2023

INSPIRATIONAL Cheese RETAILERS

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Welcome

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

We are delighted to once again shine the spotlight on some of the most innovative, hardworking and applause-worthy cheesemongers across the UK. The past few years have demonstrated just how important these businesses and the people behind them are to the fabric of their communities' lives, which makes this project all the more rewarding to undertake.

Especially in today's challenging climate, the work the professionals we're profiling within these pages is worthy of the spotlight, so read on to find out how the very best indie cheese sellers from across the UK – from London to Northern Ireland, the South West to Scotland, and beyond – are forging their own paths.

HOLLY SHACKLETON | EDITOR
holly.shackleton@aceville.co.uk

Editor
Holly Shackleton, 01206 505981
holly.shackleton@dcthomson.co.uk

News & Digital Editor
Victoria Smith 01206 505969
victoria.smith@dcthomson.co.uk

Head of Commercial
Sam Reubin 01206 505936
sam.reubin@dcthomson.co.uk

Advertising Manager
Jessica Brett
jessica.brett@dchomson.co.uk

Account Manager
Louise Barnes 01206 508629
louise.barnes@dcthomson.co.uk

Accounts
Sue Carr 01206 505903

Art Director
Lee Whiteford
lee.whiteford@dcthomson.co.uk

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FRIDAY STREET FARM SHOP

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LE GRUYÈRE SWITZERLAND AOP

How We Put This Guide Together

Welcome to the third edition of *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*, produced in partnership with Le Gruyère AOP. As before, we are proud to present this publication as a celebration of the hard work and dedication of the independent cheesemongers across the UK throughout the past year.

Yet again, these businesses have proved their value and integrity – dedicated champions of the world's fine cheese sector as well as bastions of their local regions and communities (if not beyond, too) – and we feel privileged to share their stories within these pages.

To uncover these heroes of cheese retail, we called upon our networks across the fine food industry and cheese-loving consumers to nominate their most-loved cheesemongers, via an online survey which garnered a wide range of inspiring businesses and passionate proprietors. As before, it has been a sizeable challenge to focus in on just a few of the retailers named, but we are confident that those profiled within will provide not only inspiration but tangible lessons for readers, too.

As we know just how important sterling independent cheese retailers are to their local communities, in this edition we are highlighting the region of each inclusion – so that readers can not only gain a better understanding of the UK's cheese-selling prowess across its borders, but also connect more closely with their stories.

We are also revisiting the inspiring businesses we first explored in *Inspirational Cheese Retailers 2022*, finding out how they have weathered the storms of the past twelve months and sharing their invaluable insights to support fellow readers for the year ahead.

I hope this publication inspires, educates and fires you and your teams up to power through the seasons ahead – to be the very best champions of the world's finest cheese you can be.

HELEN DAYSH
HEAD OF MARKETING UK AT LE GRUYÈRE AOP

LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP

As champions of Le Gruyére AOP, British cheesemongers have helped grow the reputation, recognition and fanbase of this most iconic cheese across the UK, and we are proud to sponsor *Inspirational Cheese Retailers* for a third year – supporting this unique project in its mission to educate and motivate cheese-loving independents to continue their invaluable work.









KNOWLES GREEN



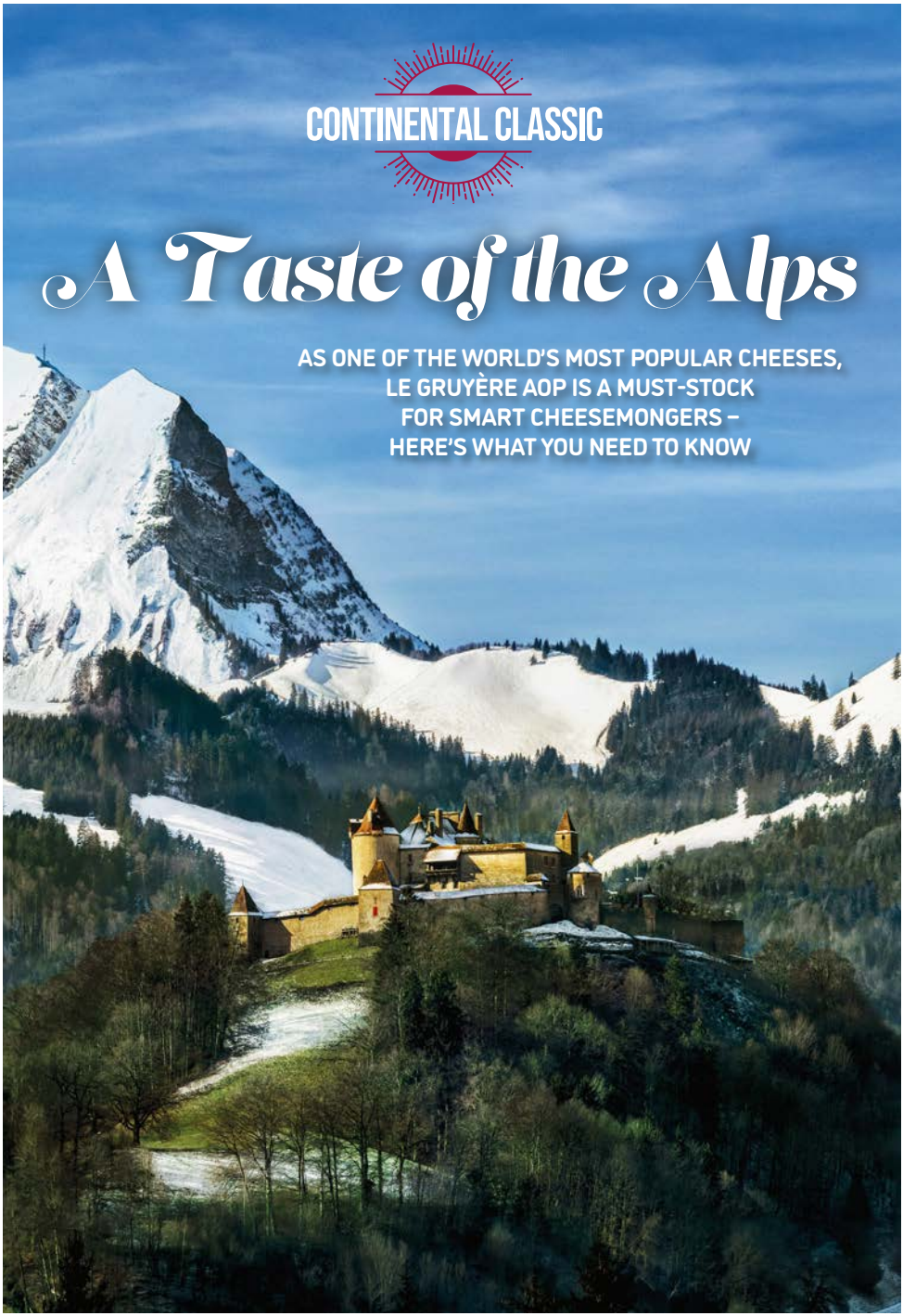


INDIE FÜDE

CONTINENTAL CLASSIC

A Taste of the Alps

AS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CHEESES, LE GRUYÈRE AOP IS A MUST-STOCK FOR SMART CHEESEMONGERS – HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP



For nearly 10 centuries, Le Gruyère AOP has been delighting cheese lovers of all persuasions with its perfectly balanced flavour – and this unique balance of sweetness, nuttiness and complexity has seen its popularity continue to grow well into the twenty first century.

Le Gruyère AOP was first produced in 1159, when the residents of the neighbouring Swiss regions of Bern, Jura, Vaud, Neuchâtel and the town of Gruyères, located in the canton of Fribourg, came together to transform the milk from their cattle herds into cheese. Throughout the 900 years since its original creation, makers of the classic Swiss cheese have passionately remained true to the historical production methods – which is why it was awarded protected name status across Switzerland and Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This move successfully protected genuine Le Gruyère AOP from lesser-quality imitations, and meant that the exemplary quality and flavour for which the cheese is known was maintained.

The 160 village dairies and 55 Alpage – mountain pasture – dairies which produce the milk used to make Le Gruyère AOP play a vital role in protecting the quality of the cheese. Its protected food name status means that



A MARK OF QUALITY

British retailers interested in stocking Le Gruyère AOP can be assured not only of traceable provenance, but also of the authenticity of the product. This is achieved by the casein mark which appears on every wheel, along with the date of production. On a genuine wheel, the words Le Gruyère AOP appear, together with the number of the producing dairy. The dairy which produced the cheese can be easily identified at gruyère.com.

MULTIPLE VARIATIONS TO ENJOY

Le Gruyere AOP boasts a number of varieties – all offering subtle differences that accentuate the cheese's most favoured characteristics

- Le Gruyère AOP Classic (aged five-nine months) is nutty, floral and sweet – perfect for lovers of milder cheese
- Le Gruyère AOP Réserve (aged 10 months and up) is flavour-packed and aromatic – complex and mature, it boasts a slight crystalline crunch
- Le Gruyère AOP can also be purchased aged 18 and 24 months – both options offer a powerful but well balanced taste



makers are expected to uphold the rigid specifications required by the accreditation without fail, from the quality and source of the milk used to the production and ageing processes. Freshness is key, and assured by the proximity of the herds supplying each dairy – the distance from farm to dairy must be no more than 12.4 miles – and the speed at which the milk is used – it must be poured into the cheesemaker's copper vat within 18 hours of milking.

The delicious flavours for which Le Gruyère AOP is known belie the simplicity of the product. At the heart of each wheel is the milk of Alpine cows which in the summer feed on lush hillside grasses, which often contain natural herbs and flora. In the winter, the cows are fed hay – rather than silage – for optimum quality.

Entirely natural and artisanally-made, every wheel of Le Gruyère AOP contains no additives or preservatives and is made using animal rennet.

> "LE GRUYERE AOP'S PROTECTED FOOD NAME STATUS MEANS THAT MAKERS ARE EXPECTED TO UPHOLD THE RIGID SPECIFICATIONS REQUIRED BY THE ACCREDITATION WITHOUT FAIL, FROM THE QUALITY AND SOURCE OF THE MILK USED TO THE PRODUCTION AND AGEING PROCESSES"

DID YOU KNOW?

The name and provenance of Le Gruyère AOP was officially listed in the dictionary of Academie Francaise in 1762.

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.



LE GRUYÈRE SWITZERLAND AOP

REVISITED

Inspirational Cheese Retailers 2022: Revisited

> AS WELL AS PASSION AND DETERMINATION, THEY HAVE PROVEN HOW ADAPTABILITY IS AT THE CORE OF EVERY WINNING RETAILER

Since the *Speciality Food* team began work on the first edition of *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*, it's been clear just how much hard work, determination and innovation is behind the success of the businesses we profile.

Of course, with the headwinds in the industry being as forceful as ever, it's not just hard work that is powering these cheesemongers. As well as passion and determination, they have proven how adaptability is at the core of every winning retailer.

Some of the retailers we've profiled over the years are themselves a product of the recent nationwide challenges – a proactive reaction put into place where others might have shied away – while many more have proven their innovative mettle by not only rolling with the punches thrown their way, but actively using them as opportunities to evolve.

In the following pages, we revisit some of the retailers we named Inspirational Cheese Retailers in our 2022 edition to see how they've adapted to the pros and cons of the past 12 months, to share their hard-won advice, and to take heart from the positivity they've gleaned from the past year.





I J Mellis

LESSONS LEARNED

"Over the past year we've learned to take things easy, and not rush into decisions," explains Rory. "When it comes down to it, making a quick call can be essential in running a business, but I've found that taking time to come to a decision can benefit in the long run. The good news is that we're here for the long haul, and it's important to step back and appreciate how our decisions now can really impact the future."

2022 was a big year for IJ Mellis; as part of further cementing its position as a proud champion of all things Scottish cheese, the team worked hard to extend the wholesale side of its business – raising its profile across the UK. "We're excited about the work we've done to expand our reach to more wholesale customers in England, and the efforts made to develop our Mellis retail range this year," begins Rory Mellis, director of I.J. Mellis Cheesemongers. "Seeing our products on the shelves of independent businesses around the UK after many months of trial and error is very gratifying, and it has been a joy to collaborate with so many new businesses in 2022."

