ALL YOU NEED TO SELL CHEESE SUCCESSFULLY

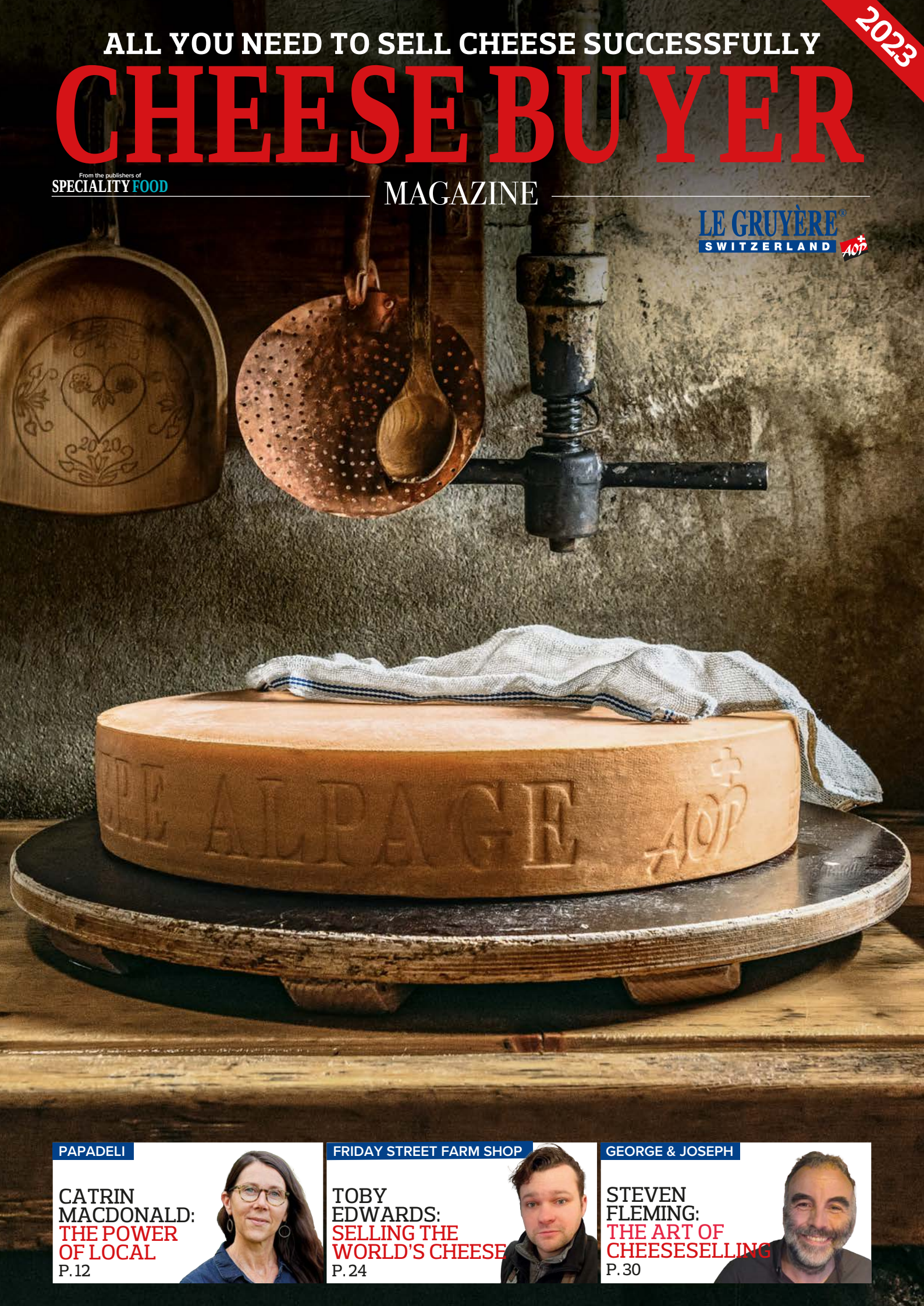
CHEESE BUYER

2023

From the publishers of SPECIALITY FOOD

MAGAZINE

LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP



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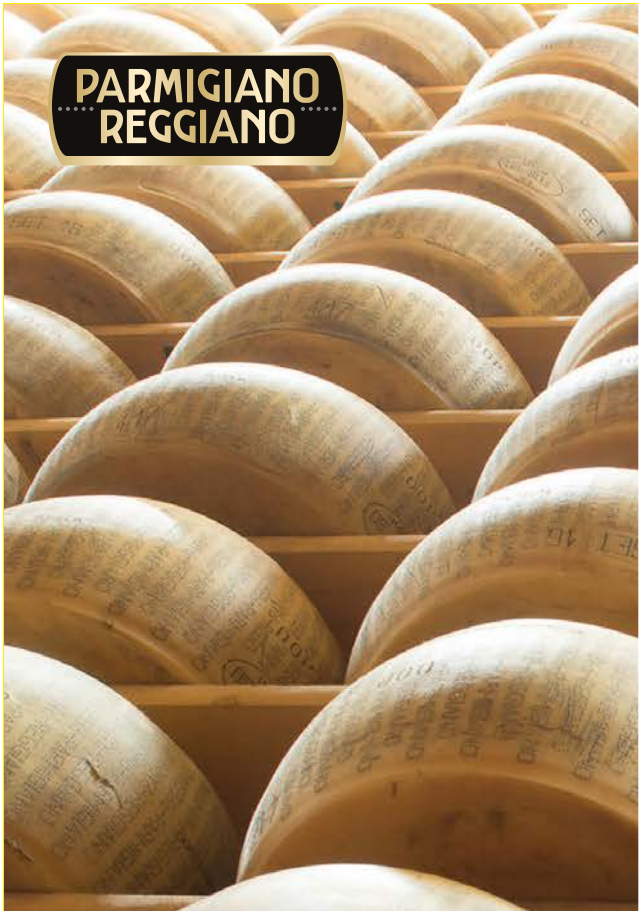
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PARMIGIANO REGGIANO

PARMIGIANO REGGIANO:

TRADITION BECOMES INNOVATION

From the heart of the **Reggio Emilia Apennines** comes a product of the finest quality. At **our mountain cheese dairies** we follow the artisan method to offer a **complete range in all its different ageing properties**. In doing this, we always push ourselves one step further, seeking **innovation in tradition**, especially when it comes to **animal welfare**, which is why our entire **supply chain** is **sustainable** and **certified** according to the **Classyfarm protocol**.

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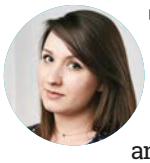
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WELCOME TO CHEESE BUYER



Welcome to the latest edition of *Cheese Buyer*, brought to you by the team behind *Speciality Food*.

The appreciation of quality cheese is growing, and it's down to specialists to make the most of this opportunity by sharing the stories behind the cheeses they sell, offering up an exciting and varied selection of cheeses (as well as the accompaniments that will make them sing), and generally bridging the gap and building the connection between the cheesemakers and the consumers purchasing their produce.

To inspire you to do just that, we're sharing the stories of some of the most delicious domestic and international cheeses on the market today, as well as features on topics as diverse as the history of cheesemongery and the current state of play in the British cheese market.

I hope you find it a valuable read.

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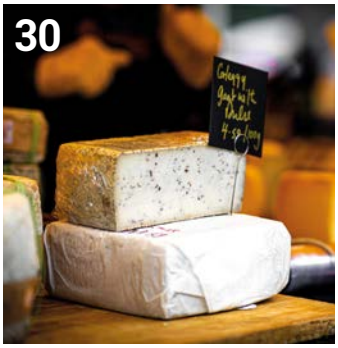
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ALL IN GOOD TIME

Their best-selling Brie so nearly didn't make it to market, but the Stansfield family of artisan cheesemakers are making up for lost time

Good things come to those who wait, and for Cornish cheesemaker Phillip Stansfield the pause in a passion for making Brie lasted two whole decades. "Our Cornish Brie is one of the four original recipes Philip first started making back in 2001 when he began cheesemaking," says Ben Stansfield, taking up the story having joined the business that his parents started on their dairy farm. Phillip and wife Carol gained early acclaim for their mellow and sweet Cornish Blue, but "after the blue mould managed to spread in the maturing room on to all of the cheeses Philip had to stop Brie production and concentrate on the Blue, which they did for the next 20 years."

> "After sitting on these four recipes for 20 years we built a new dairy for white cheeses, and the Brie is the first step with some exciting cheeses in the pipeline waiting!"

With Cornish Blue picking up awards for its distinctive character the business grew over the years, but when Ben and his sister joined the company during the first Covid-19 lockdown the time was right to revisit the foundational recipes. "After sitting on these four recipes for 20 years we built a new dairy for white cheeses, and the Brie is the first step with some exciting cheeses in the pipeline waiting!" says Ben. "Our Cornish Brie is a little different to your average; it has has a more stable structure than a classic Brie, which runs across the plate. However, this doesn't compromise the creaminess in flavour, and our recipe creates a really smooth texture with a characteristic yellow, buttery colour. We use a unique set of cultures to create a Brie full of flavour with a proper farmhouse taste."

The Stansfields' Cornish Brie is now their best seller, joining their Blue and Cornish Nanny – a rich and blue-veined goat cheese – in this artisan farmhouse range. What began as a single product is now a flourishing brand, and Philip's recipes? Well, their wait is over!





WHAT'S HOT IN 2023

From social media trends to nostalgia, Samantha Priestley explores the trends shaping fine cheese retail this year

It can be difficult to know if a new trend is just a passing fad or something that could have legs. When it comes to cheese, we might think well-known favourites are a better bet than the latest trend on Tik Tok, but you only have to look at the trend for vegan cheeses to see that sometimes a trend can grow and take off until it becomes almost mainstream. So, should indie retailers put their faith in new trends? Simon Warren from The East Street Deli thinks a good combination of the two, a middle ground, could be the way to go.

"In our cheese counter we make sure that we've got all the classics, Stilton, Cheddars, Goudas etc, but we also have a great selection of new and 'on trend' cheeses. But whilst the new ones often have a novelty effect, to boost sales for the long term you can't beat the old classics if you want to grow sales."

Classics make a comeback

It's some of those classic cheeses that are on trend this year and making a solid come back. Stilton fell in popularity over recent years in favour of more unusual blue cheese, and while other, local blue cheeses are still popular, it's Stilton that's on the rise again.

"We have seen sales of Stilton grow year on year," says Simon. "Mainly after each Christmas when it features on nearly every cheeseboard."

Carolyn Hopkins from The Truckle Truck has noticed a rise in traditional cheeses and especially cheese that has a tie to a particular location. "There's been a very big increase in purchases of the very traditional, territorial cheeses, like Lancashire, Wensleydale, and Caerffili."

This trend ties into the rising desire for local products. In cheese buying this trend works two ways. Customers are always interested in a cheese local to where they are, but many customers also love trying cheeses that are 'local' to other locations, like Wensleydale and Caerffili. For Simon, this means always keeping a good selection of British cheeses to cover these trends.

"There is definitely a greater demand for British and local cheeses and so we have probably increased the range of each of these. We're very lucky to have some great local cheese suppliers in Dorset and so we try to support them as well as possible whilst maintaining a range of cheese from slightly further afield and some that are a little more obscure."

