2021

INSPIRATIONAL Cheese RETAILERS

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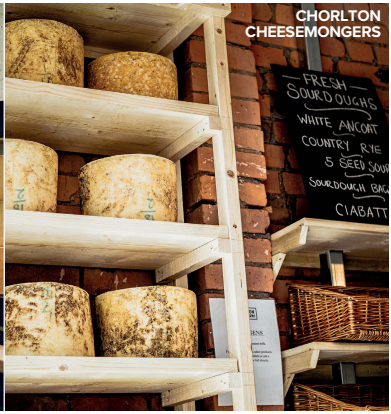
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NEAL'S YARD DAIRY



CHORLTON CHEESEMONGERS

Welcome

Welcome to *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*, a publication produced by the team behind *Speciality Food* and kindly supported by Le Gruyère AOP.

We have been motivated to produce this new publication by the people and businesses at the front line of the artisan cheese industry: cheesemongers.

It's been a challenging year for the cheese industry, but the cheese shops which have survived serve as a reminder that when the going gets tough we should innovate and collaborate – and I hope that the stories within the following pages will inspire us all to do more of this in 2021.

Read on for tales of community spirit-boosting, industry-supporting and inspiration aplenty.

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How We Put This Guide Together


FUNK

It will come as a surprise to nobody to hear that the cheese industry has experienced more than its fair share of challenges over the past 12 months, but the role of the independent cheese retailer has shone out as a pillar of inspiration and strength – for the industry and consumers alike. Innovation has been rife, and the value of cheesemongers as a community hub has been reiterated time and again.

For the team behind *Speciality Food*, the time has come to shine the spotlight on the retailers which have proven to be an integral part of the cheese industry over the course of this challenging period. Within the following pages we've collated the stories of 20 inspirational retailers, and to say that it was quite an undertaking to narrow the list of retailers we think deserve to be highlighted would be an understatement.

To produce this list, and then to condense it, was a sizeable task and couldn't have been done without the help of our friends and colleagues within the speciality cheese industry. A number of eminent cheese professionals were contacted by the *Speciality Food* team in order to find out which cheese retailers had particularly inspired them in recent times, and I'm happy to say that they were only too pleased to oblige. Their recommendations came in droves – a signal of the high regard in which the industry holds independent retailers.

We also shared a survey across *Speciality Food* platforms and those of our sister consumer publication, *Great British Food*. It was important to us that the voice of the discerning cheese shopper was heard in this publication, and their responses served to prove what we already thought to be the case – that independent cheese retailers are a highly valued part of consumers' shopping experience, now more than ever.

The recommendations shared by industry experts and shoppers were distilled into the 20 retailer profiles shared in this publication.

HELEN DAYSH
HEAD OF MARKETING UK AT LE GRUYÈRE AOP

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Independent retailers have played an integral role in the popularity of Le Gruyère AOP across the UK for generations – sharing the stories behind the cheese and offering a taste of the cheese at its best – and we are delighted to sponsor this publication in order to bring this project to life.

We hope this publication will serve as inspiration for independent retailers across the UK and beyond.



LA FROMAGERIE





MAINSTREET TRADING COMPANY



SHERIDANS CHEESEMONGERS





GODFREY C WILLIAMS & SONS



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In an age of increasing homogenisation, it's reassuring to know that there's at least one international product which is still made by the same artisanal and very human methods which have been used in its production for hundreds of years. Despite its worldwide recognition, Le Gruyère AOP is no factory-made product, but a traditional cheese which is created daily in the 170 small dairies which shelter under the Le Gruyère AOP umbrella.

These producers really are small, too. Drive through the rolling foothills of Western Switzerland and you may blink and miss them. A medium-sized dairy often employs only two or three people and may produce 14 wheels of Gruyère AOP a day.

But this is a cheese made in a way that is quite unique, and its story begins in the lush grasslands of the cantons of Fribourg, Vaud, Neuchâtel, Jura and the Bern area, where alpine cows produce the high quality milk which is essential for the making of Gruyère AOP. The cheese is an entirely natural product: the milk comes from small herds of animals which have been fed on grass in the summer and hay in the winter. No silage is used and nor are any preservatives or additives. The unpasteurised milk is delivered to the cheesemaker twice per day, every day, and although it must be poured into the vat no more than 18 hours after milking, early consignments will be ready to begin the cheesemaking process a very short time after milking. In order to ensure complete freshness, the small herds must be located no further than 12.4 miles from the dairy.





> IT'S IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THAT NO CORNERS ARE CUT WITH THE PRODUCTION OF THIS ENTIRELY NATURAL CHEESE; NO SILAGE IS USED AND NOR ARE ANY ADDITIVES OR PRESERVATIVES. THIS IS AN ARTISANALLY MADE, TRADITION-RICH CHEESE WHICH JUST HAPPENS TO POSSESS AN APPEAL WHICH HAS PROVED NEAR-UNIVERSAL

If you have noticed one or two rules being laid down here, then this is what Le Gruyère AOP is all about. To ensure the balance of flavour and quality of a cheese which is sold at different ages, and is made by so many little dairies, strict rules ensure conformity of both character and quality right across the board.

This does not, however, mean that there are not the same little differences consistent with being a live product.

HOW TO CUT

Cut the wheel in half using a cheesewire then cut into quarters using a double-handled knife – halve these quarters into eighths, then cut the top half into three wedges and the bottom into six slices. Wrap with clingfilm in order to avoid contact with the air.



