team plan to "take each day as it comes."

For Lake District-based Cartmel Cheeses, 2023 brought some stability – particularly welcome after the shared rollercoaster ride of Covid-19. "The shop is showing a regular footfall and the website is going from strength to strength," begins Steph Robinson, daugher of Ian Robinson who founded the business in 2011 with cheesemaker Martin Gott of St James Cheese.

Steph is humble when it comes to her proudest achievement from the past 12 months: "making it through another year!" The cost-of-living crisis is taking its toll on both suppliers and customers, with the former bringing price increases and customers being more careful than before with the money they spend in the shop.

A major challenge, which is sure to be felt across the independent cheese retail stable, is the change in the law on using a knife to sample cheeses. "The EHO recently came for a visit and explained we can no longer sample cheeses to customers via a knife," explains Steph. "The only way it can be done is little cubes with cocktail sticks." Unfortunately, for many cheeses (especially soft) this is not suitable or practical – and the size of a retailer's cheese arsenal plays a part too. "With such a big range of cheese, unfortunately we cannot do this. Some customers are fine with this and are happy to buy and try new cheeses, but some are not."

Reassuringly, the Cartmel Cheeses team are determined to do what independent retailers do best and respond to the desires and hungers of their loyal audience. "Always listen to your customers," Steph advises. "We always strive to listen to our customers, as it's not about what we want or need – it's about what they want and need."

The relationships those in-house have with the producers who supply their cheese is of high value, too. By dealing with cheesemakers directly and taking pride in the cheeses they stock – taking the very best care of them while making sure that the hard work that goes into their production is appreciated and rewarded – Cartmel Cheeses is undoubtedly a destination for cheese-loving consumers from far and wide.

> "WE ALWAYS STRIVE TO LISTEN TO OUR CUSTOMERS, AS IT'S NOT ABOUT WHAT WE WANT OR NEED – IT'S ABOUT WHAT THEY WANT AND NEED"

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Ashburton Delicatessen



For Sue Hudson, who runs Ashburton Delicatessen with her son, Robin, 2023 was a busy year that came with some major challenges, but a major win at the end of the year was the highlight of it all. "Probably our proudest moment came in October at the Taste of the West Awards," she begins. This prestigious award covers the seven counties in the whole of the West Country, and we won the Best Speciality Retailer award for the second time!"

Robin's chef training has no doubt fed this success – as well as the appetites of food lovers from within the local area and beyond. "We continue to grow, and customers are visiting us for our superb cheese selection as well as other goodies made on the premises and the large selection of ingredients we stock," says Sue.

2023 was a non-stop year for Ashburton Delicatessen. "The last 12 months have been very busy in the shop. We had a very good summer, and Christmas was the busiest we have ever had." However, set against this successful year have been some major challenges. "Our electricity costs went from £500 per month to £1,700 per month. Also, a great number of suppliers increased their prices which affected our margins."

> "WE BELIEVE THAT CUSTOMERS UNDERSTAND THAT TRUE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SERVICE IS NOT A CHEAP PROCESS"

Sue and Robin are finding that not all costs need to weigh on their shoulders; loyal customers recognise the cost of running a stand-out independent retail establishment. "We have learned to be more confident in passing on increases in price to our customers, because if we try to cover every increase ourselves our margins will suffer as will our profits, and we won't have a viable business to service our customers," says Sue. "We believe that customers understand that true quality and customer service is not a cheap process."





THE VALUE OF INSURANCE

Unfortunately, no business is safe from equipment issues, but Sue has learned that the right insurance and strong relationships really can save the day. "We had a major fridge failure but fortunately our insurers, NFU, were very helpful and so were our suppliers – we managed to fully re-stock nearly £10,000 of stock within a week so we could stay open for business," she says.



The Cheeseworks

For the team at The Cheeseworks in Cheltenham, collaboration is the name of the game for 2024 after a successful year of cheese selling and events. "We're proud to say that our tasting events are as popular as ever!" says Katie Marjai, store manager. "We hold them every other Friday of each month and almost always have a full turn out, with everyone enjoying the chance to sample our cheese and wines, ciders or ports from across the UK and further afield."

"We hope to reach out and create more partnerships with venues and corporate companies who might be interested in tasting events or introducing something new to their businesses like our cheese wedding cakes," she continues. "We've increased our networking with new and upcoming suppliers and venues who in turn help recommend us to their own clients."

While business at The Cheeseworks boomed in 2024, that's not to say that the past 12 months have been entirely smooth sailing. "As a business we face challenges like any other," says Katie. "In the last year we've seen an increase in our suppliers' prices, so we do our best to keep our own prices as affordable as possible. This isn't always easy, especially when other independent suppliers have to raise their own costs in order to manage inflation rates."