The weird and the wonderful

At the other end of the scale are the more adventurous cheeses. Unlike classic cheeses, these tend to not go in and out of fashion and once they are gone they are gone. Crazy flavours in cheese are a novelty, but as Carolyn has found, you have to be careful that a trend doesn't mean a compromise on quality.

"I don't generally stock blended cheeses. There are a handful of cheesemakers whom I'll make an exception for because I know they won't compromise on the quality for the sake of the novelty. Some trends do tie into that. Wild garlic is a particular favourite at the moment, but by and large I wouldn't just stock something just because it's on trend."

Gauging which trends will work for you and which won't is a lesson learned through time and experience. As Simon Warren says, you can almost feel what will work for you, and sometimes a trend isn't the right fit, even if a customer asks for it. You can end up knowing your customers better than they know themselves.

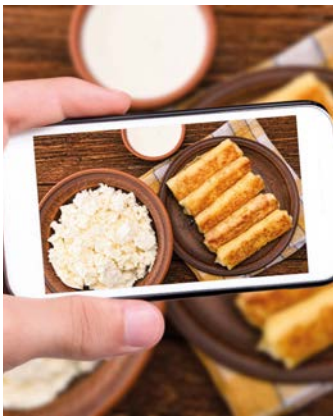
"You've got to be careful not to go with all of the customer requests. Now that we have been here for a number of years it's slightly easier to know which products will work and which won't. We keep our range as tight as possible, so you really need to know your customer base and what their tastes are otherwise you can end up with a range that is slightly irrelevant to the customer."

Getting the balance right

The two trends of crazy flavours and classic cheeses are miles apart, in many ways, but having a good balance between the two and knowing how to present them could be the key to staying on trend.

"You need a mix, but we really try to make sure our classics feature prominently in our counter," says

> "I think there will always be a market for the very weird blended cheeses, even if it's just for the 'shock' factor"



Simon. "It's so important to have new, interesting, fun and on trend products across the store, not just in the cheese counter, but we make sure that they don't take over. Classic cheeses make up such a large part of our sales so it's vital they're always available."

Carolyn agrees, and believes the way forward is to rotate the stock, so that trend cheeses always have a place beside traditional cheese.

"As an indie retailer, it's a balancing act. Keeping a core group of staples is essential, but judicious use of trendy/quirky cheeses can keep customers interested and coming back to see what's new. I generally have about 40% of cheeses in the counter that are always there, 40% that rotate in regularly and the rest are occasional 'visitors'."

What to look out for

While we do seem to have a nostalgic longing for more classic cheeses at the moment, we're also looking abroad at what other cheese makers are doing, and making it our own, while also being more aware of sustainability and seasonal produce.

"A lot of the newer British artisan cheeses are taking inspiration from classic European styles," says Carolyn. "There are a lot of washed rind cheeses coming onto the market now, for example, and some triple cream styles. There's also a trend to produce more seasonally, Hebden Goat or St James for example, using the milk when it's at its best for cheesemaking, rather than producing cheeses that vary a lot throughout the year."

And are those crazy flavours, like a cream tea cheese, here to stay? Carolyn, begrudgingly, thinks so.

"I think there will always be a market for the very weird blended cheeses, even if it's just for the 'shock' factor. It's here to stay, unfortunately."

STAYING SOCIAL

How do you keep on top of all this and know which cheese to have in store as a 'visitor', a visitor that could become a more permanent resident? As with everything, social media is the place to find out what's hot right now.

"We watch social media regularly to try and show what is on trend and how we could adapt it for ourselves," says Simon. "We recently featured the Norwegian sweet cheese Gjetost after seeing it on various social media feeds and triggering some ideas of how we could use it at The East Street Deli. Without doubt, it was one of the most popular cheeses we've featured, not necessarily in sales quantity, but for customer interaction and interest it was great. Cheese is such an 'instagramable' product that we are putting more and more time, effort and investment, into how we use it for our followers."

Social media is a two way street. It can be a great place to find the latest trends, and it's also where your cheese finds its spotlight, as Carolyn knows.

"When I do stock on trend cheeses, I definitely push them a lot through social media. I don't tend to offer many promotions as I prefer to keep prices as low as I can. The downside of trading on a market is the perception that the cheese should therefore be cheap, when my cheeses are generally anything but!"

> "Cheese is such an 'Instagrammable' product that we are putting more and more time, effort and investment into how we use it for our followers"





THE VEGAN OPPORTUNITY

It may be far from traditional, but plant-based cheese innovations are taking the world by storm finds Natasha Spencer-Jolliffe

Exciting cheese innovations in taste, ingredients, production methods and top geographic regions worldwide are emerging. Vegan cheese is a significant area we can expect to grow in uptake. Cheese producers are making dairy-mimicking proteins to replace traditional animal-based products. Consumers want products that reflect their eco-consciousness and present sustainability credentials, making vegan alternatives a sought-after choice.

Plant-based dairy alternatives have continued as a popular trend. Almost a third (32%) of British shoppers consumed plant-based alternative milk in 2021, Mintel research shows. Vegan manufacturers have turned their attention to replicating dairy, with 26% of dairy cheese eaters and buyers decreasing their intake for environmental reasons, Mintel adds.

Selling plant-based

Indie retailers, such as UK-based La Fauxmagerie, are bringing vegan cheese to the mainstream with quality and sensory properties to rival their traditional animal-based cheese. Self-proclaimed as the UK's first plant-based cheesemonger, which opened in 2019, the producer ferments cashews or almonds and combines the ingredients with white miso or yeast to age them and create a savoury cheese-like taste.

Indie retailers can source and stock vegan cheese options that satisfy consumers' environmental concerns and provide welcome flavours. They can also offer a broad selection and market these to cheese consumers' love of luxurious, experiential and occasion-based eating. If they can successfully do this, vegan cheeses have the potential to help indie retailers showcase the best varieties.

26% OF DAIRY CHEESE EATERS AND **BUYERS** HAVE **DECREASED THEIR INTAKE** FOR **ENVIRONMENTAL REASONS**

SOURCE: MINTEL

ALMOST A **THIRD (32%)** OF **BRITISH SHOPPERS** CONSUMED **PLANT-BASED ALTERNATIVE MILK** IN **2021**, **MINTEL RESEARCH** SHOWS

SOURCE: MINTEL

INTERNATIONAL STAND-OUTS

Launched in 2018, motivated by his son's dairy intolerance, the founder of Palace Culture, Mirko Parmigiani, has won accolades from the Great Taste Awards for the brand's almond Ricotta and Mouldy Goat varieties.

Dutch-based startup Fooditive manufactures vegan casein, a non-animal protein that strives to offer a plant-based protein replacement to improve the taste and quality of existing options. Fooditive uses precision fermentation, which uses microbial hosts as "cell factories" to apply genetic modification to an organism to create specific functional ingredients.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Plant-based cheeses are a huge growth category, but it's the performance on your palate that might surprise you about new wave alternatives

Have you ever wondered about the parallels between the dairy cheeses you might stock and the plant-based alternatives that have seen demand soar? "We designed a novel manufacturing method that draws on the processes of making dairy cheese," says Mike Moore of Honestly Tasty, who founded the business after a life-changing crack at Veganuary alerted him to a huge gap in the market for good dairy-free cheeses. "The majority of our cheeses are hand-flipped daily during maturation. Our Blue has a distinctive and familiar bite thanks to Penicillium Roqueforti, and our Shamembert behaves as Camembert does in part because of the Penicillium Candidium responsible for the rind." And as you can imagine, great care is taken to develop recipes that really deliver. "The ratio of specific starches against the fats in the cheese is important," says Mike. "It's key to making sure we achieve different textures and mouthfeels at different heats... We want to make sure our cheeses perform as you'd expect, whether squished on a cracker or swirled into a sauce."

This attention to detail could be why Honestly Tasty's cheeses have garnered widespread acclaim. "For ages, vegan cheese didn't taste good," says co-founder Beth Moore. "It got a bad rep for good reason, but we plan to change that! Our mission is to make tasty cheese to change perception and ultimately to drive a change in behaviour. 'No dairy? No compromise.' That's our motto, because people are looking for ways to reduce consumption (e.g. are affected by the rise in dairy intolerance) but need some help. It's a significant portion of the market that's not currently being served with a high quality product. With our award-winning plant-based alternatives everyone can share and enjoy." With a more affordable, nut-free cheese, Cheddar-style and smoked Gouda-style cheeses in the pipeline, there's plenty to chew on.









THE HAND OF THE LAND

Mythology comes alive in a vivid rebrand from Somerset's organic Cheddar maker, with new moves to help cheeses jump off the shelf

What is it that sways a customer as they hover at your chiller cabinet or cheese counter? Or that stays their cursor as it slides over the Add to Basket button? At Godminster, the organic Somerset Cheddar maker that's always championed its links to its land, a bold rebrand is grabbing that vital moment by the scruff of its neck. Following two years of soul-searching, consultation and hard spade work with a top design agency, the organic dairy has unveiled a high-impact rebrand that takes the range right back to its roots in the Somerset town of Bruton.

Born in Bruton

"In 23 years our branding at Godminster has had very few tweaks," explains Sarah Norris, the cheesemaker's head of marketing. "We've had the Union Jack since 2012 for Catherine and William's wedding and it's done really well for some markets, but we want to appeal to younger, modern foodies and cheese fans while maintaining our links to our highly loyal customer base." The new branding reflects the blend of ancient and modern in Godminster's home town, giving rise to a fresh look with the tagline: Savour the spirit of Somerset.

Visually, the packaging pulls on local mythology and the Somerset folk culture that's enjoying a fresh resurgence right now. A cast of characters inspired by ancient Wessex emblazon each label: Godminster's flagship vintage Cheddar is now Vintage Bruton Beauty, bearing a mystical boar-like creature evoking English beast mythology as well the local population of wild pigs. Cheyney's Fortune – the oak-smoked Cheddar – name checks a former farm manager and Godminster's mighty oak trees, with hints of the Green Man. Also in the range is the Red Chilli Devil's Dance – a chilli-flecked Cheddar – and Black Truffle Howling Hound, referencing Somerset's version of the black dog myths that dot the UK. The makeover encompasses the popular star and heart-shaped Cheddars too, making a full range that sings with distinct local character.

A sharper brand focus

The rebrand has been a chance to reimagine the whole customer experience. First, the Godminster team addressed the way stacked cheeses meet the eye of the approaching consumer. If stacked vertically in fridges the original packaging can appear as a pile of generic wax truckles, so a branded and foiled belly band has been added to bring the messaging down the sides of the cheeses.

"In early feedback from our customers they're calling this a game changer," says Sarah. "When a buying customer is standing in front of a fridge they only have moments – research suggests it's three or four seconds – to make a decision on what cheese to buy, so we're really hoping to capitalise on that small window. This, for us, is one of the most important parts of this rebrand: allowing our cheese to be merchandised on its back without sacrificing brand messaging. We're hoping it'll make us more discoverable, especially in shops that have a large cheese fixture. Godminster is a premium product with a premium price so we're often merchandised higher up, at eye level. That new flash of gold foiling on the band... that's really important to us."

Work has also been done on how the cheeses are enjoyed, creating a 'signature serve'. "We wanted to create the Godminster ritual," says Sarah, "so that if our Cheddar is served at a dinner party someone says 'Oh I know how to serve Godminster, let me show you.' The message we're sharing is 'Chop off the top and tuck in'; we're hoping people will score around the top and lift the lid off. Then you can cut the cheese into perfect horizontal slices, replacing the lid and pinching it shut to store for next time."