DID YOU KNOW?

Le Gruyère AOP's rich, nutty flavour makes it a delicious partner for a number of foods and drinks. Perfect with French onion soup or in a traditional Swiss fondue, it also pairs well with wines with notes of oak, such as Pinot Gris and Chardonnay.

Le Gruyère AOP is named after a crane which purportedly landed on the warlord who founded the civilisation. You can see depictions of it on statues, flags and doorways in the area, and on wheels of the cheese.





While you will find small seasonal and regional variations, and larger ones in cheeses of different ages, both Gruyère AOP Classic (matured for between five and nine months) and AOP Reserve matured for a minimum of 10 months) differ widely when it comes to flavour notes, many consumers detecting a creamy, floral character in the younger cheeses and a dryer, sometimes crystalline texture and deeper flavour in the longer-matured ones.

To achieve this level of consistency, Le Gruyère AOP closely monitors the product of each cheesemaker, checking paste quality, texture, aroma and appearance. All must conform perfectly to Le Gruyère AOP standards before the cheese can be sold under that name. Each part of the process is entirely separate from the next: milk producers do not produce any cheese and cheese makers may not produce any milk. Cheeses are judged using a points system, and cheese makers are paid more for higher-scoring cheeses, making it in their interest to ensure very high standards. Sub-standard cheeses are identified by Le Gruyère AOP cheese-masters and are either used to make grated cheese or are destroyed.

Retailers will appreciate the fact that Gruyère AOP cheese is an entirely traceable product, thanks to records and checks at every stage of its production. When the milk arrives at the dairy, a sample is taken and held for six months, so that in the event of an imperfection, the milk can be traced back to its supplier. Produced with animal rennet, Le Gruyère AOP is a very traditional cheese which, allowing for a few modern innovations such as heated copper vats, has been made in much the same way for 900 years and is naturally gluten and lactose-free.



The integrity of Le Gruyère AOP is protected by the casein mark and date of production which can be found on the top of the wheel, and the words Le Gruyère AOP along with the number of the dairy, which is imprinted on he rind.

Find out more at gruyere.com



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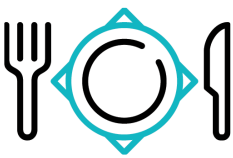
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CHEESE SAVIOUR

Cryer & Stott



LOCATION: ALLERTON BYWATER, WEST YORKSHIRE
FOUNDED: CRYER & STOTT STARTED AS RETAILERS OF CHEESE, BACON AND BASIC PROVISIONS IN WAKEFIELD MARKET IN THE 1960S
OWNER: RICHARD AND CLARE HOLMES BOUGHT THE LAST MARKET STALL IN 1998

In the midst of a challenging year for the fine cheese industry, West Yorkshire-based cheesemonger Cryer & Stott succeeded in an impressive feat: they saved a cheese from 'extinction'. Coverdale, a cheese first produced in the North Yorkshire village of Coverham in 1912, has experienced ups and downs over the decades; its creator Coverdale Dairy was closed down by the Milk Marketing Board in 1987, the cheese was then propped up with the passion of seven of the dairy's staff, before being purchased by Wensleydale in 2000. The line was discontinued in early 2020, but consumer demand for the unique cheese saw Cryer & Stott work with a local, small artisan dairy to recreate it.

"We could not let this amazing cheese steeping in over 100 years of history disappear," says Cryer & Stott's Jemma Ladwitch, business development manager. "We had to do something about it. We saw it as an opportunity to help support a producer in the Dales, and after extensive research chose a fairly new artisan dairy based in the heart of the Dales with their own herd of cows."

Cryer & Stott's decision to partner with a locally based dairy – Home Farmer – fits perfectly with their 'Yorkshire and proud' ethos. "A Yorkshire company through and through, Cryer & Stott are a fierce champion of the 'small producer' and all things 'Yorkshire'," explains Jemma. "They were the perfect choice to make the newly revived authentic Coverdale for us, and we are proud to be investing in keeping hand skills alive in Yorkshire." Today's revitalised Coverdale is an unpasteurised six-





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> IT'S BRILLIANT NEWS THAT WE'LL ALL STILL BE ABLE TO ENJOY THIS HISTORICAL CHEESE THANKS TO CRYER AND STOTT. WELCOME TO YORKSHIRE IS ALL ABOUT CELEBRATING OUR COUNTY'S AMAZING HERITAGE WHILE FOCUSSING ON A SUCCESSFUL FUTURE AND THE DEDICATION OF A SMALL ARTISAN DAIRY IS HELPING US DO JUST THAT. WE'RE INCREDIBLY PROUD OF THE WONDERFUL FRESH PRODUCE WE HAVE IN THE COUNTY AND THIS NEW VERSION OF THE CLASSIC COVERDALE CHEESE IS ANOTHER GREAT ADDITION

week-old crumbly cheese, clothbound with an aesthetically pleasing natural rind. Its spongy texture and subtle tang have proven to be instantly popular with Cryer & Stott's audience – indeed, its launch event at Welcome to Yorkshire Ian Woosnam Senior Classic Golf Tournament in nearby Ilkley in September saw it receive rave reviews from famous faces including footballer Robbie Fowler and cricketer Ryan Sidebottom.