More innovation came in the shape of I.J. Mellis's new Cakebuilder – an exciting new string to the business's bow that has been custom-built to satisfy the consumer appetite for celebrating special occasions with the joy of great cheese. "It's one of the first tools of its kind where customers can build their own custom cheese tower for cheese celebrations," says Rory. "This was something we've been working on for quite some time – we wanted the cakebuilder to look realistic so that customers could have a life-like visual of their creations. It's been thrilling to see what our customers have been ordering, and then sending them the final product and getting their feedback."

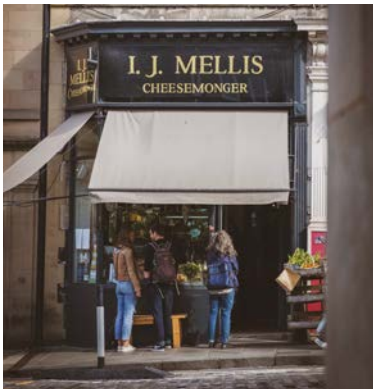
> "IT HAS BEEN A JOY TO COLLABORATE WITH SO MANY NEW BUSINESSES IN 2022"

Meeting challenges head-on

Of course, no business was exempt from the issues brought about by Covid-19. "The pandemic brought so many challenges to the business, so 2022 was focused on recovering from a year of constantly adapting to change and facing external obstacles. This year we were able to take a deep breath and look forward to doubling down on what we do best as a business."

Once the 'new normal' settled into its unfamiliar rhythm, there were more challenges to come – namely in the form of import and export regulations. In fact, Rory names this as his biggest challenge of 2022. "We work closely with producers in Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and others in Europe, both in importing their produce and exporting our own." Thankfully, the team was able to call upon its network to pull together. "Together, we've had to navigate a number of barriers that make it difficult to share our products across borders – something we're really passionate about."

On the horizon for 2023? "We plan to visit more of the producers we work with, expand on our offerings when it comes to tastings and events, and develop Scottish cheese abroad. That's all we'll say for now!"



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The Cotswold Cheese Company



For Jon Goodchild, owner of The Cotswold Cheese Company, 2022 was a year of familiar challenges and an exciting new franchising opportunity – but, like for so many businesses, it didn't begin with a cut-and-dry plan. "We were not sure how we would do in 2022," he begins. "2021 was a busy year for us as with the lack of international travel, the Cotswolds became an even more popular holiday destination." This increased footfall has led to the growth of the business's retail portfolio – "we purchased our long-established franchise in Burford as a company-owned store, as the franchisee wanted to take life a bit easier, and our son Tom – who manages part of the business – was looking to expand so it was a no brainer." Thanks to this organic growth, there are now three Cotswold Cheese Company shops within the region, as well as an online store under the same brand. While not in a rush to swiftly expand further, Jon is seeing franchising as a potential future move. "We will look at franchise opportunities again in the future in locations that are a natural expansion of our business," he says.

The team found forecasting 2022's sales with Christmas and an additional store challenging, but Jon is remaining proactive. "I suppose our lesson is the same as always, go with your gut instinct and the data on ordering, but be prepared to change if you are becoming overstocked." And as for the annual hurdle or the festive season, "Christmas has always been about holding your nerve until the final week – thankfully it paid off again for us," he says.

Like many businesses across the sector and beyond, recruitment has been a key difficulty for The Cotswold Cheese Company, as has keeping abreast of ever-changing pricing. "It's very difficult to recruit great people, they are out there but difficult to track down," says Jon. Price increases have been the major challenge for 2022 and it does not look like they will stop anytime soon. Making sure we stay on top of these, sourcing alternatives and maintaining the margin we need to run the business, has become a weekly task rather than just a New Year event."

PLANS FOR 2023

"We are going to look at sourcing directly from the product makers where possible and use wholesalers to fill in the gaps," says Jon. "We will look to further expand our own wholesale offering to local businesses and also expand our online presence. We will look to continually improve our shops and our customers experience with a cheese room planned for our Moreton-in-Marsh shop – and as always, we will look to champion local quality products."



Forest Deli



Despite coming with a raft of challenges, many of which were shared across the sector, Debbie and Simon Jones of Forest Deli found 2022 to bear the fruit of the hard work they have put in over the years – especially in terms of brand recognition. "Highlights obviously include being included in the *Inspirational Cheese Retailers* listing along with keeping our Gold status in the Taste of the West," they begin. "It was also wonderful that when visiting trade shows and The World Cheese Awards that so many of the makers of the cheese we sell knew us from us wearing our branded t-shirts and wanted to speak with us."

Getting the word out has proven to reap tangible rewards. "With social media and the publication we also made contact with and visited other cheese retailers and had other retailers visit us. We have also had exclusives on a few local cheeses which is great for us and our customers – and the producers get a lot of feedback."

The pair found the growing opportunity to connect with like-minded businesses "very pleasing and reassuring", and their new connections proved to be a valuable support in terms of discussing "honestly and openly the trials and tribulations with those in the same boat and experiencing the same highs and lows. It is definitely reassuring to know we are not alone!"

While the challenges faced were shared, and the network proved valuable, there were many issues out of everyone's control in 2022. "2022 was the year we were supposed to come out of Covid and I think we were all looking forward to a 'normal' year with some level of steadiness and being able to plan," they say, "but it wasn't long into the year when fuel, gas and electricity started to rise and the year suddenly started to look a little more concerning rather than stable.

"The challenges with the ever-increasing costs of produce alongside costs all increasing put a layer of stress onto us that was hard to manage at times, knowing things were getting worse for everyone was cold comfort though."





RETAINING A COMMUNITY FOCUS

"The last few years have taught us that making predictions is probably not a good idea," say Debbie and Simon. "We will focus on our core areas, and hope to grow the number of events we run in our Tasting Corner in the evenings into more events in the afternoons, especially in the tourist season. Being able to showcase amazing local cheeses, wines and beers alongside sharing recipes using ingredients we have in the shop, or readily available in the other independents in town, is going to be key to keeping our customer community and the town community going in the right directions."

> "OUR KEY LEARNING WAS TO TRY AND STOP WORRYING TOO MUCH ABOUT THE THINGS WE HAVE NO CONTROL OVER – INFLATION, INTEREST RATES, ELECTRICITY AND ALL THE OTHER FACTORS WILL ALWAYS BE IMPORTANT TO MONITOR AND TRACK, BUT NOTHING WE CAN DO WILL CHANGE WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN"

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Paxton & Whitfield

As a business with an enviable history – it was founded in 1797 and is proud to have supplied cheese to royal households for generations – as well as impressive recognition across the UK and beyond, it would be easy to think that success is an easy achievement for Paxton & Whitfield. In fact, the team behind the icon cheesemonger is constantly looking to evolve and improve in order to benefit customers and staff, as well as the wider industry, and the updates made in 2022 are already reaping rewards.

"In 2022 we grew our sales and enabled even more customers to explore and enjoy artisan cheese from the UK and across the Continent" begins Jenny Brown, head of marketing. "We celebrated our 225th birthday and launched Cullum' in collaboration with Martin Gott; a new hard ewes' milk cheese (named after the original founder of Paxton & Whitfield), which went on to win Gold at the 2022 World Cheese Awards."

With such growth comes challenges, as Jenny explains. "It was our first year juggling five new maturation rooms, which was an exciting challenge for our cheesemongers to experiment with which cheeses matured best in which of the new maturation rooms, how many of the rooms to use during our 'off-peak' season and what temperature and humidity controls were optimal for each of these spaces." This learning curve brought swift positives. "We have learnt a lot and it was wonderful to see this recognised by picking up three Great Taste Awards and one gold at The World Cheese Awards for Paxton & Whitfield matured cheese!"

The team's passion for constantly evolving to improve comes with benefits to all; indeed, a number of the improvements that were made in 2022 have boosted employee morale across the board. "Considering the design of our new office and cheese rooms and having more space has made a huge, positive difference to our business," Jenny says. "Simple changes such as adding a bespoke communal dining table has encouraged more team members to sit together at lunchtimes and collaborate using that space. Having a meeting room equipped with better technology has enabled more frequent virtual meetings with our shop teams, and our impressive cheese maturation space enticed a great team of passionate, food-loving temporary employees to join us for Christmas."

WHAT'S NEW FOR 2023

"2023 will see us reach more customers with artisan cheese," explains Jenny. "We'll continue innovating too, with more new cheeses, new artisan cheese propositions and new ways to engage with our customers, as well as continuing to focus on the incredible cheeses and fine food that we already have on our counters."

> "CONSIDERING THE DESIGN OF OUR NEW OFFICE AND CHEESE ROOMS AND HAVING MORE SPACE HAS MADE A HUGE, POSITIVE DIFFERENCE TO OUR BUSINESS"



The Cheese Society

HIGHLIGHTS OF 2022

"Everything felt like it was getting back to normal in 2022, our café and shop in Lincoln became progressively busier and it was reassuring to see the trade coming back to a good place again," says Lucie.



While Lucie Nock, proprietor of The Cheese Society, felt positive going into 2022 there was a major challenge to overcome. Thankfully, the business has moved on and learned from the episode, and is now looking forward to a bright 2023.

"The biggest challenge by far was the Royal Mail strikes at Christmas," Lucie begins. "They caused such an issue with delays and our Christmas parcels not arriving." For a business so dedicated to selling the very best product in the very best condition, this nationwide challenge spelled disaster. "We sent our cheeses out as we should, only for them to be held at depots for too long, lost and then binned," she explains. "It was heartbreaking for both our team and our customers, so much hard work and wonderful produce has gone to waste. So much disappointment caused and a huge financial loss for ourselves at a time that we strongly rely on."

For small businesses like The Cheese Society, such national emergencies can be catastrophic – but it's not always easy to find an alternative as swiftly as would be desired. "We've learned not to rely on a single courier, however, this is hard to adjust, especially last minute, as we're so integrated with couriers as a company."

Moving forward, Lucie is attempting to plan around such negative events potentially happening in the future – with communication playing a key role. "This issue hit us like a wall and we'll be ensuring further communication is put in place to plan further for such events happening in the future (fingers crossed it won't)."

A sentiment which many readers of *Inspirational Cheese Retailers* will agree with: "Small businesses should not have to pay for the faults of large corporations like this, it's heartbreaking and soul-destroying to lose so much money and have so much of our hard work destroyed".

> "CHEESEMAKERS ARE WONDERFUL PEOPLE AND WE'RE SO FORTUNATE TO WORK IN SUCH A WELCOMING AND KIND INDUSTRY"



Despite the scale of the damage done by Royal Mail's festive strikes, the future is looking bright for The Cheese Society. "Our plans for 2023 include further growing our online sales and online presence," says Lucie. "We are so fortunate that our little Lincoln shop and eatery in Lincoln are always incredibly busy. Tourists and locals always find us, we're off the beaten track and it's so lovely to see our cheese shop full of cheese-loving customers."

Of course, the air of discovery is always appealing, and Lucie's team are making the most of this. "We're always researching and seeking out new cheeses for our customers to discover, that's a part of the business we love and will always make considerable time for. Cheesemakers are wonderful people and we're so fortunate to work in such a welcoming and kind industry."

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The Cheese Hamlet

Despite the myriad of challenges brought about in 2022, the year was "extremely interesting with regards to in-store retailing," begins John Axon, proprietor of The Cheese Hamlet. "There were not too many highlights with regards to record breaking months, however the vibe in-store certainly improved. We removed most of the Covid screens and returned to regular sampling on our tasting table."

It's not only the shop that was back to more-or-less business as usual – the local community spirit picked up too, events and all. "The Village Festival returned along with lots of other community events such as Arts Festival, Didsbury Pride and the Open Gardens, all of which we are involved with. These events helped with the return of the community spirit that had been somewhat subdued for the past couple of years."

While many individuals revelled in the nationwide return to 'normal', "there were certainly some challenges last year," says John. "Morale was a big issue at the start of the year as footfall in the shop dwindled (compared to the two Covid years)." Plus, without the legal requirement for a weekly 'big shop', customers returned to a sense pre-Covid normality with many returning to weekly shopping trips and away from their daily visits to the store.

UK-wide issues within the supply chain also led to shared challenges. "The instability in the supply chain as well as the constant price changes caused issues with regards to the planning and execution of some of the corporate orders we handle as they are planned and costed months in advance."