Everything's been considered to give the Cheddars the impact they deserve. And now, after their long journey from the drawing board, the rebranded cheeses are out in the wild, and they've never looked more at home.

> "In early feedback from our customers they're calling this a game changer"







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SCAN THIS CODE TO EXPLORE MORE

Discover our range at godminster.com



KEEPING IT LOCAL

Local produce should be the cornerstone of your cheese counter, says Samantha Priestley. Here's why

Locally sourced produce is more popular with customers right now than it has been for a long time, but it's also great for retailers. Stocking locally made food is good for the environment, good for keeping costs down, and good for sales. When it comes to cheese there's already a solid customer base for British, but going that one step further and keeping it ultra local goes down even better with consumers. Simon Warren from The East Street Deli has seen the results of stocking more locally sourced cheese firsthand.

"We know that there is a big demand for 'supporting local' throughout our store and the cheese counter is the greatest example of that. Three out of the six top selling cheeses that we stock are from our county of Dorset and that demonstrates how loyal our customers are towards local suppliers and producers."

That loyalty is apparent once customers can feel the connection between where they are buying their cheese and its origin.

Building relationships

Building those customer relationships to cement loyalty is important, but it's also important to create lasting relationships with suppliers. It's this chain of relationships that greases the wheels of the entire process.

"It's vital to build a relationship with local suppliers," says Simon. "When you know who they are and what they go through to deliver that product to your door it makes the sale to the customer so much easier."

And this is always a two-way street, or even a three-way street. Loyalty builds loyalty, and this goes from supplier, to retailer, to customer. Simon Warren sees these relationships as an integral part of selling cheese.

"There's nothing better than being able to show that we support a local supplier as they in turn support us. They're able to give great service, help with in-store tastings and any other back-up support that is needed. If a cheese is 'local' we try to highlight how many miles it is produced from our front door which always sends out a good message. Selling a cheese is so much easier and authentic if you know the fields that the cows graze in, know the people that make it by hand and know the person that delivers it every week."

Local equals sustainable

And it's not just about building relationships and creating great stories. Locally sourced produce is better for the environment. As more businesses adopt more sustainable practices, sourcing locally goes hand in hand with a sustainable outlook. Catrin Macdonnell from Papadeli sees sustainability and quality as two sides of the same coin.

"It fits with our ethos of stocking quality artisan produce which is as sustainable as possible. Supporting local makers supports the local economy and cuts down on airmiles."

Cutting down on airmiles is also at the forefront of Simon Warren's mind when it comes to how The East Street Deli source their cheese.

"We are very keen on making sure our products don't travel unnecessary miles. If we can get a cheese direct from a local supplier versus getting it from a wholesaler, we go direct. Yes, costs are becoming more and more important, but we want to make sure we're as kind to the environment as we possibly can be."

Counting the costs

Costs are becoming more of an issue, and this is another area sourcing locally can help with. Although we are all being a little more careful with our spending, fine foods retailers are lucky in that this is one area many customers are still prepared to spend a bit more on.

"Generally, it's not about cost. It's definitely about quality, and there are so many superb quality farmers creating amazing British

> "Our customers are becoming more and more knowledgeable about cheese. When they know the story and the people behind the cheese, they're much more inclined to make a purchase"

cheeses that can compete and win on a world stage," says Catrin. "Customers are prepared to pay a little extra for superb, locally made cheeses. At Valentine's, for example, we had a heart shaped mid-range French artisan cheese and a British made heart-shaped cheese. The British cheese was twice the price and it sold out."

It's all about connections

It's a well-known fact that when we feel a connection to something, to produce, we're more likely to buy it. Building these connections is much easier when we build relationships, and customers love that feeling of being directly involved.

"Our customers are becoming more and more knowledgeable about cheese," says Simon. "They're very aware of which cheese is produced by which dairy. They often know someone who works on the farm or saw the producer at a summer show. When they know the story and the people behind the cheese, they're much more inclined to make a purchase."

For Catrin, it's about the stories we tell about these people and their produce. These connections are made by passing on information and by emphasising the fact that this is local, these people are local, just like us.

"We all love hearing how something is made, what the challenges are, why it has that name, who the farmers are. It makes it feel so much more personal and we feel as if we have a stake in helping them thrive. Customers love finding out about local makers. It's a lovely thing to be able to tell friends at a dinner party, for example. Bristol is a brilliant place for supporting local independent businesses and local cheese really appeals to this ethos."

> "Customers love finding out about local makers. It's a lovely thing to be able to tell friends at a dinner party"



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FROM THE GROUND UP

Innovation is essential to sustained sales, and the Snowdonia Cheese Company has dug deep to bring the very best to the table

There's nothing like an iconic, instantly recognisable cheese to boost your cheese counter's sales, and the Snowdonia Cheese Company can claim some expertise in this field. The famous Black Bomber and the rainbow of wax-sealed truckles that make up the full range have some serious pulling power, helping customers make their minds up and commit to a truckle of the crowd-pleasing cheeses. Expanding on a classic range – Black Bomber is so popular it won a Super Gold award at Mondial du Fromage in France – isn't easy, so a little innovative thinking has been required at Snowdonia Cheese Company, with some fabulous results.

Into the earth

The North Wales company headed deep underground for a key piece of product development, tapping into the natural resources of another classic food culture. Truffle Trove is an extra mature Cheddar from the expert cheesemakers, studded with Italian Black Summer truffles sourced from the Italian region of Marche – a delicacy known as 'the black diamond of the kitchen'. Encased in pure white wax, Truffle Trove combines the Snowdonia Cheese Company's expertly graded and carefully crafted Extra Mature Cheddar with one of the most celebrated and sought after flavours in cuisine, creating what the company's commercial director Richard Newton-Jones describes as "a distinctive earthy aroma and perfectly balanced flavour."

The incredible combination was given the ultimate seal of approval at last year's prestigious International Cheese & Dairy Awards at Staffordshire County Showground. Truffle Trove received a gold medal, the icing on the cake after becoming a best-seller for the brand.

Into the mountains

In October 2021 the company dug even deeper for the creation of Rock Star, its first vintage cave-aged Cheddar, and a cheese that sings with the character of time spent in deep caverns. The most promising Cheddars made to a very special recipe and profile are transported through miles of rock-walled walkways into slate caverns buried 500 feet down under the Snowdonia National Park. These natural maturation rooms are powered by local hydroelectric energy, creating a perfect, sealed environment to slowly develop the complex umami flavours, sweet caramel notes and long, savoury finish that Rock Star has become known for.

Rock Star completes its 18 month maturation in the slate caverns to boast the flavour profile the company's expert graders are looking for: a rich, savoury aroma and incredibly smooth and irresistibly creamy texture with the occasional crunchy crystal. "It's a real labour of love to mature a cheese deep underground in such a remote setting and for us, it's absolutely worth it," says Richard. "The flavour is stunning and the setting is incredible – it's a real honour to work with the natural landscape in this way, surrounded by the majestic beauty of Snowdonia. Rock Star is sure to elevate special occasions with family and friends. It brings a real sense of luxury and wow factor to the cheeseboard." It certainly does. Each cheese is enrobed in bespoke cobalt-coloured wax to celebrate the rocks of the historical mines it's aged in, making it an ideal gift.

These two very special Cheddars with their roots deep in the ground are excellent additions to a broad range of Cheddars that sing with natural flavour. Red Storm (a vintage Red Leicester), Green Thunder (made with roasted garlic), Beechwood (smoked), Red Devil (made with Habanero chillies and peppers), Ruby Mist (with port and brandy), Pickle Power (with pickled onion), Amber Mist (with whisky), Ginger Spice (with crystallised ginger) and Bouncing Berry (with cranberries) all join the extra mature Black Bomber to create a range that's truly hard to beat.

> "It's a real labour of love to mature a cheese deep underground in such a remote setting and for us, it's absolutely worth it"



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BRITISH CHEESE: THE STATE OF THE SECTOR

The British cheese industry has faced a tumultuous few years, but Courtney Goldsmith finds that it is emerging stronger than before

Britain's cheesemongers have well and truly had their mettle tested over recent years. From Brexit's disruption of international trade to the transformation of the retail landscape in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, where do cheesemongers, makers and distributors stand today?

After Brexit, retailers look to local

The Brexit vote took place nearly seven years ago, but the UK's exit from the European Union is not yet done and dusted. The finer details of the monumental legislation are still being ironed out, and no one knows this better than cheesemakers, mongers and distributors, who are exposed to every twist and turn when it comes to trade with Europe.

For small, artisan producers looking to share their cheese with the Continent, Brexit caused havoc. Those who relied on the growing European appetite for British cheeses to boost their profits were hit hard, and some made the decision to pull out of the exporting market. Others found new ways to make their businesses work abroad. Late last year, British cheesemaker Cheshire Cheese Company was bought by Joseph Heler Cheese to maintain its presence in the EU. The small maker benefitted from its larger rival's established operations and distribution hub in the Netherlands. "The sad thing is that small businesses like ours cannot have access to the EU," Simon Spurrell, founder of Cheshire Cheese Company told *The Guardian* at the time of the deal. "Selling the company is a great solution... it secures the future of the company with a historical cheesemaker."

Those businesses that are large enough to spread the costs of new requirements will be better off, but Britain's small-scale farmhouse cheesemakers aren't the only ones feeling the bite: research by the Centre for Business Prosperity at Aston University found that as many as 42% of the product varieties previously exported to the EU have disappeared since January 2021. This was caused by a large number ceasing to export to the EU or streamlining their product ranges.

On the other side of the coin, cheesemongers importing small amounts of European cheeses continue to face challenges. While UK dairy imports returned to pre-Brexit levels in 2022, rising 8 percent from 2021, hold-ups at UK ports are causing headaches for British cheesemongers looking to sell Continental favourites. "Brexit continues to cause some issues, generally delays at Dover or Calais, with deliveries taking weeks rather than days," Jen Grimstone-Jones, cheesemonger at Cheese Etc, The Pangbourne Cheese Shop tells *Speciality Food*. But while Continental cheeses undeniably deserve a place on cheesemongers' shelves, there is a silver lining for local cheese hounds. "Whilst it's frustrating," Jen continues, "in a way it has helped our British cheeses as they are more readily available."

Indeed, cheesemongers and delis that only import small amounts of European cheeses have found the new red tape and costs discouraging, leading them to expand their stocks of British varieties. Highland Fine Cheeses reported to the BBC that its sales had been boosted by Brexit as shops were stocking more British-made cheeses. From the consumer perspective, shopping local also means avoiding the costs importers are forced to pass on. In Mintel's 2022 *UK Cheese Report*, nearly half agreed that Continental cheeses had become more expensive since Brexit, and 64 percent of those surveyed said they would be interested in British versions of European-style cheeses, like British-made Mozzarella.

Svetlana Kukharchuk, owner of artisan cheese retailer The Cheese Lady in Haddington, Scotland, agreed that demand for local cheese is growing – and in some cases that demand is outpacing supply. "We sadly cannot offer local cheeses as there are no farmhouse or artisan cheesemakers in our region. However, we are selling more and more Scottish and British cheese in general," she tells *Speciality Food*. She sees big opportunities for cheesemakers in Scotland. "As a country we can definitely offer more farmhouse and artisan cheese to local consumers and to the rest of the world, so I hope that in the coming years we will see more and more wonderful and unique artisan cheeses emerging from Scotland."