Made in small batches of 20 cheeses every two weeks, its waiting list – covering online, retail and foodservice customers – is proof of its successful reimagining. "In 2021 we are hoping to increase production to meet demand," Jemma states. Cheese lovers across social media have also welcomed the cheese with open arms – demand was so high over the Christmas season that double batches were required.

At once keeping their home county's traditions alive and successfully reimagining a much-loved cheese; long may Cryer & Stott's successful endeavours continue.

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



EWE BEAUTY
A sheep's milk Pecorino-style cheese.
cryerandstott.co.uk



FLATCAPPER BRIE
A rich and creamy northern Brie.
cryerandstott.co.uk



DUKE OF WELLINGTON BLUE
A cheese we created for Her Majesty the Queen in 2014, that has won multiple prestigious awards.
cryerandstott.co.uk

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TECH PIONEER

La Fromagerie

LOCATION: LONDON – HIGHBURY, MARYLEBONE, BLOOMSBURY
OPENED: 1991 **FOUNDER**: PATRICIA MICHELSON

Pivoting a business in the middle of a pandemic is no mean feat, but La Fromagerie's digital makeover has appeared effortless. An early start has paid dividends for the London-based cheesemonger, which jumped into action as soon as the whispers began about a new flu-like virus that was spreading around the world.

> "WE'VE REALLY REINVENTED HOW LA FROMAGERIE WORKS WITHOUT LOSING ANY OF WHO WE ARE"

Back in February 2020, La Fromagerie was already making plans for how the business would evolve when the virus arrived in the UK. "We started upscaling online," says founder Patricia Michelson. "And with that came virtual tutorials because we do so many events, talks and tastings in the shop."

Virtual events have been a boon to La Fromagerie as footfall fell and in-store tastings became impossible. "It's been a marvelous doorway to our business for people to see us virtually," Patricia says.

Reinventing the business

Having come in early to the virtual events world, Patricia wasn't sure quite what to expect – but the digital side of the business took off without a hitch. Bookings stacked up for customers scattered all around the UK who were keen to try something new in lockdown.

La Fromagerie also made the most of the home-cooking trend by offering virtual cook-alongs with head chef Alessandro Grano. Patricia says the digital opportunities are "fantastic" for the business. "We've really reinvented how La Fromagerie works without losing any of who we are," she says.

A taste of Europe

Virtual events also offered La Fromagerie the chance to bring its inimitable stock of European cheeses to customers in a new and much more personal way, by featuring cheese experts and makers on screen – from Romain Olivier, who runs the renowned cheesemonger Philippe Olivier in France to Enric Canut, who Patricia called the "godfather of Spanish cheese". "To be able to bring those people into the tutorial is really special," Patricia says.

Interactive events have opened the door to a new way of serving customers far outside the usual London remit, and Patricia sees this becoming a permanent part of the business. "The 'new normal' is going to be different to before. People are going to work more from home. They're not going to come into the city so much," Patricia says. "And we've got to see how we can fit into that as well."



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PATRICIA'S 4 TIPS FOR VIRTUAL EVENTS

1 Choose a subject that you know about. Think of four or five cheeses that go well together. Pick cheeses that can be talked through in a progression of flavor and texture and have nice stories.

2 Plan the unboxing. In your head, go through how you want the customer to open that box. Make sure your cheese is nicely wrapped, and include tasting notes, as well as notes on how to look after your cheese.

3 Set house-keeping rules. When you dial in, introduce yourself and a few little housekeeping tips, like 'turn off your microphone when I'm talking, and when you want to ask a question, either put your hand up or put a message in the box'.

4 Run a practice session. Stopping and starting and umming and ahhing does not go well in tutorials. You've got to know your subject and your cheese inside out. Detailed preparation, good notes, and then you're off!

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SMALL TOWN ICON

The Little Cheesemonger



LOCATION: RHUDDLAN, WALES **OPENED:** 2017 **FOUNDER:** GEMMA WILLIAMS

GEMMA'S GOAL FOR 2021

After opening the new shop, Gemma is planning to start making her own cheese and butter. "I've always wanted to try to make cheese. I was going to go on a course in 2020, and obviously that never happened, but I'm going to get there by hook or by crook."

Tucked away in the town of Rhuddlan, north Wales, The Little Cheesemonger is a small shop with a huge presence in its local community. The multiple-award-winning cheesemonger, which is run by Gemma Williams, has become renowned for being a champion of local cheeses and a keen collaborator with other Welsh businesses.

Community and collaboration have always been important to Gemma, who worked in cheese and food retail across the UK before opening her own shop. But being a business owner has given her the opportunity to take an active role in highlighting producers in the local area – especially those who are in need of a helping hand.

> "PEOPLE APPRECIATE THOSE WHO WERE HELPING THEM OVER LOCKDOWN. NOW, THEY'RE SO CONSCIOUS OF SUPPORTING LOCAL SHOPS"

A local approach

While Gemma has long recognised the importance of her local town's support, she also knows that building a community takes an investment of time and care. Today, she often uses her own platforms with The Little Cheesemonger to amplify her suppliers, local events or newly opened businesses in the area.

"Running my own business, it's become more important to me," explains Gemma. On Facebook last year, she created a group where local restaurants can easily share information with the public. Since the pandemic hit, the group has taken on a new significance, having become a place where updates about delivery services and changing opening hours can be shared.

Since opening her shop in 2017, Gemma has taken a community-centric approach. When suppliers tell her they're struggling, she considers how she can help to shuffle her stock or push certain products. "Now, with having my own business, I can control that," she says.