Plus, an indecisive mix of positive and negative headlines pre-Christmas brought its own issues – namely knowing how much energy and funds to put into the 2022's festive season. "Planning for the festive period was a bit stressful with regards to stock levels," explains John. "Were the public going to ignore all the doom and gloom in the press regarding inflation and the cost of living or were they going to go all out and have a Christmas to remember? As it was, they thankfully went for the latter."

Despite the challenges, John and his team remained proactive. "During 2022, we spent more time analysing the information our EPOS system generates. This information was incredibly insightful, and highlighted some of the weaknesses in our product range that were potentially going to cause waste. We therefore altered our stock as well as introducing new stock ranges that we thought we were missing."

> "THERE WERE NOT TOO MANY HIGHLIGHTS WITH REGARDS TO RECORD BREAKING MONTHS, HOWEVER THE VIBE IN-STORE CERTAINLY IMPROVED"

PLANS FOR 2023

For 2023, we need to keep providing high quality, in demand and interesting products to the consumer. We do however need to be mindful of the cost of living that the country is currently experiencing, so we are planning some great in-store offers to help those on a tighter budget spend less while still eating well.

Welbeck Farm Shop

2022 was a difficult year for many, with no exceptions across cheese retail. According to David Wall, manager at Welbeck Farm Shop, there have been many obstacles to face. "The biggest challenge we've faced is the rising cost of ingredients/supplies and energy. Dairy prices have gone up, so we've had to keep an eye on the increases but also judiciously reduce the margins on some of the products so that we're not pricing people out of the cheeses that they've grown to love", he explains.

Earning its title as 'The Collaborator' in the 2022 edition of *Inspirational Cheese Retailers,* Welbeck Farm Shop certainly learned to adapt to the new normal and work with cheesemakers for mutual benefit. This meant that despite challenges, the past 12 months have seen the farm shop go from strength to strength.

According to David, Welbeck had two key highlights in 2022. The first was being invited to appear on Channel 5's programme *Britain's Poshest Farm Shops*. Speaking to *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*, David says, "It was great fun to take part in it. More importantly, it highlighted the wonderful suppliers we have on the Welbeck Estate; Stichelton Dairy, Welbeck Bakehouse and Welbeck Abbey Brewery."

The second was having a particularly successful Christmas, despite inflation and the cost-of-living crisis posing a challenge. "We served more people than any previous year and the customers were all very happy with the range and produce we had available. Cheese sales were up 25% in December year on year, which was great to see and shows what a great job the team here have done over the year", he says.

Reflecting on what he's learnt over the past year, David's main takeaway is that it pays to be authentic and do what fine food retailers do best. "We will continue to stick to our USPs of quality produce and excellent service, and not allow ourselves to chase short-term profit opportunities that make achieving our goals more difficult."

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

David is determined to progress in 2023, planning to maintain his loyal customer base and attract new customers with a stellar offering. "We already have a great relationship with our cheese suppliers, but we'll work on that more this year and see what offers are available on different products. We'll also be trying different cheeses coming through so that we can keep the cheese counter well stocked with great quality cheese and cheese from innovative new producers", he explains.

> "CHEESE SALES WERE UP 25% IN DECEMBER YEAR ON YEAR, WHICH WAS GREAT TO SEE AND SHOWS WHAT A GREAT JOB THE TEAM HERE HAVE DONE OVER THE YEAR"





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Lewis & Cooper

2022 was certainly a rollercoaster of a year for Lewis & Cooper in Northallerton, North Yorkshire. According to Julie Oxley-Hoyle, the great challenges of 2022 and the ones that continue into 2023 are the current economic climate, the rising price of dairy products, and energy and supply issues.

"So far, our customers continue to support these wonderful artisan products and appreciate what a challenge is facing the industry. We have certainly made changes to our business; we are mindful of rising energy costs and material costs. We have also continued to review our use of plastics and look for alternatives", Julie tells *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*.

But there was also plenty to be excited about over the past 12 months for the Lewis & Cooper team. As Julie explains, "The highlights of 2022 were continuing to meet and serve our customers and find that they continue to enthuse and be curious about cheese.

"We continue to review and refresh our selection of artisan cheeses with some new up-and-coming cheese makers, such as Ashcombe from Kings Stone Dairy in Gloucestershire. It is heartening to see that despite challenging conditions our cheesemakers continue to produce exciting and quality products.

Julie also saw 2022 as a year that truly championed British cheese, something that Lewis & Cooper does proudly at their Yorkshire store. "It is interesting to see a British interest in affineurs which I think will enhance the tradition of British cheesemaking.



"One wonderful highlight of the year was being involved in celebrating the Platinum Jubilee, and how precious that seems now. We had a great boost from many street parties and picnics being held. We always enjoy working with our local cheese producers and championing their produce. Another more personal highlight was being involved with the judging of the Cheese and Dairy Show at the Great Yorkshire Show and meeting so many great cheesemakers and judges. We were privileged to meet Anne, Princess Royal at the show who was very enthusiastic about British cheese."

> "A PERSONAL HIGHLIGHT WAS BEING INVOLVED WITH THE JUDGING OF THE CHEESE AND DAIRY SHOW AT THE GREAT YORKSHIRE SHOW AND MEETING SO MANY GREAT CHEESEMAKERS AND JUDGES"

PLANS FOR 2023

The year ahead may be uncertain in terms of economic challenges, but Julie is determined to pave a way forward for Lewis & Cooper. "We understand that we need to be adaptable and creative as a business and look to move forward with confidence," says Julie. We will always have a core selection but look forward to working with new cheesemakers and improving our offering for customers."

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Cheese Etc., The Pangbourne Cheese Shop

2023 AND BEYOND

Looking to the future, Jen is very optimistic for the growth of Cheese Etc. "2022 was actually a good year for us, but I'm hoping that 2023 will be even better. I think people are looking for experiences, hence our tastings evenings being so successful. I'd like to capitalise on that by expanding the tastings that we do to encompass other pairings as well as just cheese tasting. But the main aim of the year is to keep serving our customers with a smile!"



2022 was a busy year for Jen Grimstone-Jones at Cheese Etc., The Pangbourne Cheese Shop, as – in addition to being the go-to establishment for cheese-loving and cheese-curious shoppers hailing from her local area and further afield – she launched several new ventures at the store.

Firstly, and to huge, instantaneous success, she started hosting cheese and wine-tasting events at the shop. "We do two evenings each month, every single one sold out and we're already sold out until April this year!" she begins. They've been really well received, and the evenings are great fun. It's been lovely to get to know our customers better and in a more social environment."

Secondly, the team at Cheese Etc. opened a zero-waste refill shop, just next to the cheese shop. With more consumers looking for sustainable options for their food, drink and toiletries, there is certainly an opportunity there. However, Jen admits it has been very slow to take off. "Once people know it's there they tend to come back time and time again, but things have been difficult."



Going through the process of opening the refill shop has certainly taught Jen and the team a few lessons along the way. "We were fortunate to get a couple of sustainability grants to open our refill shop, so we've definitely learnt to look for funding that is available. Also, that we need to take time out every now and then in order to recharge – I'm not very good at this one!"



> "OUR TASTING EVENINGS HAVE BEEN REALLY WELL RECEIVED, AND IT'S BEEN LOVELY TO GET TO KNOW OUR CUSTOMERS BETTER AND IN A MORE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT"

LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP

Mainsgill Farm Shop



The past 12 months have certainly been an interesting one for the team at Mainsgill Farm Shop, adjusting to the 'new normal' and dealing with energy price hikes and staffing shortages.

"Like everybody else, staffing has caused challenges. We've got a great core team, but every business is looking for staff which is causing a huge issue. Moving forwards, there is so much we want to do here at Mainsgill that it's holding us back slightly. It's getting the right blend of skillsets and characters within the business to move forward", owner Maria Henshaw explains.

Maria also learned a key lesson in 2022. She warned other independent retailers, "Don't take your resources for granted, for example, electricity. The cost of energy supplies has had a huge impact on all businesses, and this is something we're looking at. We already have biomass but we're also looking for renewable energy, and fridges that are more economical."

Despite challenges, Mainsgill have plenty of exciting plans in store for the year ahead. "Within the food hall, it was great to see all the customers returning that travelled the length and breadth of the country or on holiday and using our facilities again", Maria tells *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*.

One of their new ventures is an expansion of their restaurant for the summer. "We're looking to add 5,000 sq ft onto our restaurant/tearoom for an orangery garden room which overlooks Holmedale, one of the most picturesque dales in Yorkshire", she adds.

When it comes to cheese, there is certainly plenty of excitement. As Maria explains, "We've expanded the cheese side of our business and we're looking for a lot more local cheeses, we've just had Appleby Creamery come on board to supply us, and we're doing more tasters again now post-Covid. This means people are getting the original Mainsgill experience where they can taste our cheeses, and it's great to be able to have that interaction with them again."

> "PEOPLE ARE GETTING THE ORIGINAL MAINSGILL EXPERIENCE WHERE THEY CAN TASTE OUR CHEESES, AND IT'S GREAT TO BE ABLE TO HAVE THAT INTERACTION WITH THEM AGAIN"

A huge part of Mainsgill is cheese tasting, and the team are excited to invite producers to the store. Maria tells *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*, "Gruyère is always a great ambassador when they come to do tastings, we've got them booked in to come throughout the year and contribute to the theatre and ambience of Mainsgill. We've also got Swaledale Creamery and Carron Lodge supporting us with tastings, and we do lots of tastings with local accompaniments such as Bay Tree and Raydale chutneys – you've got to offer something different to a supermarket."

CHEESE PAIRINGS

"We always try and complement the cheese with suppliers of accompaniments or wines that all work together," says Maria. "We've actually got some very exciting technology coming to do with our wines so we're really looking forward to that!"

Introducing 2023's Inspirational Cheese Retailers

> WE'RE CONFIDENT THAT THE FOLLOWING CHEESEMONGERS REPRESENT THE VERY BEST OF INDEPENDENT CHEESE SELLING IN 2023

It is our pleasure to reveal the businesses we've named as our Inspirational Cheese Retailers 2023.

By speaking with our friends and colleagues across the industry and beyond, and giving cheese-loving consumers the opportunity to cast their vote too, we're confident that the following cheesemongers represent the very best of independent cheese selling in 2023.

Within these pages you'll find stories of hard-won lessons, exciting innovations, passionate teams and individuals who are dedicated to providing their communities with something truly great. Enjoy.

LONDON & SOUTH

CHEESE FOR ALL

Cheezelo

LOCATION: LONDON **OPENED:** 2016
FOUNDER: ELEONORE DENEUVE



A woman-led venture, Cheezelo officially started trading in December 2016 when owner Eleonore Deneuve was renting a commercial kitchen in East London. Originally, she focused on online sales and had a regular presence at weekends markets such as Roman Road, Brick Lane and Columbia Road. Now, the thriving independent cheesemonger is a mainstay of London's Charlton Street.

A wide selection

Eleonore acquired a shop in the Kings Cross area in April 2017, offering a wide range of 70+ artisan cheeses from all over Europe: British, French, Spanish, Italian, Swiss, German, Dutch and beyond, and constantly increasing the range to satisfy the multiculturality of London. Cheezelo also specialises in regional and bespoke ready-to-eat cheese platters, composed of a variety of cheeses, seasonal fruits, chutney and crackers, available to consume at the shop, take away or for online delivery.

Eleonore explains, "The variety of cheeses as well as the other delicatessen products to accompany them, such as chutneys, crackers, cured meat and wine sets us apart. We tend to change and select the products based on the seasons and customers' demands.

BEST SELLING CHEESES



MORBIER PDO
Its taste is supple and sweet and fruity whilst is appearance is soft and creamy.
fromage-morbier.com



WOOKEY CAVE-AGED FARMHOUSE CHEDDAR PDO
A rich, fruity and tangy Cheddar with earthy, nutty notes.
fordfarm.com

LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP





"In winter, the focus would be more on hard cheeses or cheeses to warm up, particularly with the raclette cheeses (more than eight various flavours available), and cheeses to be used for fondue. In spring and summer, the soft and fresh cheeses are available, particularly refreshing cheeses from goats or ewes' milk. Ideal for salads. Similarly, the wine list varies on the seasons to match the offering of cheeses.