Covid's lasting impact

The Covid-19 pandemic was another tale of two halves for Britain's cheese industry. Businesses that relied on foodservice faced huge challenges, with some farmers even forced to dump milk as supply chains crumbled. Yet for many fine cheese retailers, Covid-19 was a time of feast, not famine. In fact, many small operators had to quickly master online ordering systems, packing and delivery in order to cope with the huge amounts of demand that emerged.

Following that time of frenzied sales, how are cheesemongers faring today? "Covid for us was a boom," Jen says. "We were open every day through every lockdown and whilst it was hugely hard work and extremely challenging, we did our utmost to be there for our customers." The pandemic also

42% SAY **MONEY CONCERNS** WOULD MAKE THEM **SPEND LESS** ON CHEESE

SOURCE: MINTEL



LOCAL CHEESES REMAIN A FIRM FAVOURITE

Jen Grimstone-Jones of Cheese Etc, The Pangbourne Cheese Shop, says the British cheese industry is going from strength to strength

We have seen a huge demand for British cheeses, and 90% of our customers ask for local and then British. Our homegrown cheeses are of a fabulous quality, with flavours and varieties on a par or outdoing their overseas rivals.

A lot of our customers are buying British Territorial cheeses at the moment. For me, they are the epitome of Britishness. No one else in the world makes the classic crumbly cheeses that we make here. We are also seeing a lot more people wanting to buy ewe and goat cheeses over cow's milk. More people seem to be suffering with dairy intolerances and this has definitely increased over the last couple of years.

I think the British cheese industry will continue to grow and flourish. The public have become a lot more aware of food miles, and they want to know where their food is coming from. People are keen to support our British farmers and I think buying British food is an easy way for people to do this. I'm very excited to see what new cheeses might come to the forefront over the next few months and years. There are so many cheesemakers starting up, making some really wonderful cheeses.



kick-started new relationships with customers. "Our online sales increased by over 100 percent, and many of those customers still order regularly now," Jen says.

Not only did retailers tot up impressive sales figures, but the pandemic was also a time of blossoming collaborations and upskilling to improve operations and stay nimble to the ever-changing environment. Looking back, some retailers believe this was a blessing in disguise. "As turbulent and challenging as both Covid and Brexit were," Svetlana admits, "they made our business even stronger. We have learned to be flexible and quickly adapt to the market conditions and demands. Today, both Covid and Brexit have hardly any impact on our business."

New challenges arise

That the British cheese industry has managed to cope with the turbulent times of the past few years is no mean feat. But while the path ahead is full of opportunity, some dark clouds are hanging over the food and drink sector as the wider economy faces inflation and a cost of living crisis.

Cheesemongers are living with the reality of inflation in their shops. "Our utility bills are massively more than they were a few months ago, and this coupled with increases in wages after the last budget has meant that we've had to pass on more price increases to customers than we would like to," Jen says. "We're all hoping that energy bills will begin to go down and inflation will follow."

And with consumers tightening their purse strings, it's no surprise that cheese sales have been impacted. "The income squeeze will take its toll on cheese, with 42% of people who eat and buy cheese saying money concerns would make them spend less," says Angharad Goode, research analyst at Mintel. But despite this, there are still opportunities for high-quality cheeses. "How they pack a punch on flavour remains a key message to explore, to leverage the oft-seen 'trading up while trading down' mindset," she added.

> "The British cheese industry today is exciting, vibrant and ever-growing. I'm delighted to see many new, high-quality farmhouse and artisan cheeses being developed and brought to the market every year"

Jen isn't worried that customers will turn their back on quality cheese. "Our customers are all feeling [the cost-of-living crisis], but many of them see good-quality, artisan cheese as something they are willing to continue to pay that bit extra for," she says. Svetlana agrees that consumers will make exceptions for small luxuries like cheese. "We have noticed that some customers have reduced their cheese consumption and go for smaller wedges of cheese, but overall it looks like our customers still continue to consider good cheese a must-have. I find this unsurprising, as cheese is an affordable luxury within reach for most people, unlike expensive purchases like cars and even mobile phones." Plus, during trying times what could be better than fantastic tasting cheese that supports artisan producers? "Cheese can bring the joy that people crave in times of financial stress," says Svetlana, "making it a popular choice for those seeking a small but satisfying pleasure."

CHEESEBOARD HEROES

While a well-stocked cheese counter is the jewel in the crown of any cheese lover's favourite indie retailer, the accompaniments offered alongside can make all the difference when it comes to basket spend. Here's our pick of the best

While an array of quality cheeses is paramount to a successful cheeseboard, all foodies know that carefully considered accompaniments make the difference between a good cheeseboard and a great one. First things first, you'll need the perfect platform for your cheese – some with a simple flavour so the taste of the cheese can sing, and some with a flavour punch of their own to complement a milder cheese. Next, come chutneys, pickles, and whatever else will tickle your customers' tastebuds; think innovative and international as well as traditional for the ultimate selection. Here are a few of our top cheeseboard picks to get your creative juices flowing!

ISLAND BAKERY



Looking for the perfect stock to complement your artisan cheese counter? Island Bakery Organic Oatcakes are the answer! Made with a unique blend of oats and extra virgin olive oil, Island Bakery's organic oatcakes are the perfect platform upon which to balance a chunk of cheese, a portion of pâté, or a soupçon of smoked salmon. Whatever takes your fancy! The range includes Original, a no-frills, wholesome oatcake; Black Pepper, which brings a bit of heat to the palate; and Three Seeds, which offers nutritional benefits in addition to a varied texture and taste.

islandbakery.scot

STAG BAKERIES



Featuring a choice assortment of their favourite savoury biscuits, the Stag Bakeries Cheeseboard Selection Box is ideal for gifting, sharing, or livening up any cheeseboard. This selection box offers a variety of flavours and textures, and the mini cocktail size of the biscuits makes them ideal carriers for a wide variety of cheeses. It contains four varieties of water biscuits – Original, Parmesan and Garlic, Chilli, and Rosemary – along with traditional Scottish oatcakes and wholemeal biscuits, ensuring that there is something for every menu and occasion.

stagbakeries.co.uk

HAWKSHEAD RELISH



Hawkshead Relish's Cheeseboard Chutney is everything you expect and more. Packed with apples, figs, cranberries and a good glug of Pinot Noir, these ingredients come together to create something wonderful. Created solely with cheeseboards in mind, we can't think of any cheese that wouldn't pair well with this chutney. The Hawkshead Relish range of over 100 preserves is handmade in the English Lake District in traditional open pans. All products are made with natural ingredients and are gluten-free, nut-free and suitable for vegetarians.

hawksheadrelish.com

PETER'S YARD



Rosemary & Sea Salt Sourdough Crackers pair beautifully with goats' cheese; try a soft, spreadable cheese or a mild Chèvre. Poppy Seed Sourdough Crackers are made with black and white poppy seeds and are lovely served with mild, crumbly cheese. The crackers are made with carefully selected natural ingredients and no artificial colours, flavours or preservatives. These include Shipton Mill organic flour, British rapeseed oil and Peter's Yard's own sourdough starter – which is fed daily and allowed to ferment for 16 hours before each batch is made.

petersyard.com

TRACKLEMENTS



Made for the most discerning cheese lover, Tracklements have collated this gift pack with some of their favourite accompaniments to go with artisan cheeses. Included is the Caramelised Onion Marmalade, the UK's first onion marmalade, made with redcurrant juice for a pleasing tang; Green Tomato Chutney, a rich, dark chutney made with exotic spices; Apple & Cider Brandy Chutney, made with Kentish Bramley apples and a liberal measure of Somerset cider brandy for a boozy kick; and Apricot & Ginger Chutney, which is the perfect combination of fruity, salty, sticky and crunchy.

tracklements.co.uk

OLINA'S BAKEHOUSE



Olina's Bakehouse is the best-selling savoury biscuit brand in Australia and now the fastest growing in the UK. Available from all major speciality and wholefood distributors, these delicious robust crackers are perfect to accompany cheese and great with dips. The brand boasts a variety of core range, gluten-free, keto, and vegan-friendly products across five biscuit styles. The Wafer Crackers provide a subtle flavour, with light crispy bite designed to let the cheese sing. The Cracked Pepper Wafer Crackers are best-sellers and will be appearing in some delightful hampers this year.

olinasbakehouse.co.uk

DRIVERS PICKLES



Drivers Pickles' Cheese Lovers Pickle Gift Box makes the perfect year-round gift for the foodie in your life, and is so attractive you don't need to wrap it! This gift box contains three of their best-selling accompaniments for any type of cheese, including: Traditional Farmhouse Pickle, chopped and mixed vegetables in a traditional sweet brown pickle sauce; Real Ale Chutney, apple pulp, onions and mixed fruits combined with a real ale chutney; and Mini Onions in Honey & Balsamic Vinegar, mini silver skin onions pickled in honey and balsamic vinegar.

pickle-lovers.co.uk



> The rules which govern the consistency and quality of Le Gruyère AOP ensure that the finished product has the unique and subtle flavours which lift it above anything machine-made

THE TASTE OF RURAL SWITZERLAND

Resting on a bedrock of tradition and history, Le Gruyère AOP has become a must-stock in quality cheese counters across the world

The legend of Le Gruyère AOP rests on a bedrock of tradition and history. The iconic cheese has been made in the Gruyère region and then in the Swiss cantons of Fribourg, Neuchâtel, Jura, Vaud and the Bern area since the twelfth century, which has allowed plenty of time for the cheese to reach its present – some would say perfect – state. But, of course, it's the taste of Le Gruyère AOP which has ensured its longevity and present fame. Ranging from delicately floral to deeply nutty, these flavours originate in the milk of the Alpine cows and this milk achieves its unique flavours because of the lush hillside grasses on which the animals are fed.

The small but interesting variations in the flavours of Le Gruyère AOP are the result of cows being fed on rich grass in the summer and hay in the winter. No silage is used and nor are any preservatives or additives. Le Gruyère AOP is an entirely natural, artisanally-made product, which is made with animal rennet and which is naturally gluten and lactose-free.

Quality is king

At a time when provenance is so important, Le Gruyère AOP's is impeccable. The 160 small dairies which produce the cheese (often making only 14 wheels daily) are governed by the PDO specifications which ensure that the cheese is consistent, made to the highest standards possible and entirely traceable, from the cows which supplied the milk, right through to the affineur who aged it and beyond.

Every step in the production of this extraordinary cheese is carefully recorded. No sooner has the milk arrived at the dairy than a sample is taken which will be held for six months so that any imperfection can be traced back to the supplier. It is very much in the producer's interest to achieve the highest standards for his wheels of Le Gruyère AOP, as each wheel is graded and the producer is paid according to how many points his cheese scored.

An international favourite, made by artisans

It is sometimes thought – quite wrongly – that such a well-established and internationally- recognised cheese must be factory made. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The rules which govern the consistency and quality of this cheese ensure that the finished product has the unique and subtle flavours which lift Le Gruyère AOP above anything machine-made. During production, the paste quality, texture, aroma and appearance of every cheese are all carefully monitored. These necessary rules stipulate that milk producers may not produce any cheese and that cheesemakers may not produce any milk. This allows the same highly skilled people who produce the mountain made Gruyère d'Alpage AOP in the summer to produce milk in the winter months.