During the lockdown, that local spirit was alive and well. Spurred by a passion for great cheese and the joy that it can bring, The Little Cheesemonger went above and beyond to continue selling and delivering cheeses around north Wales. Even when struggling with a lack of childcare, Gemma made a point to delivering orders to local elderly residents.

Digital partnerships

Virtual events offered another exciting avenue for collaboration that Gemma could bring straight into customers' homes, even in lockdown. In October, The Little Cheesemonger teamed up with local chutney maker Mostyn Kitchen Garden and Taste North East Wales for a cheese and chutney tasting event – and Gemma sees these partnerships as being key to the virtual tasting format.

"When you work with other people, it

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makes it more interesting. Other people bring different dynamics," Gemma says. By teaming up with local businesses, she found that The Little Cheesemonger could offer participants a more valuable and engaging event.

Virtual events and growing online sales offer Gemma a brand new way to share her passion for Welsh cheese and produce well beyond the borders of her own town.

The Little Cheesemonger spreads the footprint of Welsh businesses far and wide via the Welsh-themed hampers it sells online. Gift bags feature products such as Hafod Organic Cheese made by Holden Farm Dairy and Organic Perl Las blue cheese from Caws Cenarth Cheese, as well as artisan Welsh treats, including chutney, honey, biscuits, crackers and coffee.

Growing the community

Looking forward, Gemma has plans to expand The Little Cheesemonger into a larger shop in Prestatyn – but her local community in Rhuddlan is still at the top of her mind.

"We have a great community here that supports the shop, so rather than let them down, what we've done is take on another shop," Gemma says. Even with these exciting plans in mind, the challenges that Covid-19 brought to the cheese industry in 2020 won't be easy to forget. But despite the difficulties it caused, Gemma sees the positives in the crisis.

"If it wasn't for Covid, maybe we wouldn't be thinking so much about [local shopping] right now," she says. Having seen it in action in her own community, Gemma believes the local shopping revival is here to stay. "It has made people think. People appreciate those who were helping them over lockdown. Now, they're so conscious of supporting local shops."

TOP-SELLING WELSH CHEESE



OLWYN FAWR, COSYN CYMRU

Spreading the word about fantastic Welsh cheeses is a key focus of Gemma's – and while there are many to choose from, customers gravitate towards Cosyn Cymru's Olwyn Fawr. The hard-pressed mature cheese has a depth of flavour that's perfect for lovers of Manchego, with a complex and long-lasting taste of honey, hazelnut and summer meadows.

cosyn.cymru

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SOCIAL SUPERSTAR

The Cheese Lady

LOCATION: HADDINGTON, SCOTLAND
OPENED: 2017 **FOUNDER**: SVETLANA KUKHARCHUK

For Svetlana Kukharchuk, coming up with a name for her Fife-based shop in 2017 was a no-brainer: the locals had long called her The Cheese Lady thanks to her vast knowledge of all things dairy.

But in 2020, the Covid-19 lockdown cut her off from her regulars. Svetlana felt that because of her Cheese Lady persona, she needed a new way to get in front of her customers, and social media proved to be a valuable new avenue for connecting and communicating with her community.

> "I KEPT THINKING: PEOPLE BUY FROM PEOPLE. AND THAT'S WHY I NEEDED TO PUT MY FACE OUT THERE, EVEN THOUGH IT'S HARD"

Finding her voice

Before the disruption caused by Covid-19, customers always enjoyed coming into the shop to speak to Svetlana and ask her for recommendations and information about her cheeses. Finding a way to recreate that experience online became her main task.

But while Svetlana was used to being the face of her business in the shop, putting her face all over social media was a new challenge. "I felt like I needed to put myself out there, even though I'm very, very shy," she says. But taking that leap has proved fruitful. By stepping in front of the camera to offer personalised tips and recommendations for her website and social media channels, as well as profiles of every cheese in her shop, she has found a new way to connect with her customers. "I kept thinking: people buy from people. And that's why I needed to put my face out there, even though it's hard," she says.

For new customers, the videos offer a chance to put a face to The Cheese Lady brand. "Maybe they've never met me in person, but if I make videos and attach them as product videos for every cheese, I thought maybe they'll feel more of that same service as they would get in a shop," she adds. "And that's why I really started doing it."



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3 TIPS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

1 Just get started. "I'm a very private person when it comes to my social media, but I understood quite early on when I started this business that I needed to be on social media. The more I've gone on, the easier it's got."

2 Trust yourself. "At first, I outsourced social media to another agency, but I felt like it wasn't working for me. Even though they were a professional marketing agency, I thought, 'maybe I'll do better myself because at least I know my product'."

3 Keep learning. "I try to learn from wherever I can. If there are any courses or free webinars, I take advantage of those to learn more."

"The horizons have expanded"

In addition to raising product and brand awareness on her social media accounts, Svetlana moved into the world of online tastings in 2020 – and she hasn't looked back.

"It's been great, and I feel like now the horizons have expanded for us and we can reach so many more territories across the UK," Svetlana says. "Instead of being a very local shop, which we still are, now we can reach audiences further afield." Online tastings and events have now become a legitimate income stream for the business.

Svetlana credits her customers with inspiring her to push her online business further over 2020: "If it wasn't for my customers, I probably would have chickened out and closed for a few months and not done anything online. I had huge doubts.