"The variety of ready-to-eat cheese platters has been one of the successes of Cheezelo since the start, being freshly made with different sizes and types of cheeses, mixed with cured meat. Cheezelo can cater for small parties up to large events, ideal for birthdays, weddings or work events in London."

Eleonore prides herself and her store in its ability to follow a consistently high level of customer service, providing advice for customers to select the best products whilst also choosing high-quality goods and new finds for them.

Adjusting to the new normal

"Last year has shown a significant increase of costs from suppliers that unfortunately had to be passed onto the customers", Eleonore admits. "Cheezelo decided to offer other types of products more affordably, as well as selecting different cheeses and items that are still of great quality at a better value.

"Another challenge post-Covid is that footfall hasn't been back to what it was prior. With more people working from home, Cheezelo has reduced its opening hours and operates more on a booking-only basis for late evening openings for cheese and wine evenings, raclette and fondue parties. This has significantly helped to manage better stock, time and costs whilst still being profitable."

2022 also marked the celebratory five-year anniversary of Cheezelo. For Eleonore, "Post-Covid, online sales increased significantly as well as delivering platforms. Customers have changed their habits about ordering delicatessen food online."

PLANS FOR 2023

Looking into 2023, Eleonore is keen to broaden her horizons and hopes that the year ahead will bring exciting plans to do just that. "I really would like to develop the brand and extend to another location in London. The search for another premises has started already, and it's just a question of finding the right place, so hopefully, this year, if not the next one.

> "WE'VE DECIDED TO OFFER OTHER TYPES OF PRODUCTS MORE AFFORDABLY, AND SELECT CHEESES AND OTHER ITEMS OF GREAT QUALITY AT BETTER VALUE"

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EXPERT MATURERS

Mons Cheesemongers

LOCATION: VARIOUS ACROSS LONDON **OPENED:** 2006 **FOUNDER:** HUBERT MONS



Mons was originally started in France in the 1950s from the back of a van by founder Hubert Mons. After nearly a decade of accruing knowledge about producers and farms, he began sourcing artisanal cheeses from his native region of The Auvergne and sold them at local markets with his wife, Rolande. In the 1980s, Hubert and Rolande's two sons Laurent and Herve joined the family business, with Laurent taking over the shop and Herve overseeing cheese ripening and developing sales in international export.

The UK iteration of Mons Cheesemongers was launched after a meeting at Slow Food's cheese festival in Northern Italy, where Herve Mons and Jon Thrupp began working closely together to bring the family's cheeses across the Channel. Consequently, Mons Cheesemongers opened its first British venture in 2006 at Borough Market.

Focus on raw milk

Now, with a range heavily focused on raw milk cheeses, the family selects traditionally made Continental and British cheeses and ages them in their cellars in London and on the Cote Roannaise. It is their carefully curated maturing room that makes Mons stand out in the world of cheese retail.

Laurence Lindars, store manager, tells *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*, "There aren't many cheese retailers that also work as maturers or affineurs; our shop in East Dulwich is both a climate-controlled maturing space and a regular shop. By having that level of control over the maturation of the cheese we work with we're able to make sure it reaches our customers in just the right condition.

"We're also in regular contact with the producers and cheesemakers. Whilst our customers don't necessarily need to know the name of a particular producer's favourite goat, being able to paint an honest picture of the work and people involved in the journey of cheese from a farm to the customer's table is hugely important to us."

It is this passion for the journey of farm to fork that gets the team going in

> "WE CREATE A WARM AND UNINTIMIDATING SHOPPING EXPERIENCE WHERE CUSTOMERS CAN LEARN ABOUT AND TASTE OUR CHEESE AS WE HELP THEM PINPOINT THE PRODUCTS THAT THEY WANT TO TAKE HOME"



LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP



the morning. As Laurence explains, his modus operandi is to do justice to the Continental and British predominantly raw-milk cheeses they select, mature and sell. "This comes from creating a warm and unintimidating shopping experience where customers can learn about and taste our cheese as we help them pinpoint the products that they want to take home."

An exciting year ahead

As a retailer that relies on importing Continental cheeses, navigating Brexit was particularly difficult for Mons Cheesemongers.

"We've had to remain agile enough to negotiate the slightly tumultuous waters of importing in a post-Brexit landscape. At the turn of the year, we built a new dedicated maturing space in our Bermondsey arches, this gave us the flexibility to up the amount of alpine cheese we store as and when we need to", Laurence explains.

But while it presented challenges, the past year was a successful one for Mons, and the team is determined to continue this into 2023. "We're hugely proud that we have been able to maintain a steady interest in our online shop since Mons UK started out by selling cheese over a single trestle table at Borough Market. It has been really tricky trying to translate the intimacy of shopping in person – nothing beats getting handed a piece of cheese as you enter a shop – but I think we have done a great job.

"Christmas was also an absolute blast this year, each year we have friends, family and old colleagues return to help. It'll never cease to amaze us how great the British appetite for cheese is across the festive period!", Laurence adds.

When it comes to the future, Laurence is simply hoping for more of the same. "Given the challenging economic and political climate at present, we are forever grateful for those that have continued to shop with us. We're aiming to get out and visit producers in France, Switzerland and the UK this year, getting hands-on is always the best way to learn about the cheese and farms we work with."

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



VACHERIN MONT D'OR
Only made seasonally this cheese is powerful, rich and has a piney flavour.
fromageriedumontdor.com



MISTRALOU
A lactic-set, hand-ladled cheese, with a feather-soft texture, wrapped in a chestnut leaf.
mons-cheese.co.uk/products/mistralou



ST JAMES
A washed rind cheese with a mouth-coating creaminess and a meaty, savoury flavour.
stjamescheese.co.uk



PARMIGIANO REGGIANO
Italian hard, granular cheese produced from cows' milk and aged at least 12 months.
parmigianoreggiano.com

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LOCAL HERO

Friday Street Farm Shop

LOCATION: FARNHAM, SUFFOLK **OPENED:** 1970
FOUNDERS: PAULINE AND RODGER BLYTH



FUTURE PLANS

Friday Street Farm has a long to-do list for the future. As Toby explains, "We have many things planned for 2023. Our first plan has already been under way, we have partnered up with [local brewer] Adnams to do a Cheese & Wine Pairing of the month. This goes both ways, as Adnams will push the cheese as well as their wine in their store in Aldeburgh, and in the Farm Shop we will push the wine alongside our cheese."

Friday Street Farm opened in the 1970s starting off with a small barn and quickly developing into the larger farm shop and kitchen it is today. The farm shop is located in Farnham, Suffolk, outside the small town of Saxmundham, towards the popular coastal town of Aldeburgh. Now being run by the founders' son James, with over one hundred years of farming experience the Blyth family have developed Friday Street Farm in a way that means their passion for producing quality local food and their connection with the land can be shared with a far wider community.

An experience like no other

Deli manager Toby Edwards has been with Friday Street since early 2015, starting off as a Saturday boy for the butchery and slowly working his way up. According to him, what makes the deli so special is the newly opened Cheese Room. "For one we are (at this moment in time) the only cheese room in Suffolk. We give the customers an experience like no other.

"I feel and from customer feedback as well, it is a more personal experience shopping in the cheese room. Also, our selection of cheese and being well known for stocking all the local cheeses and even the lesser-known cheeses that you might not be able to find anywhere else."

His small team is certainly dedicated to providing the best possible service, motivated by the opportunity to work for a family-run business in the community and love of fine food. "I feel it's important when choosing a new member of staff to find to someone who is passionate for food and producing a high-quality service to our customers", Toby tells *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*.

"One success of 2022 but also a challenge was building our team up to where it is now. Like most businesses, it is hard to find the right staff or even hold on to them throughout these current times. After interview after interview, we were finding it hard, but in the end, we did find our perfect fits.

"I fully believe our Cheese Room wouldn't be where it is today without my colleagues Phil and Dean. I set up the cheese room and got the 'behind the scenes' things sorted, but the boys have come up with ideas that I missed myself and that has pushed sales and made the customer experience five star in our Cheese Room."

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Wedding bells

Stemming from the success of the new Cheese Room, Friday Street Farm has begun creating wedding cakes made from cheese. A huge trend for weddings at present, this helped to boost sales throughout the turbulent times of 2022.

According to Toby, "One of our biggest successes has been our bespoke cheese wedding cakes. My proudest moment was making our first one in July last year. It was such a success that I even put a replica of the cake on display after the wedding to showcase what we had done. It just snowballed for them onwards.

"By the time winter months rolled in, we had already done six weddings. People have already booked for the 2023 wedding season. I feel it's the experience they get from day one of planning it to the day of the wedding.

"I always encouraged the couples to come and have a testing session with me to find out what suited them the best as it is always hard for people to get across over the phone what they would like. Plus, I have the experience with weddings as my mum is a wedding cake specialist. From this, I know how important the day is to people and wanting to make it as easier as possible for them."

> "MY PROUDEST MOMENT WAS MAKING OUR FIRST BESPOKE CHEESE WEDDING CAKE IN JULY LAST YEAR. IT WAS SUCH A SUCCESS THAT I EVEN PUT A REPLICA OF THE CAKE ON DISPLAY AFTER THE WEDDING TO SHOWCASE WHAT WE HAD DONE"

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



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



SUFFOLK FARMHOUSE CHEESES SUFFOLK GOLD
A creamy semi-hard farmhouse cheese with golden colour.
suffolkcheeses.co.uk



SUFFOLK FARMHOUSE CHEESES SUFFOLK BLUE
A creamy lightly veined blue cheese.
suffolkcheeses.co.uk



GORGONZOLA DOLCE PDO
A soft, buttery paste with blue veining.
en.gorgonzola.com

LE GRUYÈRE SWITZERLAND AOP

LOCAL HERO

Norfolk Deli

LOCATION: HUNSTANTON, NORFOLK
OPENED: 2014 **OWNERS:** MARK AND ROSIE KACARY



Owners Mark and Rosie opened their deli in January 2014, after having what could be described as wide-ranging careers, including acting, midwifery, managing a food hall and 30+ years in IT sales and marketing.

As Mark explains, "It's not necessarily what people think leads to owning a deli, but in one way or another, we have both been closely associated with food. For example, my father gave me part-time work at The Curzon House Club and then Aspinall's in London where I ended up as a wine waiter and cocktail barman. In-between acting jobs Rosie ran a sandwich round in London and was a private chef for a marketing company, and between us we provided catering for weddings, corporate parties etc."

Championing local

Situated in the small Victorian seaside town of Hunstanton, Norfolk Deli specialises in local produce. "Our focus is on Norfolk products which naturally includes Norfolk cheeses", Mark says. "We of course offer a lot more than just Norfolk cheese and we sell a lot more than just cheese. I like to say that as a business we are more a deli than we are a cheesemonger, but on the flipside, we are much more of a cheesemonger than a deli. We bridge that void which sometimes exists between one and the other. Not many cheesemongers, for example, have an alcohol license, and not many delis typically stock approximately 100 different cheeses at any one time either.

"When customers visit our shop, not only can they source some amazing cheeses, but they can also add into their shopping basket, a local wine, or local beers, locally made chutneys, bread, and crackers. But without a doubt, in comparison to so many cheese retailers in the country, our stock of Norfolk cheeses from people like Catherine Temple of Mrs Temple's cheeses, Arthur Betts from Ferndale Dairies or Jonathan and Dulcie Crickmore at Fen Farm shows our passion for Norfolk produce.

It is this passion for championing local produce ties into their hard work and determination to succeed. As Mark tells *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*, "We always get up with a desire to improve on the previous day. There is a saying "Those that want to succeed in business don't always achieve it, whereas those who have to succeed do". This of course is a statement which can be disproven many times over, but it is true that we are driven to succeed because we must. When we moved to West Norfolk, we had sold everything and had nothing

BOOSTING FOOTFALL

"We are looking at different ways to market the business, ways in which to tempt the general public to visit our shop and that is a challenge that is likely to continue over the next 12 months or more", Mark adds. "Therefore, I am working with other retail businesses to drive business opportunities into the town of Hunstanton. It's the only way I see that as small businesses we can do anything to change things around."

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standing between us and the proverbial poor house other than our business.