The freshness of the milk is assured by the ruling on proximity: the small herds which produce the milk which is delivered twice daily to the dairy must be located no more than 12.4 miles from the dairy. The milk must also be poured into the cheesemaker's copper vat no more than 18 hours after milking.



STOCK ONLY GENUINE LE GRUYÈRE AOP

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


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GENTLY DOES IT

Fifty-odd years working with the smallest artisan cheesemakers has taught Rowcliffe a thing or two about the passion and patience that brings truly great cheeses to market

When Sunit Mehta says Rowcliffe knows artisan cheesemakers, he means they really know them. As managing director of Rowcliffe he has sat around producers' kitchen tables, learnt about extended family networks, and led a team that supports this vital but idiosyncratic industry through the sometimes choppy waters of contemporary commerce. "Our reason for being is to provide a platform for artisan producers," he explains. "We don't buy commodities, things that are ruled by volume and price; we've built our business around the people who make these very special products, and the work that they do."

Doing it right

Rowcliffe's process isn't simply about buying and managing the onward supply chain of cheeses, but building and nurturing personal relationships with their makers. Indeed, it even has a 'supplier relationship manager'. "He's been in the specialist cheese industry all his working life and is dedicated to managing the relationship with our producer partners," says Sunit. "To me that's quite special." It's an approach suited to an industry built on small strips of pasture land, small herds of livestock, and small teams of artisan makers. "Some of our producers are a one-man band," stresses Sunit. "Or maybe their partner, their child and that child's spouse are the only employees they have. In the commodity sector the rule of buying is 'Listen, I'm going to give you more volume, you're going to give me a better price.' In the speciality cheese market it doesn't work that way! Here, there may be a demand for 100 units but the makers might be able to produce 60, 70 or 80. Demand is always way higher than supply. So these guys do business with people that they like. Some of our producers are fourth or fifth generation makers who have inherited the family business, their passion and knowledge drives the business. We appreciate what they do."

The unique point for Rowcliffe's suppliers is the company's reach into food service and premium multiples alongside independent channels. "We're the only company in the UK that supplies to all three channels," says Sunit. "So we listen to what our artisan producers want to do. They want to see their cheese in a Michelin-starred restaurant? We can do that. They want to see their product in premium delis? We can do that. Or if they need to sell some more volume into a top multiple to make the economics work, we can help with that too."

To market

The same care is, of course, extended to the independent buyers that Rowcliffe supplies. Meeting the expectations and needs of fine food retailers – another truly diverse demographic – means packaging, marketing and selling makers' wares well, supporting their ambitions and helping overcome barriers to market. Clemency Hall is a case in point. Developed especially for the independent trade, the brand unlocks Rowcliffe's massive bank of experience and expertise to bring a carefully curated range of products to delis and farm shops. "Some of our people have been here 40 years, doing the same work and developing those relationship with our maker partners," says Sunit. " That enables us to go to them and select a handful of cheeses, olives and antipasti that fit the technical standard and facilitates our retailers' search for that point of difference. It's packaged in a way to support what our retailers want to do – sell their customers something truly premium.

"Our producers are very proud of their products. They are, in many cases, their babies. They've spent so much time creating and nurturing their cheeses, and our job is to help take those products out into the world. Doing justice to the work that's gone on, and making sure everything we give a platform to meets our buyers' expectation, is everything to us. At the end of the day that's what we're all about."

> "Doing justice to the work that's gone on, and making sure everything we give a platform to meets our buyers' expectation, is everything to us"

Clemency Hall

Expertly Hand Crafted Cheese

Clemency Hall offers a selection of the best of British & European cheeses and olives & antipasti hand selected from the Mediterranean, exclusive to Rowcliffe, for Independent Retailers.

Contact your Rowcliffe area sales manager or telesales executive, on **01892 838999** or email **sales@rowcliffe.co.uk**





SPOTLIGHT ON INTERNATIONAL CHEESE

From Continental favourites to artisan flavours from further afield, Courtney Goldsmith discovers international cheeses still have much to offer British cheesemongers

Britain's artisan cheese market is maturing like the finest of its aged Cheddars. This small island now produces 1,000 varieties of cheese, according to Cheesegeek founder Edward Hancock, which is nearly double the 550 produced by France.

At *Speciality Food*, we're the first in line to celebrate the successes of the British cheese industry, but even we can't deny the allure of Continental cheeses. From the classics, like Comté, Gruyère and Parmigiano Reggiano, to the lesser known but increasingly well-loved varieties, European cheeses are iconic for their indulgent flavours, artisan farmhouse techniques and local terroir.

Further afield in North America, speciality producers are quickly rising the ranks to erase America's international reputation for sub-par cheese with award-winning options that are well worth stocking. Even Asia, long distanced from all things dairy, is catching on to the cheesemaking bug as consumers find their taste for Cheddar. In China, cheese lollipops have recently taken off. Cheesemakers in the country produced around 373,000 tonnes of cheese in 2021, up 1.3 percent from 2020, according to the Beijing-based Intelligence Research Group.

But before you dive in to revamp your international cheese selection, it's well worth taking stock and making a plan to get the best return on your investment.

Exploring lesser-known varieties

With so many cheeses to choose from, should you stick to the tried and true classics or take a punt on something your customers might be less familiar with? "It's hard to get away from many of the usual suspects like Brie, Comté, Emmental, and Gruyère, but probably some of our best-selling international cheeses are cheeses like Montagnolo Affine, Gorgonzola, Délice de Bourgogne, and more recently Alp Blossom," says Mark Kacary, MD of The Norfolk Deli.

Indeed, experimentation appears to be having its moment, with sales of firm favourites like Parmesan, Edam, Mozzarella, Halloumi and Feta down 2.7 percent in value and 6.7 percent in volume last year, according to data from Kantar. At the same time, Maasdam, an Emmental-style Dutch cheese; Manchego, a Spanish sheep's milk cheese; and Grana Padano, an Italian cheese similar to Parmigiano Reggiano, have seen sales rise.

Lavinia Cooke, general manager at Delifonseca, says her team has been taking more risks on shaking up their stock. "We have been rotating cheeses, particularly Continental, much more in the last few months, trying out different or seasonal cheeses," she says. What does this look like in practice? "Researching and liaising with suppliers allows us to explore other varieties, and when a new cheese comes in, we always put it on tasters to get feedback from the customers." This step is key for gathering intel about the unique preferences of customers in your area – it will vary from one shop to the next. Most importantly, this offers a chance to engage

> "Sometimes the story of how the cheese is made sells the cheese more than the look and the taste"

CONTINENTAL CHEESE SALES BETWEEN **2020** AND **2022** ROSE IN **VALUE BY 2.2%** BUT TO FELL IN **VOLUME BY 4.5%**

SOURCE: MINTEL'S 2022 CHEESE REPORT

customers and get them used to stepping out of their usual routine. "Most prove to be a great hit, some we probably wouldn't stock again, but all are good for discussion," Lavinia says. "Two recent additions that have been selling particularly well in the last few weeks are the Chevre d'Argental (goat's milk) and the Brebirousse d'Argental (sheep's milk) from France."

Look to award-winners for an idea of where to start with international cheeses – they're sure to wow customers, and the credentials of an award win might help convince them to purchase something a little more out of the ordinary. "Cheeses that have won awards are always reliable sellers," Lavinia says. "For example, Montagnolo Affine, Ossau Iraty, and Von Mühlenen Gruyère."

Top tips for displays

Many customers will need a bit of a nudge to get out of their usual cheese buying habits, so it's important to think long and hard about how you will display your international cheeses and build conversation around them in the shop. "It is hard to introduce a new cheese into the cheese room, let alone an international cheese," admits Toby Edwards, deli and cheese room manager at Friday Street Farm Shop. "Being in Suffolk, a lot of our regulars like to stick to what they like, e.g. Baron Bigod or Suffolk Gold." Why not take advantage of your customers' favourites by adding new international varieties where the most popular cheeses are typically stocked? You might just spark a conversation about a new tester as they make the rounds for their go-to cheeses.

It doesn't hurt that Friday Street Farm Shop has a unique cheese room that offers an immersive shopping experience for customers. Visitors have a chance to see the cheeses at their best – and biggest – rather than at a typical serve-over counter. "When it comes to international cheeses, we can give them a proper good showcase event, displaying cut pieces as well as how the cheese looks whole," Toby says. He has successfully integrated a number of international cheeses into the shop's regular rotation using this method, including Alp Blossom, a Bavarian cheese coated in flowers and herbs; Hornkäse, a creamy cheese from Germany with flavours of truffle; and Red Wine Farmer, a Swiss variety from Affineur Walo with a fabulously rich taste. "All of these started as either a recommendation or were spotted at events, then we slowly began pushing them with showcase events. All three have now become regulars in our cheese room," Toby continues.

If your shop doesn't have the luxury of a cheese room, you can still create displays that inspire exploration. For example, you can't go wrong with separating cheeses into the countries and regions where they're made. This is a great opportunity to add informative signage about the history of cheeses in these regions – but Lavinia suggests keeping all your blue cheeses together to showcase them as a whole.

6 TIPS FOR SELLING INTERNATIONAL CHEESES

- Work with your customers as individuals to find the best match, or offer alternatives to their favourites
- Don't be afraid to push the boat out with something new, it could lead to your new top seller
- Don't ever be afraid to show your passion for cheese – storytelling can help cinch a sale
- Try offering promotional themes by country, for example 'buy three French cheeses, get 20% off'
- Create an immersive experience with tastings and ask for customer feedback
- Listen to your customers' recommendations too





AN INDEPENDENT SPIRIT

The Bell family has been going its own way since the 80s, and the cheeses created couldn't be finer

Speciality cheese in the UK is a category particularly indebted to a handful of pioneers: adventurous trail blazers willing to do things a little different to revive and reinvent the heritage of farmhouse cheese that we hold so dear. Meeting customers' demand for authenticity, provenance and a true diversity of cheeses will likely have brought you in the orbit of the Bell family who, in a small corner of North Yorkshire, have played more than their part in the flourishing artisan cheese scene we easily take for granted.

Independently minded

Fresh thinking is a big part of the company's origin story. It was in the late 80s that founder Judy Bell set out to create a quality alternative for the many cheese lovers suffering with cow's milk allergies. Forging a new category in a time when 'free-from' barely existed, Judy bagged her first gold award at the Nantwich International Cheese Show in 1989 with her soft white ewe's milk cheese Olde York, still a popular choice. Judy's legacy is honoured in many of the cheeses on sale today. Her Mediterranean style cheese – now known as Mrs Bell's Salad Cheese – was her very first recipe, first made in 1987 and then launched commercially in 1989.

In fact, Judy's passion for ewe's milk cheeses brought some of the UK's most iconic sheep cheeses to the board, but in 1995 the family decided to expand into cow's milk, launching Yorkshire's first blue cheese in 30 years. Yorkshire Blue has itself turned out to be something of a bobby-dazzler, winning over judging panels and cheese lovers alike with a mild creaminess that develops into rich, complex flavours. Mrs Bell's Blue came along in the same year and is Shepherds Purse's most awarded cheese on the international stage, having won more than 80 top awards. It's also a favourite of Rick Stein and Raymond Blanc, and considered to be one of the best ewes' milk blue cheeses in Europe. The meadowy sweetness coming from the sheep milk contrasts beautifully with the umami notes of salty blue cheese to deliver a rich, complex flavour.