"I thought 'will people need cheese?'" With no one able to entertain, Svetlana worried that customers would not continue to purchase farmhouse cheeses for their own pleasure.

"But it turned out it was so necessary for them. It spurred me on. We were doing a public service, bringing joy to people's lives. So I carried on and continued, but it was only because of their encouragement and their support, and telling us that we were needed."

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BRITISH ICON

Neal's Yard Dairy

LOCATION: LONDON **OPENED:** 1976
FOUNDER: RANDOLPH HODGSON



While cheesemongers across the UK worked to support the troubled British cheese industry following the emergence of Covid-19 in early 2020, the domino effect was arguably kicked off by Neal's Yard Dairy, who partnered with Jamie Oliver to launch the inaugural British Cheese Box – which has since gone on to inspire other like-minded businesses to do the same. Although potentially the biggest wave-making initiative by the business in recent times, Neal's Yard Dairy has always been a trailblazer when it comes to supporting the British specialist cheese sector.

> "THE INCREDIBLE SUPPORT FROM THE PUBLIC MADE CHEESEMAKERS REALISE THAT OUTSIDE OF THIS WALL OF SILENCE - A RESULT OF THEIR USUAL CUSTOMERS BEING OUT OF BUSINESS - THERE WAS AN INCREDIBLE WILL FOR THEM TO SURVIVE"

"Our unofficial mission statement is to improve British cheese," says Jason Hinds, sales director at Neal's Yard Dairy, and with its founder – Randolph Hodgson – being himself a cheesemaker, it was only natural that the business would be run with true empathy for the cause. "It was a lonely path for a long time," explains Jason, as Randolph was alone on his quest to support specialist cheesemakers following the demise of the sector after the war, rationing, and the emergence of supermarkets (which hadn't recognised the value of artisanal cheeses until a decade ago). "Randolph was launching the business at a time when British cheese was largely unknown by consumers," says Jason, "and drove around the UK looking for great cheeses, bringing them back to stock in his shop when he particularly liked them."

Fast forward to 2020 and the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, and this proactive approach is still alive and kicking at Neal's Yard Dairy. "By the end of March it became clear to me that, as a result of restaurants closing, there would be a lot of cheesemakers struggling to sell their cheese," explains Jason. "We had to find a way to sell specialist cheese to a new market, and it struck me that the only way that the cheese building up in store rooms could be sold was if the consumer was engaged." A project of this size required a big name. "Jamie Oliver was the only person I knew who could help me to

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this - he's been a great champion of British cheese for a long time, and has an incredible number of followers - and at 7am on the last Wednesday of March, we finalised our plan to sell boxes of British cheese directly to consumers. We were up and running in 10 days, and by the end of April we had sold around 14 tonnes of cheese to consumers."

This reactive initiative was a huge success, inspiring cheesemongers across Britain to set up similar projects, and getting UK consumers to connect with the industry - Jamie's social media team received hundreds if not thousands of messages from consumers, saying that they never knew cheese could taste so good. Not only was there a groundswell of support from consumers, but they were spending their money to support struggling cheesemakers. "This incredible support from the public made cheesemakers realise that outside of this wall of silence – a result of their usual customers being out of business – there was an incredible will for them to survive," Jason says.

Neal's Yard plans to continue working with the cheese box model, and has expanded its offering to include a cheese box subscription – allowing it to support a further 18 struggling cheesemakers. "It's clear that consumers like to discover cheese in this way," says Jason, "and it allows us to provide a chunk of cash for cheesemakers who otherwise wouldn't have it." It will continue to be reactive to what the industry needs at any given time, too, communicating with cheesemongers to uncover the businesses which most require support and working directly with them.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHEESEMONGERS

"If you don't have cheesemongers to champion the story, provenance and quality behind a specialist cheese, and why it costs more than standard cheese, the message isn't going to get out to consumers," Jason says. "Supermarkets aren't going to spread the message, and don't necessarily believe in it. Cheesemongers are absolutely critical - they are the most important and undervalued link in the food chain."

MUST-STOCK CHEESE



COLSTON BASSETT STILTON

Made exclusively for Neal's Yard Dairy. It's the cheese which I would take with me to a desert island, and the one we sell most of as a business.
colstonbassettdairy.co.uk



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CUSTOMER SERVICE SAVIOUR

Mainstreet Trading

LOCATION: ST BOSWELLS **OPENED:** 2008 **FOUNDER:** BILL DE LA HEY



The demand for online retail is showing no signs of slowing down – ably assisted by the Covid-19 pandemic – but one retailer is standing firm against the tide, and vowing to uphold the indie USP of providing excellent customer service to consumers. While Bill De La Hey, owner of Mainstreet Trading in St Boswells on the Scottish Borders, has developed his online presence in the wake of Covid, his passion for more direct connection between his customers and the produce he sells rings through.

> "PEOPLE COULD GET AN ONLINE SHOP DELIVERED BY THE SUPERMARKETS, BUT WE WERE DETERMINED TO OFFER SOMETHING DIFFERENT – IN LINE WITH OUR USP – A POSITIVE REASON TO COME OUT INTO THE FRESH AIR AND PICK UP A TREAT"

His retail empire is based in an old department store, which Bill describes as "an amazing site in the middle of nowhere. This location means that shoppers travel to the establishment more often than not, and so it's imperative for the team to provide them with a "treat" of an experience. A big part of the retail magic that Bill and his team share with customers is passion. He is hugely inspired by the love within the cheese industry and the collaboration between cheesemakers and mongers, and is sure to pass this onto his customers. "I have a lot to say about cheese!" says Bill.