"On a slightly more jovial note, our dogs make sure that we're up and ready to go. No matter what time of year it is one of us (me) is up and walking the dogs on the beach at 5am each morning, light or dark, rain or shine. It's a brilliant time of day to think about what we've done, and I often come back with an idea (which my wife dreads). We share a small town with three major supermarket chains, so we have to keep coming up with ideas which we can implement before the big boys catch on."

Community spirit

With high streets still in peril after the Covid-19, local businesses have a tough task of adapting to the new normal. Mark is one independent business owner taking action to boost footfall and restore his town centre.

Local authorities are working with the community to help make the British high street a vibrant cacophony of small businesses. He explains, "In the latter half of 2022 we were part of a newly formed group called the Hunstanton Advisory Group, the role of the group is to look at how and where projects can be implemented to improve the town, its image and its attractiveness to help bring in more people. I'm always awash with ideas and this gives me the perfect platform to help us overcome the challenges of 2022/23 by working on ideas to increase footfall in the town in general."

> "OUR STOCK OF NORFOLK CHEESES FROM PEOPLE LIKE CATHERINE TEMPLE OF MRS TEMPLE'S CHEESES, ARTHUR BETTS FROM FERNDALE DAIRIES OR JONATHAN AND DULCIE CRICKMORE AT FEN FARM SHOWS OUR PASSION FOR NORFOLK PRODUCE"

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



MRS TEMPLE'S BINHAM BLUE
Full-flavoured and tangy with a soft and rich paste.
mrstempleschees e.co.uk



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



FERNDALE FARM NORFOLK DAPPLE
Firm texture with delicate flavour notes.
ferndalefarmnorfolk cheeses.co.uk



MRS TEMPLE'S WELLS ALPINE
A flavoursome and nutty cheese with subtle sweetness.
mrstempleschees e.co.uk



MONTAGNOLO AFFINE
Flavour and richness of a triple-creme Brie, with a sharpness from blue veins.
champignon.de

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THE EDUCATOR

The Cheese Locker

LOCATION: ABBOTS BROMLEY, STAFFORDSHIRE
OPENED: 2021 **FOUNDER:** ALEX HUNT



PLANS FOR 2023

Gaining recognition for the company and as a business owner is top of Alex's to do list for the coming period. "I am planning to open a cheese club locally as well as to push more business online so to gain a greater reach of customer from across the country," he says. "I also hope to gain more visibility as to enable me to fundraise for the National Autistic Society as I am also autistic."

For fine food businesses across the UK – from retailers to producers, distributors and everything in between – customer service is king. It's a well-known and proven philosophy that the greater the level of customer service you provide, the higher the rate of return custom and satisfied customers. For Alex Hunt, owner of Staffordshire's The Cheese Locker, this well-worn adage has proven true.

In 2021, during his degree, Alex decided to open The Cheese Locker as an "exciting venture" to further his own skills. As the founder and sole employee of the business, he is supported by his family in his mission to educate his local community about the very best cheeses from nearby cheesemakers and beyond.

"I believe my customer service is what helps me stand out as I provide an informative service about the cheese I supply," Alex begins. Vitally, he recognises that this is not a process that can be rushed. "I am willing to put the time in to accommodate the needs of my customers," he explains, "and to serve the community and provide the products which they struggle to find anywhere else." Providing this service – recognised by his loyal customer base as being of an impressively high level – has no doubt been a challenge for Alex, especially considering the fact that he was both successfully running the business and completing his degree (which he finished in summer 2022) for the first 10 months since its conception.

> "COMING TO TERMS AND LEARNING HOW TO BUILD THE BUSINESS ITSELF WAS QUITE THE HUMBLING EXPERIENCE WHICH I HAVE LEARNED MUCH FROM"

In classic *Inspirational Cheese Retailers* style – a facet to the business which has earned him nominations to be in this edition of the publication – he is passionate about introducing his customer base to a wide range of

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BEST-SELLING CHEESES



COLSTON BASSETT STILTON
A classic, award-winning Stilton. A must have for any Christmas cheeseboard.
colstonbassettdairy.co.uk

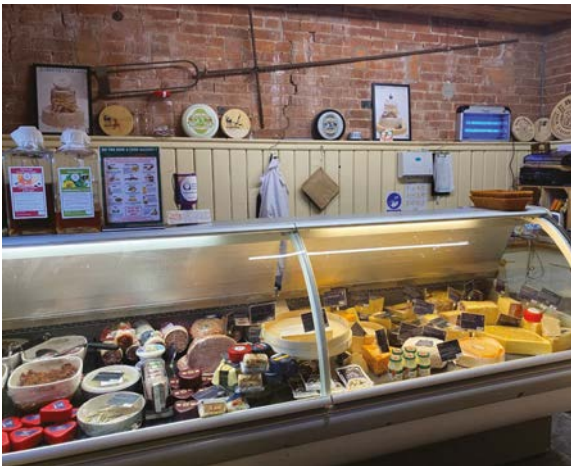


MAYFIELD SWISS
An Emmental-style cheese that is sweet, nutty and creamy.
alsopandwalker.co.uk

ROUZAIRE BRIE DE MEAUX
A rich, soft and creamy Brie with mushroom notes.
fromagerierouzaire.com

cheeses, and in doing so creating an "exciting and adventurous atmosphere."

"Coming to terms and learning how to build the business itself was quite the humbling experience which I have learned much from," Alex says. Of course, as every small business owner knows, hitches are an unavoidable part of running a business. "One of The Cheese Locker's greatest challenges was the fridge breaking in the summer – I lost over £2,000 of stock which was sadly not covered by insurance." Alex's enduring belief in the work he was doing led him to keep calm and carry on – "all I could do to overcome this challenge was the persevere and strive on," he says.



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PAIRING MASTER

Knowles Green

LOCATION: BOLLINGTON, CHESHIRE **OPENED**: 2021
FOUNDERS: MARK DENT AND DAGMARA SZTOMPKA

Many dream of holding a place in the fine food retail industry – who wouldn't love to share their passion for cheese with like-minded foodies? – yet for a large proportion, this dream remains unrealised. Thankfully for Bollington locals Dagmara Sztompka and Mark Dent, they turned a long-held dream of working in the cheese and wine business into a reality in 2021 in the shape of Knowles Green Creative Tasting. "A unique twist on the corner store, Knowles Green is a shop brimming with fresh cheese, provisions, and a robust selection of wines from small producers offered by the glass to enjoy after work or on a Saturday afternoon while you shop," explains Mark.

As cheese lovers themselves, the pair are uncompromising when it comes to the items they sell. The key component to any stocking decision? "Quality," says Mark, "with a completely unbiased attitude to the cheeses we stock." Mark and Dagmara take their position as educators seriously, being sure not to rush their clientele when they're pondering a purchase. "We encourage our customers to try before they buy, guiding them through a range of British regional classics and Continental essentials.





Since it opened in 2021, the business has quickly become recognised as a neighbourhood cheese and wine specialist where discerning customers can stop by for a cheeseboard and glass of wine – a boon for local customers and cheese-loving visitors, as well as for the team: "it's total enjoyment to be able to work in an environment that you really love – it's not really work," explains Mark.

Despite the business's young age, in 2022 it celebrated a major success, when Dagmara was invited to represent Knowles Green as a judge at the

LE GRUYÈRE SWITZERLAND AOP



International Cheese Awards – the largest (over 5,000 cheeses from all over the world are judged every year) and oldest (in 2022 it celebrated its 127th year) cheese competition in the world.

Evidence of the business's merit keep coming, with 2022's festive season proving fruitful – "last Christmas was a real turning point for Knowles Green and has eased us into 2023 with expanding confidence," says Mark – and 2023 thus far also reaping fruit. "We've now fully launched our new website, and are running the second annual Bollington Wine Fair on 13th May at Bollington Arts Centre. We're aiming to sell 200 tickets, similar to last year's event." More is on the horizon; "We are planning to finish the last quarter of the year with a similarly large event not yet announced but scheduled for Saturday 9th September – watch this space!"



CHALLENGES

"One of the biggest challenges for Knowles Green is to keep on the pulse with the current trends," explains Mark. "We are constantly reviewing our range and sourcing new products to stay fresh and interesting. Keeping our customers interests heightened is key to our development."

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THE CONNECTOR

The Bristol Cheesemonger

LOCATION: BRISTOL **OPENED:** 2013
FOUNDER: ROSIE MORGAN

With dreams of cheesemaking and experience doing just that at Bath Soft Cheese Co., it was only natural that when presented with the opportunity to take on the thriving The Bristol Cheesemonger, current owners Oli Smith and his wife Jenny Howell jumped at the opportunity.

The business has always enjoyed close relationships with its suppliers. "Since The Bristol Cheesemonger was founded" – in 2013 by Rosie Morgan, who sold it to Oli and Jenny in late 2021 – "we've been a local specialist with close connections to our producers," begins Oli. Fortuitously, the city was only too happy to welcome the cheesemonger into the fold. "Bristol is a city that prides itself on supporting its small independents and we carry this idea right through the business; virtually every penny spent in our shop either stays in Bristol or goes directly to small rural businesses."



Building connections

This local focus extends to the cheese counter itself, too. "Apart from occasional guest cheeses, we now buy 100% directly from the producer and are batch selecting an increasing number of products." Connection is vital, from cheesemaker to cheeseboard. "We want our customers to get the best tasting cheese and also feel a sense of connection to the producers. Our staff members know many of our cheesemakers personally, we take them on dairy visits and make days so that they understand the processes involved.

"We love being the link between the often very small producers we work with and our customers," continues Oli. "It's also fantastic working with all the local chefs who love working with British cheese and also appreciate all the little variations and seasonal changes that make small production and farmhouse cheese so special."

The power of passion

Sharing this passion with customers is of vital importance to the team at The Bristol Cheesemongers. "You could walk into the shop at any time and speak to a staff member about what is tasting good, and they will not only share their passion, they will talk about visiting the farm and a lot of background knowledge of the products. We get to visit the farms to taste through and collect what we



2022 WINS

"2022 went by in a bit of a blur!" Oli says. "We changed things up in the product line a fair bit and I think that has gone down well. Essentially, we moved the focus if the shop onto smaller producers and, by Autumn, we'd managed to go directly to every single producer which felt more right for us. We are also quite proud of the fact that we are now a Real Living Wage employer."

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> THE ECONOMIC INSTABILITY HAS PRESENTED CHALLENGES, BUT WE'VE TRIED TO STAY FOCUSED ON WHAT WE DO BEST, NOT WATER DOWN OUR ETHOS AND PLAY TO OUR STRENGTHS



think our customers will like (and we get to chat to some of the nicest people we have ever worked with). This means that we can share the stories of these dedicated producers with our customers and champion amazing tasting, well-made produce."

While passion is a powerful tool for any business to have in its arsenal, it cannot weather all storms alone. "The economic instability has presented challenges," explains Oli, "but we've tried to stay focused on what we do best, not water down our ethos and play to our strengths." This approach is reaping rewards, and the pair has learned that variety is the spice of life. "The wholesale side of the business has actually grown significantly – everyone from cheesemongers to restaurants is having to differentiate themselves at the moment and it's no longer enough to by everything from a single well-known supplier. We tell our deli and cheeseshop wholesale customers that we don't want them to use us for everything, the last thing we want is for there to be other shops carrying only our range – it's boring!"

A bright horizon

The first few months of 2023 have already proven fruitful. "So far in 2023 we've already launched our Fresh Cheesemaking Course in partnership with Coexist Community Kitchen – a wonderful local non-profit. At the beginning of April we're running The Bristol Cider and Cheese Festival in collaboration with The Cider Box. The festival is going to be four times bigger than it was last year and we've got a fantastic line up of cheesemakers coming to do talks and tastings."

Connecting with and visiting new producers is top of mind for the team, with a couple of new cheeses from tiny producers on the horizon to be excited about – as well as "a big project that I can't really say anything about at the moment!" hints Oli.

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SOUTH WEST

CUSTOMER CARE

"We and the team love the shop being busy and helping people with suggestions for cheeses they may not have tried before, and cooking advice. We have boards out every day with tasters to tempt them and always offer tastings of anything in the counter to help them with their choice. Customer care and service are vital to the ethos of our shop," says Robin.