A new generation

Bluemin White, the first cheese developed by Judy's daughter Katie Matten, in 2010, has since won a three-star Great Taste Award, Super Golds and Golds at the World Cheese Awards, and Golds at British Cheese Awards. So, it was with confidence that in 2012 Judy handed the reins of the business to Katie and her sister, Caroline Bell, beginning a second generation of pioneering cheesemaking for the company.

That year saw the launch of Harrogate Blue, a creamy cow's milk cheese matured for a minimum of 10 weeks. The cheese has been a hit since day one, winning its first award just two weeks after launch. In 2019 it was joined by Northern Blue – a punchier version of Yorkshire Blue made with a stronger strain of Penicillium Roquefort.

Since Caroline and Katie took the reins the business has more than doubled in size, and at a time when so many successful brands are acquired to sit within a broader portfolio, the continued independence of this family company helps it to stay true to their founding principles. The agility this allows was witnessed in 2021, when the cheesemaker accelerated a product launch to help out sheep farmers struggling to sell their milk during the pandemic; a campaign that helped win them Cheese Hero Awards at the Virtual Cheese Awards. In 2022 Judy sadly died, having made an incredible mark on the UK's cheese and speciality food scene. The loss has been felt deeply, however with Caroline and Katie heading up the close team they are energized for the next stage. With growing demand for high-quality, artisanal cheeses, they remain committed to operating with exceptionally high technical standards, making world-class, consistently delicious cheeses in a sustainable way that promotes good health for people and the planet. These philosophies are the bedrock from which they continue to grow.

> "In a time when so many successful brands are acquired to sit within a broader portfolio, the continued independence of this family company runs through everything the business does"



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DIGGING DEEP

Think you know Wales' oldest dairy co-operative? An exciting foray under the earth is giving the farmer-owner Creameries a fresh new direction

You'll know that winning repeat custom for your cheese counter isn't just about delivering excellent-tasting cheese, though that's a great start. It's also about the stories, those ties back to communities of producers and the lore of the land that pull at the heartstrings of a deliberating shopper. If you're a buyer keen to bring strong ethics, provenance, and heritage to your cheese counter, you need to know the news from a co-operative at the heart of North West Wales' historic pasture lands.

A fresh look

First up is an enticing relaunch for the cooperative's cavern-aged cheeses, which have been consolidated into a single Handcrafted selection of very special territorials. "We noticed the cavern-aged cheeses becoming really popular," says marketing manager Kirstie Jones, "so having the whole Handcrafted range switch to cavern-aged works really well. We upgraded the Cheddar with Leek from our every day range because we found that when it was matured in the cavern that amazing leek flavour really came through but with a sweetness too, which is lovely. We have a brand new Red Leicester in the range too, which like the rest of its family, are matured underground in the slate caverns near Harlech. The change in the atmospheric pressure down in the mine seems to bring out a sweeter character."

This off-grid, natural maturation chamber is not only ideal from a technical and environmental perspective but has a conceptual resonance too, tapping into the deeper mythologies around Wales as an ancient land of folklore and legend. The new branding for the range capitalises with its evocative new product names: Cavern Platinum (a Welsh Cheddar); Cavern Ruby (Red Leicester); Cavern Emerald (Welsh Cheddar with leek) and Cavern Onyx (Welsh Cheddar with Penderyn whisky).

Made to bespoke recipes distinct from the Creameries' core cheeses, the cavern aged products really are home grown Welsh Jewels. "The original Handcrafted range was named with descriptors of the cheese," explains Kirstie. "We were keen to get cleaner labels out there and brighter colours. The colour scheme echos the Welsh flag too, so it's a subtle nod to the provenance. With the names we're really tapping into the idea that precious jewels are what's produced by the pressure in underground caverns." The Creamery has kept the pack size – 200g vertical wedges – the same. "They lend themselves really well to a cheese board," says Kirstie.

> "We're really tapping into the idea that the underground pressure produces the Welsh Crown Jewels of cheese"

Tapping new seams

The Creamery is also working through an exciting increase in production. In order to support the growth there will be an ongoing recruitment drive for local farmers as the expansion becomes operational. Welcoming more producers to the fold, and gradually increasing the volumes of milk taken in and cheese created, will take these distinctive Welsh cheeses onto an international stage. "Our capacity will be scaling up from 17,000 tonnes to 23,000 tonnes annually," says Kirstie, "so we'll be building up production gradually. Our Dragon range – 'proudly owned by our farmers' – is something we really promote. The co-operative is wholly owned by the farmers; no one else in the business has a share."

The additional volume of milk, supplied by local farmers and processed by the Creamery, could win fans for the brand across the globe. A new deal sees the USA become a new international market for the Welsh cheeses. "The extra volumes we'll be producing open up new opportunities for export. We're finding the cheeses are popular across the UK through multiple retailers, independents, wholesale and our recently launched online shop, but opening up to more international buyers brings a whole new potential market for us." These are exciting times for a business firmly rooted in the iconic landscape of North West Wales, and for buyers ready to sell these stories into your own community of cheese lovers.





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A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHEESEMONGERY

Ellen Manning explores the past, present and future of the art of selling cheese

Our love of cheese is a longstanding one. So it's no surprise cheesemongery dates back centuries. From cheese taxes in the 10th century to the growth of shops dedicated to cheese, the advent of cheese counters and pre-packaged chunks of cheese in supermarkets, and the resurgence of traditional cheesemongers and delis we see nowadays, cheesemongery is a longstanding tradition that is ever-changing but ever-enduring. Yet no tradition survives without evolution and innovation to keep pace with the world around it. And cheesemongery is no exception.

A rich history

For Ned Palmer, cheesemonger and author of *A Cheesemonger's History of the British Isles*, the history of cheesemongery is fascinating. His research took him back to the reign of King Aethelred in the 10th century, when cheesemongers were taxed in the lead up to Christmas – an indication of the importance the festive season would continue to have for cheesemongery up to this day. The business of cheese is something that pops up throughout the history books, Palmer observes, from its sale at local markets to the introduction of the 'Ordinances of the Cheesemongers', along with regulation in a bid to prevent 'middlemen' from profiting and inflating prices. Over the past few centuries, the cheese industry has seen huge changes, from the advent of railways allowing the transport of milk into towns, meaning farmers' wives stopped making their own cheese, and the introduction of factories and refrigeration which turned cheese into a global business.

Innovation evolves

But there are perhaps two major factors in cheesemongery's evolution – packaging and supermarkets. "One of the problems which we still have today is you open a wheel of cheese then you've got this big open face that starts to dry out. You've got to open it because otherwise it's just not that inviting, but as soon as you do, it starts to dry. So if you're a shop in a quiet town, it's difficult to keep your cheese in good condition and you end up wasting a lot." As a high maintenance product, packaging was to be a game-changer, allowing easy, convenient chunks of cheese to be pre-packed. Yet that evolution came with its own issues, with Palmer's research turning up concerns in some circles that packaging was a symptom of "declining tradesmanship". "It's too easy," he explains. "There's no art in selling that compared to your lovely Cheddar that you have to break down into pieces, which is quite a skill. It's a craft."

It's one issue in a long story of evolution and innovation. And the advent of modern ways of making, storing and selling cheese can sound like they spelled the end of traditional cheesemongery. But recent years have seen its resurgence thanks, in part, to the return of farmers'-style markets like Borough Market. "That seemed to set something off with markets around the UK," adds Palmer. On top of that, the stark reality of the effect of the Covid-19 lockdown on the British artisan cheese industry – threatening to doom many makers – served to galvanise a campaign to promote British cheese and a return to a more direct

> "There's a continued interest in local food production, food security, environmental practices – our customers are more in tune with those things and that, in turn, helps dictate where we go in terms of the business"



way of selling to consumers, either through cheesemongers and delis, or online methods.

Cheesemongery today

For today's cheesemongers, the business has evolved to mix tradition with modern technology and tastes. Stephen Fleming, from Leeds-based George & Joseph, says one of the biggest changes he's seen in recent years is the resurgence in British-produced cheeses. "It just continues to keep on growing, which is brilliant for us as cheesemongers because it gives us lots of products to talk about and to sell," he says. "There's always something new to discover." In the 12 years he's been operating, Fleming has seen customers become more adventurous in what they buy thanks to growing interest and increasing availability of artisan cheeses. "That's definitely a trend I've seen. Not just novelty, but there's a continued interest in local food production, food security, environmental practices – our customers are more in tune with those things and that, in turn, helps dictate where we go in terms of the business."

That continued interest helps balance the drive for convenience, says Fleming, and means he doesn't feel cheesemongery is under threat from supermarkets in a way they perhaps once were. "An Aldi opened pretty much opposite our shop a few years ago. At the time, some of our customers asked if we were worried and I said no, because what they sell is a very different proposition to what we sell." But did they see a drop in customers? "It turns out we saw an increase – partly because they provided 100 parking spaces in an area where there's not much parking." Add to that the range of cheese he sells and the way it's sold, and he keeps his customers interested. "Some of them may not have even seen a whole cheese – all they've ever seen are oblong blocks that are vacuum packed and plastic-packs that you get in the supermarket. When we show them what a whole Cheddar looks like they're fascinated. There is a definite curiosity and people are realising there's a difference between the supermarket and what we sell."

That point of difference is something Oli Smith, owner of the Bristol Cheesemonger after he took over from founder Rosie Morgan, thinks is key – though he acknowledges there have been occasions where he's been asked why someone should buy a cheese from him that they can get in a supermarket cheaper and more easily. It is a factor that has influenced the evolution of cheesemongery, he admits. "One way some of the cheesemakers we work with have decided to navigate that is to pull back from supermarkets completely. Some are choosing to differentiate themselves that way."



> "There will always be people pushing the boundaries in any industry and it's important that people do that. At heart, though, we're very traditional – maybe even a bit romantic – when it comes to cheesemongery"

A blend of old and new

The joy of a traditional cheesemonger may be in the old-school ways of sourcing, buying, storing and selling cheese, but any cheesemonger in 2023 will admit that technology has helped their world evolve. "The internet is wonderful for being able to research not only products, but practices as well," says Fleming. "Take the way we wrap cheese – we do it the traditional way, in wax paper, and there's techniques for doing that. So I spent a lot of time on YouTube watching videos and other people doing it." Add online selling to that – a saviour for many cheesemongers and cheesemakers during the Covid pandemic. "You would imagine it's hard to sell cheese online because people want to taste it and try it. But we seemed to shift a heck of a lot." Social media also helps and for Fleming, the impact is instant and obvious, with examples of customers arriving in the shop 15 minutes after a particular cheese has been posted on their channels asking for it. Steve Barney, from The Cheesery in Dundee, agrees. "For us social media has had a big impact," he says. "It's a great way to reach a large number of customers and it gives us a platform to engage with them too which is really nice. It also helps us reach a slightly younger audience too, exposing tomorrow's cheese lovers to the amazing world of cheese!"

Like Fleming, Barney has seen a rise in online orders and delivery and subscription services within the world of cheesemongery, with many customers sticking to it post-pandemic. But he is hopeful that any evolution hasn't seen the end to the 'in-shop experience'. "That's where the traditions are key and hopefully always will be. Buying cheese is an incredibly sensory experience; when you walk in you instantly smell the cheese, visually you can see all the wonderfully diverse types of cheese and, of course, you get to try the cheese too." Smith agrees, citing the "wildcard" conversations that see a customer walking out with a cheese they would never have picked up without his help.