A childhood spent on farmland imbued Bill with a high regard for the work that goes on behind the scenes at cheese-producing farms. "My grandmother was a dairy farmer when I was growing up in Somerset, so I grew up going to The Bath & West Show and tasting all the cheeses," he says. "When I set up a cheese counter of my own, it was important to me that I support the cheesemakers from the area where I grew up, so Montgomery's Cheddar had to be on my shelves!"

While a number of independent retailers took to the internet to secure their businesses as a result of the challenging market conditions in 2020, Bill's approach was considered and tailored to what he and his team do best. "When the first lockdown hit we sat down and considered what our next steps would be. We do have an online store, but so much of what we do is engaging with customers, telling them the stories behind the cheeses we sell and connecting them to the produce, that we didn't want that to suffer through only selling cheese online." The business established cheese boxes, French and Spanish-themed ones as well as British, but chose to offer these on a click-and-collect basis, so that the connection would not be lost.

"Covid forced our hand so we had to evolve to do more online," says Bill, but the invaluable service that Mainstreet

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Trading offers was not to be sacrificed. "For some of our customers who would come to collect their cheese boxes, it was the first time they would have left their houses in weeks so it needed to be special." The shop's fine quality produce brings a certain treat element to proceedings, but Bill wanted to give shoppers a real reason to get out into the fresh air for a positive retail trip.

"It's all about quality of product, and we most enjoy being evangelical about the product in person and catering for the people looking for a positive shopping experience," he says. "The pandemic has brought all of this to the fore – people are being more discerning about the food they're buying, and are desperately trying to find cheer where they can."

MUST-STOCK CHEESE



MONTGOMERY'S CHEDDAR
Golden, nutty notes.
montgomerycheese.co.uk

PLANS FOR 2021

"I had planned to up the business's green credentials in 2020," says Bill, "but the pandemic scuppered my plans to minimise our plastic usage and so on, so I decided to make it my mission to support environmental cheesemakers and producers instead.' This detour is a natural fit for Mainstreet Trading, giving the team an extra impetus to engage with the specialist cheese industry - not to mention a boon for their customers. Bill hopes to pick up where he left off in 2021, while continuing to support the small rural cheesemakers he so resonates with.

"Also, we used to host Neal's Yard Dairy and Mons for tasting sessions in our shop, I'm looking forward to welcoming them back when I can," says Bill.

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MEAL KIT MASTERMIND

Sheridans Cheesemongers

LOCATION: IRELAND – DUBLIN, MEATH, GALWAY, WATERFORD
OPENED: 1995 **FOUNDER**: KEVIN AND SEAMUS SHERIDAN

Before 2020, online cheese sales were a small part of the retail business at Sheridans Cheesemongers, but that all changed when the Covid-19 crisis hit. "Since the pandemic, it's exploded and become a business in itself," explains Kevin Sheridan, who is co-founder of the business along with his brother Seamus.

A growing desire for high-quality Irish farmhouse cheese caused business to boom online, in Sheridan's shops and in the company's wholesale arm, thanks to strong demand from independent fine food retailers. This led to an incredibly challenging, but equally rewarding year. "The amount of energy it's taken – mental energy, physical energy, organisationally changing the whole structure – it's been busy on all fronts. It's been a lot of work, a lot of effort, and a lot of stress – but a lot of opportunities as well," Kevin says.

> "ONE OF THE POSITIVES OF THIS HORRIBLE SITUATION HAS BEEN PEOPLE COOKING MORE AT HOME, COOKING WITH THEIR FAMILIES, AND LOOKING FOR LOCAL INGREDIENTS"

Catering to home cooks

Sheridans not only began selling more cheese online last year – the business's range of meal kits, recipe ideas and gift boxes also became a huge hit, with much of the population being stuck at home over 2020.

"People are looking for solutions," Kevin says. A scratch-cooking craze took off after the pandemic hit as many consumers had more time on their hands in lockdown. Supply chain issues in supermarkets also caused shoppers to reconsider their food choices, leading to increased demand for local options.

"One of the positives of this horrible situation has been people cooking more at home, cooking with their families, and looking for local ingredients," Kevin says. "It's been very, very positive."

While some customers are looking for fun and inventive at-home cooking experiences, others are searching for simple ways to create fantastic flavours for everyday meals at home – and Sheridans Cheesemongers' recipe ideas and meal kits walk the line between the two.

The shop's meal kit boxes range from simple fondue – which comes complete with Emmental and Le Gruyère AOP cheese as well as an optional bottle of Riesling – to pizza, arancini and pasta kits. With all of the necessary ingredients included and the recipe provided, the boxes take the hard work out of making a meal from scratch, leaving home chefs free to get cooking.

Local awareness

If food and drink trend reports for the year ahead are anything to go by, consumers are likely to continue seeking out high-quality ingredients for at home cooking, and Kevin expects Sheridans' online sales to keep growing.

"Overall, we've seen an increasing awareness of our own brand this year, and we've seen an increase in people's engagement with foods, as well as their interest in locally produced food

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3 TIPS FOR MEAL KITS

1 Create a solution. "People are cooking at home every day, and families are spending a lot of time at home, so we wanted to make simple, easy solutions."

2 Keep it simple. Aside from the ingredients included in your kit, Kevin says any additional accompaniments should be items that people are likely to have at home already.