CUSTOMER CARE

Ashburton Delicatessen

LOCATION: ASHBURTON, DARTMOOR
OPENED: 2012 **FOUNDER:** ROBIN HUDSON

Located in the bustling town of Ashburton on the edge of beautiful Dartmoor, Ashburton Deli is owned and run by trained chef Robin Hudson with help from his mother Sue and an enthusiastic and knowledgeable team.

The deli carries a large selection of cheeses – currently 55 but more in the summer months and at Christmas. Owner Robin tells *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*, "We like to showcase as many local and regional cheeses as we can, as well as an excellent choice of Continental cheeses – the very best quality of the ones we choose to sell."

A helpful team

The team prides itself on being able to help customers select the best cheese for their needs. "We carefully source and taste them all and have excellent help and advice from the six cheese suppliers we use. Our customers travel a long way to be able to choose the very best cheeses for their party cheeseboards, wedding cheese towers and even just a small selection of the best to enjoy at home for themselves", Robin explains.

Of course, a big part of this is sampling and having the knowledge to offer pairing advice. "We have a

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wonderful chef Andy who heads up the in-house cooking, aided by his wife Emma, an experienced patisserie chef, plus all the rest of the team who help customers in the shop and with the cooking if required.

Success during a tumultuous year

Every independent retailer has found the past 12 months difficult to navigate, with increased costs across the board and a drop in consumer confidence.

"Our big challenges last year were mainly keeping good stocks of some items that were hit by problems with supply chains throughout Europe and coping with how to absorb the price increases," explains Robin. "However, the biggest challenge of all we faced this past year was the huge increase in the cost of electricity – from £500 per month to £1700! It is impossible to economise when you must keep fridges and freezers going in a food shop and it was a big blow for the shop income."

Despite these challenges, Robin and his team have kept a positive attitude, and 2022 has been another very busy and successful year. "We are delighted to find that many of the new customers we acquired during the lockdowns have kept returning and we are thrilled by their loyalty. Once again, we won a very prestigious Gold from Taste of the West in the Best Retailer category, which is always a thrill as the award covers such a large area.

> "WE AND THE TEAM LOVE THE SHOP BEING BUSY AND HELPING PEOPLE WITH SUGGESTIONS FOR CHEESES THEY MAY NOT HAVE TRIED BEFORE"

"We also purchased a small barn directly behind the shop which we have converted into our storeroom, which has made a huge difference to our efficiency as we were previously renting a storeroom up the road. This was also one of our greatest challenges, but since we got through it, we will call it a success!"



BEST-SELLING CHEESES



TICKLEMORE GOAT
This stark white cheese is crumbly and delicate with subtle herbaceous hints, made from Devon goats' milk.
sharphamcheese.co.uk



KALTBACH CREAMY
Enhanced with an extra portion of the finest Swiss cream, this cheese offers a marvelous melt-in-the- mouth texture.
emmi-kaltbach.com



DELICE DE BOURGOGNE
A soft-ripened triple cream French cow's milk cheese from the Burgundy region of France, first created in 1975 by Jean Lincet at Fromagerie Lincet.
fromagerie-lincet.net/en/



FOSSEWAY FLEECE
This sheep's cheese made in Somerset is a wonderfully smooth and silky experience with a fresh and clean taste that ends in a mellow afterglow.
somersetcheese.co.uk

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FEEL-GOOD FOOD

Love Cheese

LOCATION: YORK **OPENED:** 2012
OWNER: JORDAN THOMSON

THE LOVE CHEESE MISSION

"Our M.O. is to keep things light hearted and make sure that the customers (and staff) have a good time," says Jordan. "It is an industry that can seem quite exclusive, there are so many people that just see artisan cheese and a treat at Christmas. We try to make it accessible (and also enjoyable) for everyone."

A cheesemonger alongside a cheese and wine bar must be nigh on top of the list for any cheese lovers asked what businesses they'd love to frequent in their town – and so the foodies of York must have cheered when, 10 years ago, Love Cheese was launched on Gillygate, York. After two years, the business was bought by Harry and Phoebe Baines, who last year sold it to Jordan Thomson, a manager who they'd employed in 2020.

Today, Love Cheese is a veritable empire in the area, boasting a cheesemonger, cheese and wine bar (charmingly named the Speakcheesey), and the Secret Garden. The business having three outlets was a smart move. "We offer a larger range than most other cheesemongers our size, this is due to having multiple outlets for the cheese (the shop, the website, the Speakcheesey, virtual events etc) so we can get through the produce whilst it is fresh and not worry too much about being over stocked," explains Jordan. Plus, the experience between all three outlets has proven pretty seamless – a boon for Jordan and customers alike. "Having all of the outlets including the Speakcheesey and Secret Garden mean that customers can sit in, have a cheeseboard and a glass of wine. Then when it is time to leave, they are essentially exiting through the gift shop where they take lots more cheese home too. Most importantly, we are all a friendly bunch who are just happy to have a chat and a good time."

> "MOST IMPORTANTLY, WE ARE ALL A FRIENDLY BUNCH WHO ARE JUST HAPPY TO HAVE A CHAT AND A GOOD TIME"

A destination for cheese lovers

This focus on customer experience has reaped rewards. "We have quickly climbed TripAdvisor and Google rankings as both a cheesemonger and a cheese and wine bar; we're 26th out of all places to eat in York at the time of writing, and it's getting better by the day!" says Jordan, and the business's online presence doesn't end there, with a successful webstore and regular schedule of virtual events. Indeed, the popularity of Love Cheese's online events are one of Jordan's proudest achievements from the past year. "We are still regularly sending out 100+ couple's boxes for these events. So that is 200 people talking and eating our cheese and wine all across the UK." The business is enjoying more analogue success too. "We're so proud of how many times we've been put forward for food and travel magazines – we massively appreciate it, and are grateful to the people who let us know we have been featured as often it is a surprise!"



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A bright future

Despite Love Cheese's speedy success, there are constant challenges just around the corner. One shared by all is rising prices – "we have found ways to add value so the customer doesn't feel short changed" – with another big one being Christmas. "We worked insanely long days for about two weeks to make sure we could get all of the orders out on time," says Jordan. "With the mail strikes and bad weather there were some accidents but we were able to get most of them rectified in time for Christmas."

Price rises and festive seasons notwithstanding, 2023 is looking bright at Love Cheese. "We are already signed up for lots of taste trails where the public can come visit the shop and sample lots of exciting produce. I am most looking forward to the cheese and chocolate tasting we will hopefully be doing as part of the York Chocolate festival," says Jordan. "We also have a pretty full calendar for new virtual cheese tastings, showcasing that artisan cheese can be delicious, entertaining and throw in some light-hearted jokes along the way." The best highlight of all for Jordan? "I'm very excited that we are doing a May the 4th Star Wars themed tasting... Return of the Cheddi!"

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



FROMAGERIE LINCET DELICE DE BOURGOGNE
Creamy, salty and delicious. I don't think I have met a person yet who doesn't like it.
fromagerie-lincet.net



CURLEW DAIRY OLD ROAN
A great Wensleydale, less crumbly and slightly buttery. A firm favourite for the customers.
curlewdairy.co.uk



DODDINGTON DAIRY DODDINGTON
We always ask for the oldest ones they have available - as they have the best crunch, similar to Parmesan.
doddingtondairy.co.uk



LEEDS BLUE
A ewes milk Gorgonzola-style cheese. Lovely big pockets of rich salty blue dispersed in a creamy cheese.
olianas.co.uk

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MAKER SUPPORT

Cartmel Cheeses

LOCATION: CARTMEL, LAKE DISTRICT
OPENED: 2011 **FOUNDERS:** IAN ROBINSON AND MARTIN GOTT

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



HOLKER FARM DAIRY ST JAMES
A seasonal washed rind, ewes milk cheese made by Nicola Robinson and Martin Gott.
stjamescheese.co.uk



MRS KIRKHAMS LANCASHIRE
Mild and creamy, and made by Graham Kirkham at Goosnargh near Preston.
mrskirkhamscheese.co.uk



THORNBY MOOR DAIRY BLUE WHINNOW
A Cumbrian-based blue cheese made by Carolyn in Thursby.
thornbymoordairy.co.uk

As you'd imagine from a business originally co-founded by a cheesemaker – Martin Gott of St James Cheese – the focus at Cartmel Cheeses is well and truly on selling cheese at its very best. The shop is now run by Ian and Steph Robinson, father and sister of Nicola Robinson, who works with Martin on the farm and cheesemaking side of the business.

"We pride ourselves on sourcing what we believe to be the best farmhouse cheeses," says Steph. "We deal directly with each cheesemaker and look after each cheese to ensure we show off the hard work and love that goes into making each cheese. All our cheeses are handmade, and the milk mainly comes from the farmers' own herd or flock. Each cheese can vary throughout the year due to what the animals are grazing on, or the time of the year."

Keeping customers happy and well fed with the best cheeses in their prime is of paramount importance to the team. "We like to change some of the cheeses on the counter from time to time, to make sure all our customers always have something new and interesting to try." In a popular evolution, the range is becoming increasingly peppered with local produce. "We are finding more and more that our customers are wanting locally sourced produce, so that is what we will continue to try and source," says Steph.

Of course, building a team of the right people who will not only work as ambassadors for the cheeses they sell but who are also delighted to be given the opportunity to explore the world of cheese is a must. "We find the best training comes from tasting the cheese, and learning the special characters/flavours each cheese has," says Steph. "We are a quite small team. The shop is run by my father and I. We also have two brilliant members of staff, Peter and Becky. Peter has been with us for over 10 years and Becky coming up three years. We all love the job we do. Who wouldn't enjoy eating cheese every day!"



A bright future

A myriad of challenges were thrown at the business in 2022 – "our greatest achievement of the year has been to be still running as a business" – but thanks to an established online presence the business stayed afloat. "During Covid we were completely closed," explains Steph. "All staff came in once a week and shipped out

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mail order. We were very lucky that two years prior we had established our website. If it hadn't been for the website we would most likely not have been still going." The team's efforts reaped rewards for producers, too: "We managed to keep selling the stock we had in the shop and also helped the cheesemakers sell the stock they had as well."

Despite the gloomy outlook for 2022, the next 12 months are looking to be "exciting and fun," says Steph. "We hope to introduce more British cheeses to our range, also a few more Cumbrian cheeses. We have quite a few Cumbrian cheeses but we know a few more are in the process of being made." It's not only cheese that visitors to the shop can indulge in. "We also plan to add more British/local stock to our bakery side. We are not just a cheese shop, we also sell lots of local breads, pies, pastries, our own range of chutneys, crackers... All the yummy things to go alongside your cheeses."

> "WE PRIDE OURSELVES ON SOURCING WHAT WE BELIEVE TO BE THE BEST FARMHOUSE CHEESES. WE DEAL DIRECTLY WITH EACH CHEESEMAKER AND LOOK AFTER EACH CHEESE TO ENSURE WE SHOW OFF THE HARD WORK AND LOVE THAT GOES INTO MAKING EACH CHEESE"

LOCAL PARTNERS

Smart investments are proving to be business boosters as time goes on: "We have this year invested in a new electronic canopy to cover the entire yard seating area, with lights and heaters, so people can enjoy their cheeseboards in the yard all year around," says Steph. Cartmel Cheeses also serves stone-baked pizza between April and October on Friday and Saturday evenings. Complementary partners are very close to the business – "we have the Unsworths yard brewery next door who can serve you with your ales and cider, and Cartmel Drinkshop on the other side serving wines and cocktails. Both have soft drinks too. We work very closely as businesses and it works for us all."

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CUSTOMER CHAMPION

The CheeseWorks

LOCATION: CHELTENHAM, GLOUCESTERSHIRE
SOLD: 2006 **OWNER:** BEN AXFORD

BEST SELLING CHEESES



COLSTON BASSETT STILTON
Gentle, buttery and balanced.
colstonbassettdairy.co.uk



MOUNTAIN GORGONZOLA
Dense and milky with a bite from blue veins.
en.gorgonzola.com



SCHLOSSBERGER
A full-flavoured and nutty Swiss cheese.
jumilondon.com



CROOME CUISINE WORCESTERSHIRE HOP
A tangy Cheddar rolled in hops.
croomecuisine.com

Something of an institution, The CheeseWorks has been a cheese shop since 1994. Originally it was a branch of The Fine Cheese Company, but in 2006 it changed owners and was made independent. The shop is positioned on the charming Regent Street in Cheltenham, next door to the popular Everyman Theatre and just a few meters from the promenade. This vibrant street is full of independent retailers and restaurants, making it a desirable location for conscious consumers.