Smart stocking and selling is the way to healthy customer base and bottom line, Katie and the team have found. "Understanding customer tastes is as important as ever," she says. "Our shop has over a hundred varieties of cheese, and though the majority are available all year round, trying out new types helps us understand how we can hold onto customer favourites while testing the palates of cheese lovers so we can offer a wider variety of unusual but equally delicious cheeses."

Keeping an eye on food waste has also proven to be of benefit, and is something The Cheeseworks is keen to maintain. "Preventing waste is really important to us," Katie says – they have even set up shop on the Too Good To Go app in order to sell food that would otherwise go to waste at discounted prices. "Some people may never have stepped foot in the shop but seen us on app and been pleasantly surprised with the selection we have to offer!"

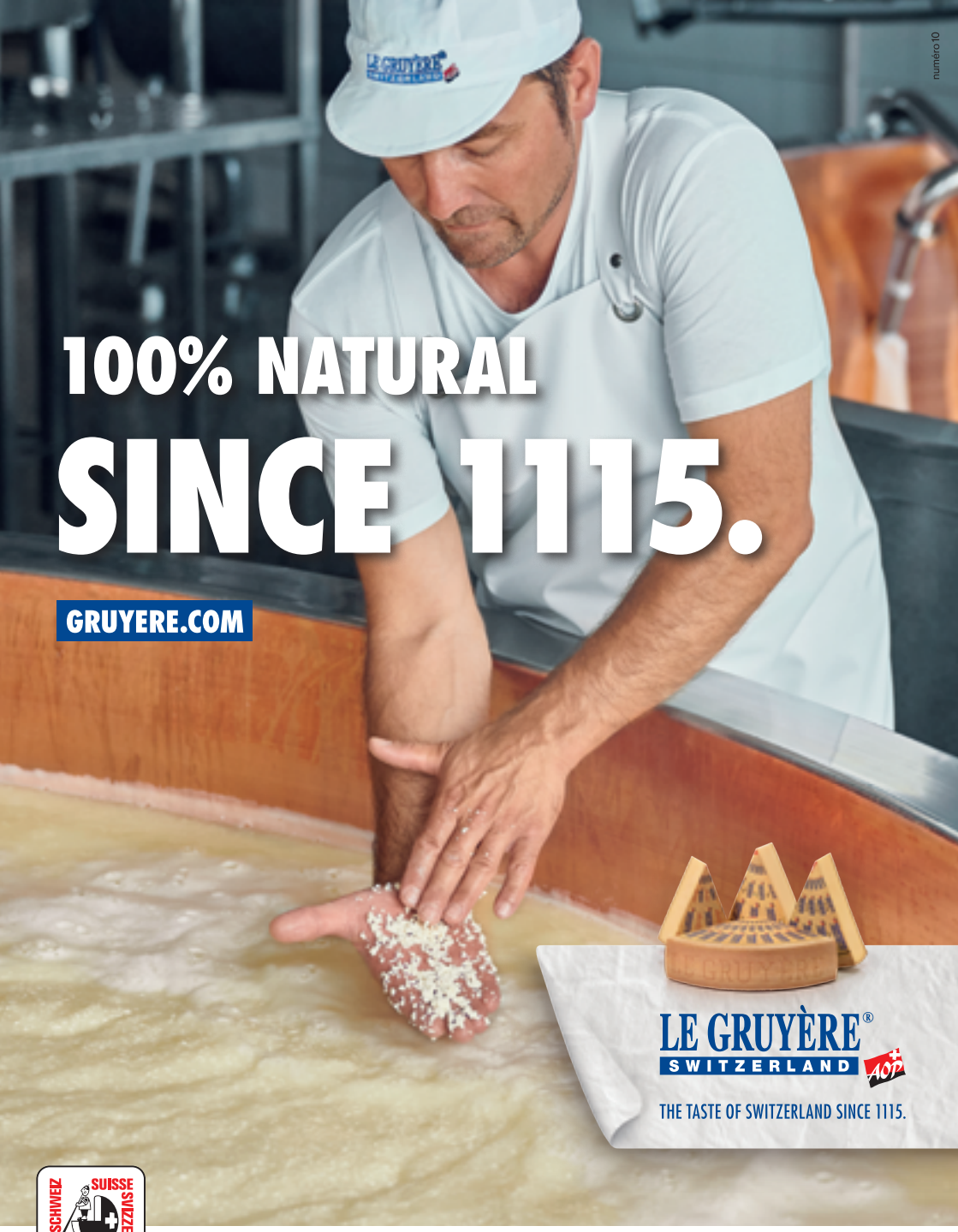
> "TRYING OUT NEW TYPES OF CHEESE HELPS US UNDERSTAND HOW WE CAN HOLD ONTO CUSTOMER FAVOURITES WHILE TESTING THE PALATES OF CHEESE LOVERS"



BOOSTING SOCIALS IN 2024

"We want to increase our engagement across our social media platforms to reach a wider audience of cheese lovers, avid foodies or people who are yet to step into the word of cheese, to share the passion we hold in the shop with our followers," says Katie.