3 Don't try to do too much. "Try to hit as broad an audience as possible. Keep it general, and keep it accessible to as many people as you can."

and cooking at home," Kevin says. "All the things that the speciality foods community has been working on for a long time have accelerated."

But even if these trends slow down when the Covid-19 pandemic one day fades away, Kevin believes that online shopping and the desire for simple solutions for flavourful meals with local provenance will be here to stay.

"Even after this passes people have hopefully had a really good service and found a new way to buy, regardless of whether they can go to traditional shops," Kevin says. "I would hope that we've found a new customer base and a new way of shopping that will continue on through the long term."



INNOVATIVE THINKER

Courtyard Dairy

LOCATION: AUSTWICK, LANCASHIRE **OPENED**: 2012
FOUNDER: ANDY AND KATHY SWINSCOE

For rural cheesemongers like The Courtyard Dairy in Lancashire, the UK's national lockdown in March 2020 spelled big trouble. With the public told to stay at home and no possibility of passers-by who could pop into their shop, owners Andy and Kathy Swinscoe found their business was suddenly cut off from its customers.

The pair realised that they were at risk of losing the relationship that they'd worked years to build with their local community, and they knew they needed to develop new ways of connecting with their customers.

Connecting online

"Our cheeses are quite unique, and they require a little bit of explaining," Andy says. "What I really love doing is serving customers." In the shop, he has a passion for talking cheese with his customers, explaining the ins and outs of different varieties and the stories behind his favourites. "We realised that we wanted to keep up that connection with the customer, and the online cheese tastings allow us to do that."

By April, just a month after lockdown began, the pair were running cheese tastings via Zoom. By embracing technology they found they could







HOW TO... KEEP YOUR VIRTUAL EVENTS INTERESTING

"Don't make it too hard for yourself," Andy advises. "People are just after a fun experience." He suggests running themed events in order to generate repeat bookings. "Use a specific topic that you can drill down on, whether that be French cheeses or Italian cheeses, to vary your tastings a bit more." But don't forget to cater to demand. If a tasting is particularly popular and sells out, Andy will run an identical tasting a week or two later.

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> WE REALISED THAT WE WANTED TO KEEP UP THAT CONNECTION WITH THE CUSTOMER, AND THE ONLINE CHEESE TASTINGS ALLOW US TO DO THAT

recreate the customer interactions that they were missing in the shop.

"We've played on what we do really well. What we're known for is a real specialism of knowledge and for going into real detail, almost being geeky about cheese," Andy says. The virtual tastings have now become a huge part of what The Courtyard Dairy does, allowing the business to stay buoyant when footfall into the shop plummeted.

Contactless cheese

As business picked up in-store over the summer, The Courtyard Dairy found that social distancing was still limiting their business, but instead of resting on their laurels, they found a unique and forward-thinking way to boost their revenues: a cheese vending machine.

"We've seen them up in Switzerland," Andy says, "and we'd always wanted to do it, but there was no real need with the cheese shop being so busy." The pandemic gave them the perfect opportunity to fulfill the dream. "We decided that it was such a great idea that we wanted to capitalise on."

The cheese vending machine offered The Courtyard Dairy a way of reaching customers who were wary of coming into the shop or who didn't want to wait in a queue for their cheese, as well as allowing for quicker sales than they could provide in their store. "All those little problems could be ironed out."

All told, over 2020 The Courtyard Dairy learned that technology could provide exciting new avenues for their retail business.

By stabilising sales with these innovations, Andy and Kathy can focus on doing what they love: sharing their passion for cheese.

TOP-SELLING CHEESES



HAFOD CHEDDAR
Buttery and smooth, with that special Cheddar tang.
holdenfarmdairy.co.uk



ST JAMES
Rich and pungent washed-rind cheese from Cumbria.
stjamescheese.co.uk

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THE PIVOTER

Funk

LOCATION: COLUMBIA ROAD, LONDON
OPENED: OCTOBER 2020 **FOUNDER**: MATHEW CARVER

Mathew Carver, founder of the famous The Cheese Bar restaurant in London, could never have thought that six years after beginning his foodservice empire he'd be mastering the art of fine cheese retail, but thanks to the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020 that's exactly what's happened... and the new retail arm of the business is going from strength to strength.

His cheese empire had humble beginnings, as a food truck which travelled to festivals selling grilled cheese sandwiches, before growing to include new Camden institution The Cheese Bar and innovative sushi-inspired Pick & Cheese. Through this work he learned that people of his age – he was in his mid-twenties at the time – didn't have as much knowledge of British cheese as the quality within the sector warranted.





Due to open their third bricks-and-mortar restaurant in March 2020, Mathew's team was hugely impacted by the pandemic and successfully pivoted their existing sites to offer cheese boxes – curated selections of cheeses from their restaurants' suppliers, which would otherwise have gone to waste. The update was announced on social media and received a great response, so much so that as well as using the boxes to get through the "abundance of cheese" that was the result of closures, Mathew started researching the British cheese industry further and getting in touch with new-to-him cheesemongers in order to supply their businesses, too. "It was so important to understand our supply chain and to recognise the important part we play in that," Mathew says. "We couldn't have paused our business for five months and have expected all of the producers we work with to be able to supply us with cheese when we returned."