A passionate experience

Having been in business for almost 30 years, The CheeseWorks is certainly not devoid of passion or experience. In fact, according to general manager Vaik Lucas, "I would say that what makes us stand out as cheese retailers is the experience and the journey that we are able to offer to every customer that passes through our door. The staff are passionate about what they sell, and you can't expect them to stay quiet about the cheese you're looking for – even if you don't ask!

"Within seconds, they can make up the perfect cheeseboard to suit your every need. Our clientele (which includes many regular customers) have praised the shop for its friendly atmosphere and knowledgeable staff. Buying cheese from us is not just a transaction, but an experience which benefits both customers and staff."

Finding motivated and passionate staff is something of a dilemma for independent cheese retailers, but at The CheeseWorks, the team is raring to go each day. "What gets the team up in the morning (apart from their interest and passion for cheese) is that they know they are coming up to the shop to spend quality time with their friends. We often think of ourselves as a family", Vaik explains.

"We can rely on each other to always have a smile, even in incredibly busy times, and know that we'd look after each other both inside and outside of the shop. In my opinion, this warm, close-knit environment is the best way for us to grow more interest in what we do and sell. We learn so much from one another each day."



A challenging year

Of course, 2022 presented significant obstacles for cheese retailers of all sizes and specialities. As Vaik explains, "The constant price increases were challenging for us, as well as for the cheesemakers,

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> BUYING CHEESE FROM US IS NOT JUST A TRANSACTION, BUT AN EXPERIENCE WHICH BENEFITS BOTH CUSTOMERS AND STAFF

suppliers, and the public. We tried our best to absorb most of the increase but eventually, it had to affect our customers. We have always been transparent, honest, and clear about the situation and it has been very warmly received by our understanding customers.

"The key to overcoming this has been communication, both with suppliers and the public. This year, we have spent a lot of time talking to people to find the best way to maintain a sustainable business. Everybody has been very understanding and open to making compromises – us included."

The previous year was also a successful one for The CheeseWorks, as the team was able to focus on hosting experiences for their customers and boosting loyalty. "We have been hosting cheese and wine/port/cider tasting evenings for years now, but we've always been limited on how many people we could host. Sometimes we even had to rent a venue just for the occasion.

"Over Christmas, we transform the room into our packing unit where we send out internet orders to be delivered all over the UK. We managed to put together an amazing team for Christmas and therefore offer the best experience for our customers and staff! We also had a few successful collaborations doing tastings and cheese pairings with local wine merchants. 2022 was a successful year despite facing many obstacles."

Where the future is concerned, The CheeseWorks is determined to keep calm and carry on. "We have many more tasting events on the horizon, held in and outside the shop. We have also very recently updated our website and will keep working on it to make it as exciting as possible for our users", Vaik told *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*.

"Interest in fine food is growing fast in the country and therefore in our business, so we are thinking of trying to offer the CheeseWorks experience outside of Cheltenham... watch this space!"

TASTING EVENTS

"In 2022, we have been lucky enough to rent the floor above the shop to use as our very own Tasting Room," says Vaik. "The tasting evenings in there have been amazing and have allowed us to spend some quality time with our customers who are always eager to come back for more."

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COMMUNITY CRUSADER

The Mousetrap Cheese Shop

LOCATION: LUDLOW, HEREFORD AND LEOMINSTER
OPENED: 1998 **FOUNDERS:** MARK AND KAREN HINDLE

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



CROOME CUISINE WORCESTER HOP
A tangy Cheddar covered in toasted hops.
croomecuisine.com



NEAL'S YARD CREAMERY FINN
A soft cheese with double cream and milk.
nealsyarddairy.co.uk



ISLE OF MULL
A slightly fruity Cheddar-style cheese with a great depth of flavour.
sgriobruadh.co.uk



CAWS CENARTH PERL LAS
Strong but delicate with lovely lingering blue overtones.
cawscenarth.co.uk

The Mousetrap Cheese Shop was opened 35 years ago by the Hindle family who run the local Monkland Cheese Dairy. Partners Claire and Matt Knowles bought the three shops in Leominster, Ludlow and Hereford from the Hindles 10 years ago.

Speaking to *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*, Claire says, "We had decided to buy a business and spent eight months living with Matt's mum after we'd sold our house looking at businesses. We went looking at all sorts of delis and finally came to see the Mousetrap, although it was out of our price range so we dismissed it for a while.

"We were so enchanted with Herefordshire, we thought it would be a wonderful place to raise our little family so we begged and borrowed any bit of money that we could from family and the bank to secure the business. The fact that there were three shops gave us scope to work together but not need to be on top of each other all the time, it was also really important to us to be able to organise ourselves so we could collect the kids from school and have a good quality of family life with them so the three shops with their experienced staff gave us that opportunity.

"We also saw that there was lots of scope to expand the business online and we've developed the website and online sales from nothing to now be taking nearly as much as we do in our busiest shops."

Making community connections

Being located in Herefordshire, the Mousetrap is well-placed to offer a wide selection of cheeses from around the UK and beyond. As Claire explains, "I think the huge variety of cheese we sell is probably the main comment we get. We sell a massive variety online and that's only a part of the range in the shops, well over 100 types of cheese at any one time.

"We pride ourselves on how we take care of the cheese from the sourcing, maturing and care in the counter, all the way to how we post it in insulated boxes with ice packs so that it travels safely for our online sales. Our shop customers love being able to have a sample of course, and it's a great way of introducing new cheeses to people without them having to risk buying something they don't like.

"We have a great reputation for quality and as we're based in Herefordshire with comparatively low overheads, our online prices are much less than a lot of our competitors',

> "WE'RE BLESSED WITH A LOVELY GROUP OF STAFF WHO HAVE SUCH GREAT RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUR REGULARS AND A LOVELY WAY WITH VISITORS, IT'S JUST SUCH A FANTASTIC ENVIRONMENT TO BE IN, AND EVERYONE IS HAPPY TO COME INTO THE CHEESE SHOP!"

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so altogether it's a great base to successfully run our business."

Claire's stores are certainly fixtures of the community, and it is interactions with her customers that really boost her serotonin. "We're so lucky with our customers, it's just such a nice place to work", she tells *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*. "We're blessed with a lovely group of staff who have such great relationships with our regulars and a lovely way with visitors, it's just such a fantastic environment to be in, and everyone is happy to come into the cheese shop!

"We love sharing our joy of cheese, it's great to do cheese tastings for wedding cakes and it's so rewarding giving someone a taste of something new that they then love. Making sure people go away with something they know they're going to really enjoy is very satisfying.

She has also seen increased footfall recently, with her bricks and mortar stores busier than ever. "I think there's been a great resurgence in people committing to shopping locally since



lockdown and again, word of mouth has helped that. We're so lucky to be so well supported locally; Ludlow was always our best-performing shop, boosted by the amount of 'foodie' tourists we get to the town who like good cheese, but Hereford is so close to taking over that mantle, purely because of our lovely locals", she adds.

CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION

The amount of wedding cakes we've sold has been phenomenal," Claire exclaims, "I think we're getting a lot of word-of-mouth sales from the huge number of happy customers we've had. As we put our cakes together with taste in mind, but also very much with a mind to budget and always getting the "best quality in flavour and variation within a great price point, they're so popular.

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FED BY INSPIRATION

"A combination of our local communities and our network of producers gets us up in the morning," says Laura. "We are blessed with two incredibly supportive communities around our Comber and Ormeau Road branches – from customers who pop into the store every day for a well-deserved cup of Causeway Coffee, to those who pick our brains for their weekend cheese board, or thought-out gifts for special occasion. Our network of producers inspires us all daily, and is why we attract such passionate and hard-working foodies to the team. Being able to meet the producers allows us a little peek into their lives and their stories. It's hard not to feel invested in a product and a person once you've met them and have learnt about their journey!"

IRISH CHAMPION

Indie Füde

LOCATION: BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND
OPENED: 2014 **FOUNDER:** JOHNNY MCDOWELL

When it comes to championing the very best Irish food and drink – including cheese – it doesn't get much more passionate than the team behind Indie Füde. "The business is all about being independent and supporting small, indigenous food producers from the island of Ireland, not least the wonderfully talented cheesemakers we have," begins Laura Bradley, director.

Despite its humble beginnings in a County Down attic in 2014, with an ambient focus and dreams of cheese and charcuterie-selling, the business grew to incorporate a market stall at which founder Johnny McDowell was able to promote the business and its delicious wares. In May 2016 Laura joined the business, and since then its growth has become renowned across Northern Ireland. "In 2017 the decision was made to find a new home on the main street in Comber, and in June 2018 we moved into our current HQ – fitted out with a custom-built cheese fridge that was our pride and joy!" says Laura. "Having a significantly bigger store with a wonderful high street frontage was an important step for us, and allowed us to shout louder about everything we had to offer. We were well supported both by locals and destination visitors looking for the best of local produce."

For the love of cheese

A cheese-focused venture soon followed. "In 2020 we opened our second venture – The Cheese Edition – specifically focused on what we believe to be an unrivalled selection of cheese being made on the island of Ireland. The Ormeau Road is a real hive of independent retailers – and they are thriving! We've had great support from the neighbouring retailers. It's a wonderful community we are delighted to be part of."

In a pretty unique move for a cheesemonger, Johnny partnered up with Davide Tani of VeloCheese in 2022 – making Italian-style cheese in a 'cheese lab' located in a living museum in East Belfast, which allows for tasting,

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> OUR NETWORK OF PRODUCERS INSPIRES US ALL DAILY, AND IS WHY WE ATTRACT SUCH PASSIONATE AND HARD-WORKING FOODIES TO THE TEAM

events and a bit of theatre to play a role in the production process. "We were welcomed into some of the best pizzerias on the island from an early stage," explains Laura. "We're still in our infancy and developing every day – but received a silver award at the World Cheese Awards for our Stracciatella which we were delighted with!" The business has also partnered with fellow NI-producer Burren Balsamics to produce a range of largely cheese accompaniment-based products, with two items in the range winning gold at the Blas nah Eireann awards in 2022.

No cutting corners

Investing in doing things right is at the core of Indie Füde's success story. "The team at Indie Füde is incredibly important to us – and we train our staff in house and via the Academy of Cheese. Knowledge is power! And it allows them to communicate confidently with customers." Members of the Indie Füde team, through careful nurturing relationships with Irish cheesemakers and on-site visits, are often able to try new cheeses under development; a sure-fire perk for cheese lovers. This passion for the domestic cheese market shines through. "Our individualism where it comes to our selection of cheese is certainly a talking point. Every week we are asked for a specific cheese – and we (almost) always talk them round to a fabulous Irish equivalent. Concentrating on cheese from the island of Ireland gives us the ability to maintain a high level of understanding of each and every one."

That's not to say that business has always been smooth sailing, especially in the current tempestuous waters. "Continuing to run a business with our unique values and focus has been a challenge – particularly with price increases across the board," says Laura. "We pride ourselves in being as sustainable as possible in all our business choices and as the cost-of-living crisis continues to pinch we can sometimes find ourselves questioning some of these fundamental values." Despite this, the team's investment in sustainable options is never in question: "they define us as a company and feel right."