A promising future

With so much change already behind, where next for cheesemongery? It's no secret there are challenges ahead, from rising costs to changing consumer habits. But given the fact it's survived so far and rolled with the many punches, cheesemongers are confident it will always have a place. "It's interesting because supermarkets seem to be closing their deli counters, which I guess is great because more people come to us," says Fleming. "But I suppose there is a question around the reason why they're doing that." He also admits technology and convenience could see further developments, from video guidance to vending machines. "But I still believe customers really value human interaction, which is something you're not going to be able to replace by having a vending machine full of cut pieces of cheese. These things will have their place of course. But I still think it's going to be a place for the human cheesemonger. there to offer advice and guidance."

Barney agrees. "I think there will always be people pushing the boundaries in any industry and it's important that people do that. At heart, though, we're very traditional – maybe even a bit romantic - when it comes to cheesemongery. We want our customers to have a personal experience. We want to find out what cheeses they like and suggest something new. We want to know what plans they have at the weekend and guide them accordingly. We want them to taste different cheeses and leave with cheeses they are going to love and we want them to come back and share their experiences with us. In a world where people talk face to face less and less it's nice to have a small bubble where people can come and do that. Plus they get to leave with fantastic cheeses, produced by amazing, dedicated cheesemakers and served by friendly, knowledgeable and passionate cheesemongers."

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GOING FOR GOLD

The beautiful Shropshire Blue has long been a champion in the hearts of Clawson's cheesemakers, but you don't have to take their word for it

We all know that cheese awards can bring lucrative attention and sales, but if you're in any doubt of the pride that's at stake, just head to the Clawson homepage, where faces beam from a faded black and white photo of four women proudly clutching shining trophies. The dairy's love affair with silverware has been long and lustrous, with its Blue Stilton scooping the Perpetual Challenge Cup in 1953 at the London Dairy Show.

> "Shropshire Blue is a largely undiscovered British cheese. Our recipe results in a creamy and buttery but fairly mellow flavour, which makes it the perfect introduction to blue cheese"

At the time of going to print, the Clawson team is preparing another big award bid, for the International Cheese & Dairy Awards. In 2022 its Shropshire Blue beat over 4,000 cheeses from around the world to be crowned Supreme Champion Cheese. It was a huge coup for the Leicestershire co-operative, which is owned by the 31 farmers whose milk makes the golden and blue-veined truckles. "Shropshire Blue is a largely undiscovered British blue cheese," says senior brand manager Nikki Matthews. "Our recipe results in a creamy and buttery but fairly mellow flavour, which makes it the perfect introduction to blue cheese!"

The rich, golden cheese is an innovation of the co-operative, which was created in 1912 by 12 farmers looking for a reliable market for their milk. More than 100 years on, their hard work has paid off. Its signature Stilton has won the dairy a legion of loyal customers as well as critical acclaim; add in a range of classic Stilton recipes, popular fruit blends, savoury blends and the majestic Rutland Red, and you have a stellar range of English cheeses that have won just about every award going. Here's to their incredible silverware cabinet, and the truly great cheeses that keep winning new fans.





A GUARANTEE OF QUALITY

A commitment to sustainability is at the core of DalterFood Group's strategies

Sustainability is a key value for DalterFood Group, one of the major players of the Italian and international dairy sector. Every day it strives to improve the environmental impact and sustainability of the supply chain of its Parmigiano Reggiano, which is produced in its two mountain cheese factories.

This is a solid undertaking that has allowed the entire supply chain to obtain, for the second year in a row, the voluntary Animal Welfare certification according to the protocol of Classyfarm, the Italian National Reference Centre for Animal Welfare. Providing highly distinctive and undeniable added value, the certification attests that the companies to which it is given and all the supply chain players observe precise requirements in four macro areas of their businesses: company and personnel management; facilities and equipment; living conditions of the animals on the farms and biosafety.

A responsible process

The supply chain is constantly monitored in all phases. This starts with the purchase of milk, provided by 40 farms, mostly located in the Reggio Emilia Apennines near to the relevant cheese factory, with which DalterFood has built a strong partnership over time. The milk provided is then processed at the two cheese factories, both owned by the Group, the Colline di Selvapiana e Canossa factory and the Colline del Cigarello e Canossa factory (RE), where master cheesemakers, as guardians and interpreters of ancient knowledge, turn it into excellent Parmigiano Reggiano with their skilful hands and expert eye.

To support the supply chain, it is also essential to have monitoring and integration of Corporate Social Responsibility, with a view to reducing the environmental impact of individual units, from the maturing and storage rooms to the cutting and packaging factory. This focus on excellence then continues in the Sant'Ilario d'Enza factory, where the group has over 20 packaging lines for all the cuts required by the market, including customised ones.

DalterFood Group's Parmigiano Reggiano has also achieved compliance with standard UNI EN ISO 22005:2008 on Agri-Food Supply Chain Traceability.

There is great attention to detail placed on where all its raw materials are by establishing and applying strict protocols and procedures. This, together with the extensive experience developed in cheese factories, creates an ethical pathway where every phase of processing is closely monitored to help produce a premium product, which represents a piece of national agri-food heritage and the tradition and typical characteristics of a region.

A mark of quality

What DalterFood Group provides for its Italian and foreign customers is, therefore, a true virtuous model that guarantees a controlled and certified supply chain. Not only for conventional Parmigiano Reggiano, but also in Mountain Parmigiano Reggiano – which has a distinct flavour and aroma thanks to milk exclusively from cows grazing in the mountains – and Parmigiano Reggiano 'solo di Pezzata Rossa Italiana' (only from Italian Pezzata Rossa Cows), a super-premium cheese exclusively made at the Colline del Cigarello e Canossa factory using milk from cows reared at the Le Boccede farm on the Reggio Emilia hillside, the only one on the Italian and international market and both organic and Mountain Product-certified, as well as in organic Parmigiano Reggiano. Altogether, 180 whole Parmigiano Reggiano cheeses are processed every day, and matured for various ages, from a minimum of 12 months up to over 40 months.

For over 40 years DalterFood Group has specialised in the production, cutting and packaging of grated and portioned cheeses distributed in 34 different countries and is the voice of the Italian dairy tradition worldwide. It is the ideal partner for the food industry, large-scale retail trade and Horeca. They guarantee high standards of quality and safety through stringent product, process and environment controls.

> "For over 40 years DalterFood Group has been promoting the Italian culinary traditions by selecting, portioning and packaging the finest PDO aged Italian cheeses and other delicacies, which it distributes in 34 different countries"



IN FROM THE MEADOWS

Storytelling is everything in cheese selling, and Affineur Walo's l'Antoine has quite the tale to tell

The very best cheeses have a really good story to tell, whether it's the tale of the pastureland, the pedigree of the dairy herds, or the personal history of the cheesemaker. For l'Antoine de Fribourg, a semi-hard raw cow's milk cheese from Switzerland's Affineur Walo, it's the recipe that provides a perfect yarn to inspire customers.

> "Affineur Walo's quest for perfection was inspired by his research into a 17th century shepherd and mercenary from Gruyère who became a celebrated cheesemaker"

L'Antoine is the result of affineur Walo von Mühlenen's search for a cheese to typify the alpine region of Gruyère near Fribourg, with a long tradition of artisan summer cheeses made on open wood fires. But while the lush pastures and high flower meadows of the Gruyère district produce some excellent seasonal cheeses, a long search didn't reveal any dairies making a cheese that carried the character of the land all year around. This mattered: Walo's quest for perfection was inspired by his research into a 17th century shepherd and mercenary from Gruyère who became a celebrated cheesemaker. In battle Antoine, the son of an Alpine herdsman, sang a song of his mountain homeland and returned to the region to make cheeses that echoed the sweetness and floral notes of the land.

It was when Walo happened across a rather special cheese in a 100-year-old maturation cellar that he realised he was on to something. "Made in a cheese dairy above Lake Gruyère according to a traditional recipe, it was delicious and brought a touch of melody, but was not yet a revelation," he explains. "I decided to give the cheese a second chance and we let it mature for some time. After another four months, the cheese, now nine months old, was simply stunning. This wonderful cellar had worked its magic!" And the recipe? A local tradition reputed to have its origins in the diary of Antoine himself.





HOW TO FUTURE-PROOF YOUR CHEESECOUNTER

Cheese Buyer explores the powers set to shape the sector for years to come

The British cheese industry has seen a raft of forces impacting its success over the past few years – read more in the report on page 16 – and while some of these are temporary glitches to be navigated, others prove themselves to be fully-formed movements shaping the sector. Our approaches must evolve to suit the changing consumer, financial and political tides, but this doesn't mean holding back on what makes fine cheese great. Indeed, by retraining our focus on quality, provenance and connection – and keeping abreast of the opportunities that arise – the fine cheese industry can be a force for good when facing the challenges ahead.

Proving value-for-money

The cost-of-living crisis is one such challenge, with cheesemakers expecting to be pushed to demonstrate good value. "Cheese will come under pressure amidst the cost-of-living crisis, together with the wider food and drink category, with wide agreement that money concerns would make people spend less on cheese," says a Mintel spokesperson, referencing the body's recent *The Future of Cheese Global Market Report 2023*. "The need for brands to demonstrate how their products deliver value for money is made particularly pressing by the popular view that own-label cheese is just as good quality as branded."

According to James Grant, owner of No2 Pound Street cheesemonger, the independent retailer has an important role to play in keeping cheese lovers satisfied but not out of pocket. "Specialist cheese shops and delis need to offer menu advice, and we have to continue to shout out about the quality of cheese and goodness it offers. Affordable nutritious and tasty meals can be made." Educating customers will play a key part when it comes to maintaining sales levels and appreciation of cheese – without leaving them short.

Mintel states that the squeeze on purse strings is only going to get more intense. "Own-label's role in ensuring the grocers' value-for-money image in cheese has been heightened in the income squeeze, with keen interest in tips for cheaper alternatives to favourite cheeses." With artisan cheesemakers and mongers not being keen to go down the discount route, smart usage of cheese could be the solution. "A focus on how their flavour packs a punch is needed for brands to justify their higher prices, to tap into the popular view that flavourful cheese helps make meals more interesting. Many people looking to packed lunches and at-home meals creates opportunities for brands to encourage 'trading up while trading down'."

Those who have cooked with cheese will be aware that the stronger the cheese, the less a recipe will require, and *Cheese Buyer* readers should use this knowledge to the advantage of their patrons and business. "Recipe ideas and menu cards offered when buying cheese are important," James says. "Using full, rich flavours to enhance an otherwise bland dish and avoid using too much cheese; making cheese the main ingredient in meals... using a mature rather than vintage cheese - this could be a swap out for a higher priced meat/fish meal. Try using a cheese sauce on a smaller piece of fish, reducing the cost of the fish by using a small piece of tasty cheese for a creamy sauce instead."