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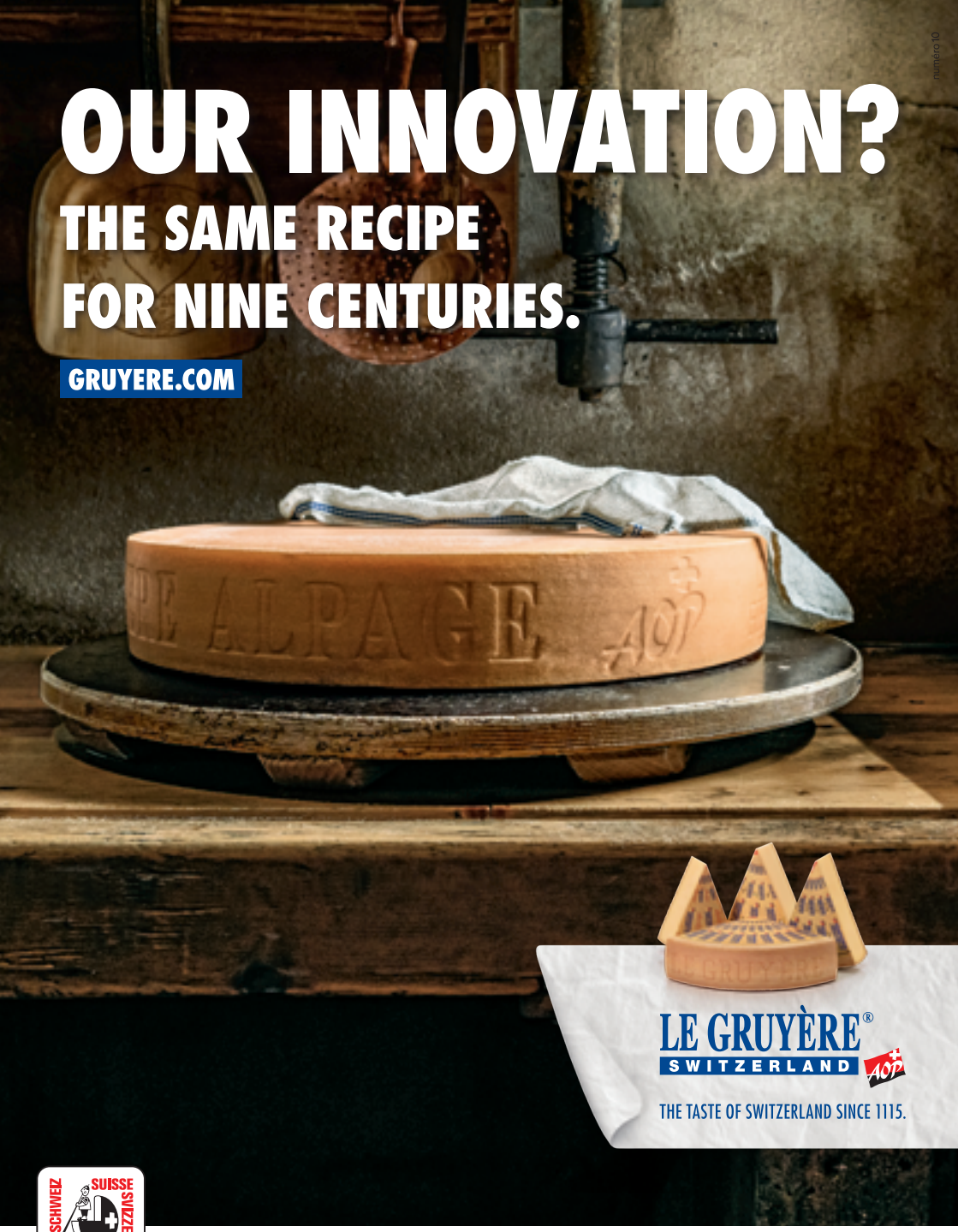
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