BEST-SELLING CHEESES



MIKE'S FANCY CHEESE YOUNG BUCK
An incredible raw milk blue cheese – crumbly and creamy, picante and tropical.
mfcheese.com



VELOCHEESE X INDIE FUDE MOZZARELLA
An Italian-style cheese made in the heart of Belfast.
velocheese.co.uk



COOLATTIN CHEDDAR COOLATTIN FARMHOUSE
A powerful and punchy two-year-old Cheddar, wonderfully balanced with bright acidity and fruit.
coolattincheddar.ie



TEMPLEGALL HEGARTY'S CHEESE
The Supreme Champion of the Irish Cheese Awards. Savoury and nutty with a pleasing tang.
hegartycheese.ie

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FAMILY FEEL

The Cheesery



LOCATION: DUNDEE AND BROUGHTY FERRY
OPENED: 2008 **FOUNDER:** DOROTHY HEGARTY

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



SNOWDONIA BLACK BOMBER
An extra mature Welsh cheese with a creamy texture and full flavour.
snowdoniacheese.co.uk



ISLE OF KINTYRE OLD SMOKIE
Smoked over wood chips for a rich flavour and smooth texture.
scotcheese.com



LE GRUYÈRE AOP
A favourite among customers and the team!
gruyere.com/en

For a couple with a history of street food, The Cheesery offered the ideal opportunity to set down roots and indulge in one of their biggest passions: cheese. Sold to Hilary and Steve Barney by the previous owner, Dorothy Hegarty, in May 2016, the business has clearly reaped the rewards from the pair doing thorough research, travelling around Scotland to conduct a cheese trail, and connecting with dairies before opening. "Dorothy was amazing with us," begins Hilary. "She allowed us to work alongside her for a few weeks before we officially took over, providing us with a 'bible' of information including suppliers, best-selling cheese, even regular customers and what they liked. She taught us how to care for the cheese, wrapping and overall good working practice. This knowledge was invaluable to us." These solid foundations paved the way to the couple opening their second store in March 2019, on Gray Street in Broughty Ferry. "With butchers, a grocer, a wine merchant, and bakeries, we thought a cheese shop would be the perfect addition to the beachside town," she tells *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*.

Offering a solid range of independent retail's most loved attributes – working with local producers, stocking a wide range of cheeses ("a selection of around 65 in each shop"), offering familiar favourites alongside adventurous options, and a knowledgeable, friendly and approachable team hosting a large number of regulars is reaping rewards.

"It's brilliant serving regulars who know what their favourites are and that's that, and then the other side of the coin is chatting to new customers – making them feel at ease coming into the shop and seeing all of that cheese in front of them. It's hard to know where to start and we appreciate it can be overwhelming." Clock-watching is a no-go at The Cheesery. "We love nothing more than taking our time with them, letting them try different cheese and working with them to create what they are looking for – whether it be a cheeseboard for a night in for two, a few cheeses for a gathering of friends or a gift. Our cheese gift boxes are the best!"

Sources of pride

As well as raising a young family during the course of the business's growth – the couple's two children were both born since the shop opened – the team is proud of its navigation through the myriad of challenges thrown at them by the Covid-19 pandemic in a positive and proactive mode. "We had some minor supply issues with Brexit, but nothing major. Obviously, some price increases too. With so many small business – particularly in the food industry – closing their doors at the moment, it's not the easiest of times, however the people of Dundee and beyond love their cheese. We are so grateful for their support, and we hope to carry on doing

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PLANS FOR 2023

"We have so many ideas for the next few years and it will be exciting to see what comes of them," says Hilary. "We are considering a lot of options from events to getting back to street food, a third shop – there are so many possibilities. Cheese and food as a whole are our passion."

what we're doing – giving people a great shopping experience, a smile and fantastic, well cared for cheese to take home and enjoy."

The Cheesery's cheese gift subscriptions are one of Hilary and Steve's proudest achievements. "They have been incredible," says Hilary. "We deliver a box made up of a selection of carefully chosen cheese, accompaniments and tasting notes. It makes the perfect gift, but also a lovely thing to sign up to if you want to branch out with you cheese choices. With the first box, you receive a cheese journal where you can jot down the cheese you like, rate it, note what you had it with and we have designed a taste wheel too. This is useful for not only cheese customers may have at The Cheesery, but all over the world. It's so great when our customers come into the shop after travelling with tales of the cheese they have tried. Every day we are learning."



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ONLINE EXPERT

The Welsh Cheese Company



LOCATION: TAFFS WELL, CARDIFF AND ONLINE
OPENED: 2017 **FOUNDER:** TOM PINDER

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



HOLDEN FARM DAIRY HAFOD CHEDDAR
Unpasteurised and organic, with an earthy, rich and buttery flavour.
holdenfarmdairy.co.uk



CAWS TEIFI TEIFI NATURAL
A superb Gouda style cheese made in West Wales. It is unpasteurised and organic and absolutely delicious.
teificheese.co.uk



CAWS CENARTH PERL LAS
Wales' most famous blue cheese.
cawscenarth.co.uk

What better retailer to represent the best of Welsh indie cheese retail than the one created to do just that? With the aim of showcasing and celebrating the very best Welsh artisan cheeses, The Welsh Cheese Company has grown from an online-only operation to a warehouse and office space for its wholesale and online arm, and a retail shop proudly selling direct to a loyal public.

As with any specialist business, the team has worked hard to not only gain an unparalleled understanding of its marketplace, but also relationships with the sector across its home country. "We're really passionate about Welsh cheese and believe that we've got some of the best cheeses in the world here in Wales," begins Tom. "The fact that we're so specialist means that we know the Welsh cheese scene really well. We're constantly in touch with cheesemakers from all over Wales and love to be the first people to be championing any great new cheese that's being made in Wales."

A growing mission

Making the jump from bricks and mortar to online is a challenge in itself, but moving to incorporate a physical shop when your retail experience is based around e-commerce is quite the feat – even if the model neatly caters to changing consumer needs. "Covid



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has meant that we've had quite a tumultuous couple of years. When the pandemic started we were in a very fortunate position because we were primarily selling online, so we were able to continue to sell that way and the business grew," explains Tom. "We've had to adapt whilst coming out of the pandemic. On the one hand we've been working very hard to retain all of the new online customers that we picked up over the past couple of years, and on the other hand we've been very keen to move the business forward and diversify. Hence the physical shop and the wholesale operation. It's been challenging but we've got a small but brilliant team here who have really risen to the challenge."

The team's first physical shop opened in 2022, and is already selling over 70 different varieties of Welsh cheese, as does the website. Of course, having in-person interactions with customers is a bonus: "it's fantastic to be able to share our love of Welsh cheese with customers face to face," says Tom. Exciting plans are afoot – a boon for a small-scale business like The Welsh Cheese Company. "One of the advantages of being a comparably small business is being able to rapidly adapt and evolve, so we've got so many ideas of the next few months that we're really looking forward to putting in place."

Growth is ongoing. "We had a 30sqm cold store built at the end of 2021 which means that we can hold enough stock to supply Welsh cheese to other businesses all over Wales, and one of our main goals for 2023 is to continue to grow our wholesale customer base and introduce Welsh cheese to restaurants, delis, farm shops and other businesses who don't yet know how good it is."

POWERING THE TEAM

"We've got a really strong belief in the quality of the cheeses that we sell. We're proud to be working closely with Welsh cheesemakers and proud to help bring them to as wide an audience as possible," says Tom. "We're also very focused on customer service. We primarily sell online, which can often mean that customers don't have a chance to develop much of a relationship with a business, but we work hard to provide the best service we can, whether that's in the way cheese is presented and delivered, or in every customer interaction."



LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND

Taste of an Icon

Made in western Switzerland, Le Gruyère AOP has been produced in the same way since 1115AD, using raw milk from cows fed on grass in summer and hay in winter. It is the only cheese that has won the title of Best Cheese in the World at the World Cheese Awards five times – testament to its iconic appeal.

It's not only the cheese's thoroughly unique and perfectly balanced flavour which has maintained its popularity for centuries; thanks to being both gluten and lactose-free, it can be enjoyed by all cheese lovers including coeliacs and those with lactose intolerance.

OFFERING THE PERFECT BLEND OF SUBTLE SWEETNESS, NUTTINESS AND SAVOURY NOTES, LE GRUYÈRE AOP IS NATURALLY VERSATILE AND CAN BE ENJOYED IN A NUMBER OF WAYS

- No cheeseboard is complete without Classic and Reserve options; simply partner with a gently seasoned cracker to let Le Gruyère AOP's flavour shine through
- Enjoy Le Gruyère AOP the traditionally Swiss way, in a fondue – enjoy with cubes of crusty bread and small boiled potatoes
- Thanks to its well-rounded flavour, Le Gruyère AOP is a versatile ingredient; visit gruyere.com/en/recipes for a host of delicious ideas

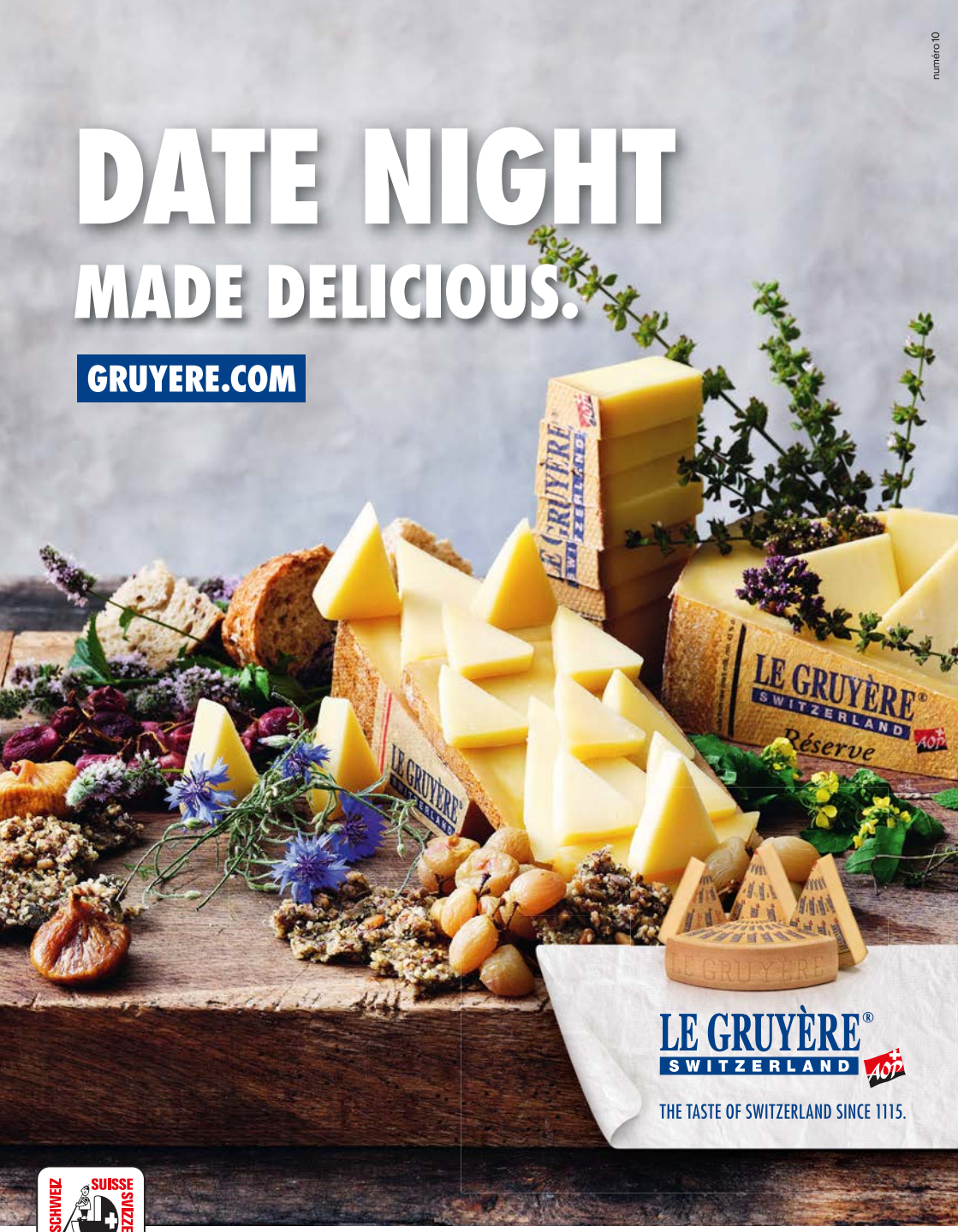
LE GRUYÈRE AOP IS AVAILABLE IN DIFFERENT MATURITIES:

- Classic is matured for five months and has a delicate, nutty, creamy flavour
- The Reserve is matured for 10 months and has a drier, more grainy mouthfeel
- Gruyère AOP aged for 14 months or more has a much stronger flavour

> "LE GRUYÉRE AOP IS THE ONLY CHEESE THAT HAS WON THE TITLE OF BEST CHEESE IN THE WORLD AT THE WORLD CHEESE AWARDS FIVE TIMES – TESTAMENT TO ITS ICONIC APPEAL"



LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP



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