> "There is no future for massive scale industrial dairy farming. Such systems are contributing to climate change, polluting rivers, destroying biodiversity and compromising the welfare of the cows"

RETAILER INSIGHT: JAMES GRANT, OWNER OF NO2 POUND STREET



How important is indies' role in educating their customers about quality over quantity?
This is vital. Knowledge is key. Indies need to be focused on promoting the benefits of artisan cheese, especially over industrial. A sustainable approach and ethical livestock husbandry is a conversation that needs to be had. Consumers need to know about the industrial giants taking all the lions share of business and damaging our environment in the process. Artisan cheese farmers that are at one with regenerative land management need to be applauded. What goes in to their cheese is pure goodness born from sheer toil for the love of their craft.

In your view, what does the future of the British cheese industry hold?
I believe that artisan cheesemakers will continue to spring up. Communities are really pulling together to support each other. There is an understanding that small producers are at one with their cheeses. These cheese are consistently better than supermarket offerings and this is being realised.

What might cheese lovers be surprised to know about mass-produced cheese?
Large supermarkets have been known to repurpose their cheeses, if not sold, and remould and sell again. Not sure I'd want any of that. Small producers make cheese to order and to their customer demands to avoid wastage.

Strategic shopping

Harking back to a habit which a number of us adopted during Covid-19 lockdowns due to necessity – meal planning – is set to be a smart move for consumers yet again in order to avoid food waste. James suggests, "advising the consumer to buy what is needed for their menu planning. Not forgetting the 'housekeeping'; storage is important and reiterated at point of sale. Using all of the cheese including the rind in soups and toppings is another great way to get mileage from your purchase."

Conscientious shoppers aren't set to be entirely focused on prices and value for money as the cost-of-living crisis (hopefully) fades. In 2023 and beyond, a considered purchase is just as likely to include thoughts and opinions around the sustainability of the cheese in question, too. While the sometimes negative press sustainability attracts is sure to continue to be pushed by some, it's important that its excitement and inherent opportunities are promoted and applauded. "Artisan cheese production is a fusion of science, art and culture. As we enter the great agricultural transition, there has never been a better opportunity for a renaissance of British cheeses," begins Patrick Holden, cheesemaker of Hafod Cheddar and founder of the Sustainable Food Trust.

Indeed, the appetite is already growing strong. "The transition will entail moving to production systems operating within the planetary boundaries of climate, nature and people, so cheeses which come from farming systems which deliver in these three areas – reducing emissions, restoring nature and building human capital –will be in demand," he explains. "Sustainable dairy farming offers the opportunity to deliver on all these fronts, especially when cheese is produced on the farm," providing a ripe opportunity for independent sellers of quality, artisan cheeses.

"Independent retailers have massive advantages over supermarkets in this area of sourcing sustainable and local products," agrees Patrick. "They are free from the paralysing proportions of highly centralised distribution systems, they can be fleet of foot and above all they can build personal relationships with their producers. Customers like nothing better than the person who serves them knowing the story behind the food that they are selling, especially if they have visited the relevant farm!"

In order to future proof the success of sustainably produced cheese in your store, Patrick suggests that retailers work to open their customers' eyes to sustainability. "They could set targets which they display to their customers on the percentage of local seasonal and sustainably produced products they sell, including cheeses," he says, "and display photographs of the people who make the cheese in the store and make sure the labels tell the story."

"A well-informed customer should be the most prized asset of an indie retailer," Patrick continues. "They will be loyal and the more they know, the less they will wish to buy supermarket cheese, which these days comes mainly from industrial scale dairy farms, often from cows that never get out to grass. There is no future for massive scale industrial dairy farming. Such systems are contributing to climate change, polluting rivers, destroying biodiversity and compromising the welfare of the cows." The tide is turning on industrially-made cheese. "When we buy cheap Cheddar and other cheeses at supermarkets, we are paying a dishonestly low price because it doesn't reflect the damage done to climate, nature or people. Because of this, it's worth paying more for cheese where you know the story behind its production."

WHAT'S NEXT FOR PLANT-BASED CHEESE

According to Mintel's report, vegan cheeses are set to play a "limited" role in the cheese market, but with many businesses entering the space in recent years, visibility and availability is seeing a boost. "This new product development (NPD) comes across, at first glance, as warranted, as 37% of people say there should be a greater variety of these products available in supermarkets," comments a Mintel spokesperson. "However, just 20% of people who eat and buy cheese name such variants as one of their top three choices to reduce the environmental impact of their cheese usage, including just 41% of those calling for a wider offering."

Catering to demanding palates is key to the success of plant-based cheese, believes Mintel. "Looking ahead, ensuring that plant-based variants deliver on the eating experience will be key, including in key occasions like with bread and as an ingredient in hot meals. The strong view of flavourful cheeses as making meals more interesting underlines the pivotal importance of this."





KEEPING QUALITY AS KING

Natasha Spencer-Joliffe explores how to sell fine cheese in a challenging landscape

From luxurious cheeseboards to tasty picnic favourites and premium sandwiches, cheese remains a sought-after symbol of occasion and permissible indulgence. With varieties expanding, indie cheese retailers seek to showcase a broad selection of the finest cheeses from around the world.

Cost-of-living crisis affects cheese choice

In a changing consumer landscape, typified by the cost-of-living crisis, shoppers are looking for more from their cheese – and their indie retailer – to get the most from their money. Today, the cost-of-living crisis is a key factor influencing consumers' decision-making when selecting cheese.

The income squeeze will take its toll on cheese, with 42% of people who eat and buy cheese saying money concerns would make them spend less, market intelligence company Mintel's 2022 research reveals. Shopper behaviour in 2022 led to less cheese on the dining table in France, with consumers opting for simpler menus, Kantar research found.

Given the current cost of living issues, 'premium value for money' is a very important factor for indie cheese retailers. "Together with the popular view that own-label cheese is just as good quality as branded, this puts the leading brands under pressure to prove their value," says a Mintel spokesperson.

Therefore, indie retailers have to work hard to deliver a premium offering and all-round experience that competes with own-brand, mass-market cheese in supermarkets. Specialist knowledge, dedicated customer service and a fine selection of premium international cheeses offer indie retailers key differentiating factors from supermarkets, providing a competitive advantage.

Despite the crisis fiercely shaping consumer spending habits, indie retailers can still attract shoppers and appeal to their shifting decision-making behaviour by piquing their interest with an expansive collection of fine-tasting cheeses that provide a sensorial experience at a good price. Indie cheese retailers that house unique and sought-after varieties can tap into cheese consumers' desire for tastes, combinations and textures that stand out from what they have previously sampled and bought.

Maximise flavour to pack a sales punch

Flavour is a significant differentiator in cheese and a vital way for indie retailers to communicate taste and convey their sensorial experience. The Mintel spokesperson adds that luxury remains a crucial message to explore "to leverage the oft-seen 'trading up while trading down' mindset.

"A focus on how their flavour packs a punch is needed for cheese brands to justify their higher prices, given the widespread view that own-brand matches them on quality."

Luxuriating the cheese experience

Creating a connection between flavour and meal occasions can propel the popularity of indie retailers' specialist cheeses. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic and governmental restrictions, the UK saw an additional 1.2 billion in-home cheese occasions in 2020 compared to 2019, signalling a year-on-year rise of 20%, insights from the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) reveal.

"Positioning their cheese as elevating the whole meal through upgrading a small element of it would tap into the popular view that flavourful cheese helps make meals more interesting," says the Mintel spokesperson. Research from Mintel reveals that 69% of people hold this view, including 76% who say money concerns would make them spend less on cheese.

> "Creating a connection between flavour and meal occasions can propel the popularity of indie retailers' specialist cheeses"



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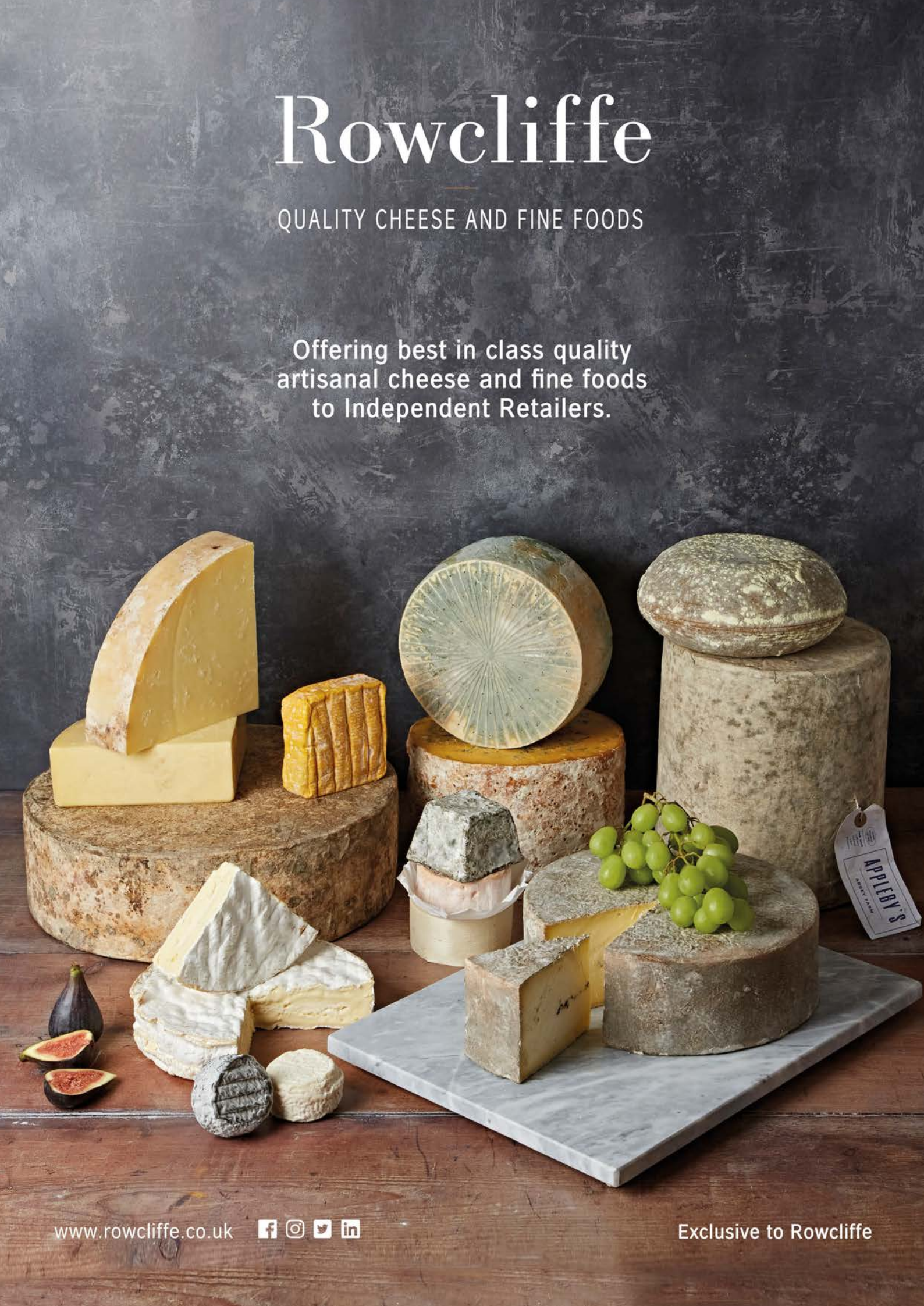


*No. 1 Greek & Cypriot Cheese Brand, SOURCE: Nielsen, Total Cheese Report, GB Grocery Multiples, Volume Sales MAT to 31.12.22

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