In order to house the growing retail element of the business, Mathew took

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ownership of a bricks-and-mortar site on Columbia Road in London in late September, turning it around in an impressive three-and-a-half weeks and opening to a welcoming public. They utilised the stock they weren't able to use in their foodservice sites due to reduced capacity as a result of social distancing measures, and found retail to be a valuable asset to their empire – not least because of its need for a full understanding of the product being sold.

The team found that it's more demanding to prepare a cheese perfectly for retail than to work with one destined to be cooked with, and that experience of working in foodservice can't translate directly into a retail environment. "It would have been easier to employ someone who had worked in cheese retail before, but we wanted to support our existing staff" – avoiding furlough and redundancies – "and give them an opportunity to grow their knowledge and enjoyment around cheese. The restaurants are quite fast-paced, which means that they didn't offer much opportunity for our staff to sit down and really learn about the cheese that they're serving."

> "PEOPLE IN OUR RESTAURANTS HAVE BEEN ASKING FOR YEARS WHEN WE WERE GOING TO START SELLING CHEESE IN A SHOP, AND WHILE PEOPLE CAN'T GO OUT TO RESTAURANTS WE'RE GIVING THEM A WAY TO RECREATE THE EXPERIENCE AT HOME"

Despite the retail arm of the business coming about as a result of adversity, and it coming with hitherto inexperienced challenges, Mathew has no plans to return to being a purely restaurant-based business. "It's useful to be able to share cheese and resources between our restaurants and shop, and to not have all our eggs in one basket." Perhaps the most valuable asset to the business which has come about as a result of opening a retail site is the opportunity to explore the British cheese industry further, and to educate its staff in a way that otherwise would not have been possible. "It's great for our staff to have the confidence to make suggestions around cheese, and to have the time to get to know the produce we sell."

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



BARON BIGOD
A creamy, white bloomy-rind cheese with a silky texture.
fenfarmdairy.co.uk



DRIFTWOOD
Subtle peppery and earthy undertones with citrus notes.
whitelake.co.uk



SINODUN HILL
Goat's cheese similar in style to a Pouligny.
nortonandyarrow.co.uk

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THE COLLABORATOR

The Fine Cheese Co

LOCATION: SOMERSET AND LONDON **OPENED:** 1989
FOUNDER: ANN-MARIE DYAS



The team behind The Fine Cheese Co knew as soon as the coronavirus pandemic hit that cheesemakers would be badly affected. Still, the scale of the problem took them by surprise, says Ruth Raskin, cheese care and quality manager.

"I don't think any of us quite realised how massive it was. A lot of cheesemakers lost about 70% of their business," Ruth explains. "They lost orders for thousands of cheeses overnight." Thankfully, The Fine Cheese Co was a strong position to help. The business contacted its cheesemakers and made an action plan.

Lending a helping hand

The first thing The Fine Cheese Co did was find out which cheeses needed to be sold. "We were very much in close contact with people, saying 'what's urgent right now'," Ruth says. Based on this intel, the team created a range of new selection boxes to sell online.

The selection boxes were a simple way to direct customers to the cheeses that were at the highest risk of going to waste, and the team moved swiftly to ensure they were on sale as soon as possible. "Normally that would take months of planning, and months of organising photo shoots and costings," Rush explains, "But we did it in two weeks." By the end of April, the cheesemonger found another way to help struggling producers: the Save British Cheese box. The Fine Cheese Co joined forces with Jamie Oliver, Neal's Yard Dairy and The Courtyard Dairy to ensure the most at-risk cheeses would find a home.

It was a significant move for three separate cheese businesses that would

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



PITCHFORK CHEDDAR
Finely balanced flavour, with fruity, tropical notes and savoury tones.
trethowanbrothers.com



TUNWORTH
English camembert-style cheese, with the thinnest rind and a fruity tang.
hampshirecheeses.co.uk



COLSTON BASSETT STILTON
Intensely rich, with a deep, complex flavour.
colstonbassett dairy.co.uk



KIRKHAM'S LANCASHIRE
Traditional creamy cheese, with a moist, texture and a mellow tang.
mrskirkhamscheese.co.uk

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> THERE WAS A GENUINE FEAR THAT WE WERE GOING TO LOSE SOME REALLY FINE CHEESEMAKERS, AND ONCE THEY'RE GONE, THEY'RE GONE. YOU CAN'T GET THOSE RECIPES OR THE HISTORY, KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE BACK

generally think of themselves as competitors to come together to work on the project. "The idea was that we could help more people if we worked together," Ruth says. And they did; the box received a massive response. "It was obvious that there was a real appetite amongst the general public for helping the cheesemakers."

Having Jamie Oliver on board certainly provided a boost, too. "People who would normally buy from us would know that these British cheeses are gorgeous, and I think Jamie Oliver brought it to people who perhaps had never tried them before."

"Good for one, good for all"

With new customers quickly becoming returners, the initiatives have proved to be a boon for many farmhouse cheesemakers. "Those little cheesemakers really could have gone under if people hadn't helped. There was a genuine fear that we were going to lose some really fine cheesemakers, and once they're gone, they're gone. You can't get those recipes or the history, knowledge and experience back."

Ruth continues, "If you lose them, you've actually lost part of your food history and your food culture. So, people rallied around, and they really did make a difference."

When asked whether this spirit of collaboration will continue within the industry, Ruth says that it's been there from the start. "We know that what is good for one is good for all. If British cheese is in good, strong health and doing well, that's good for everyone. So it will continue because it was always that way, and the pandemic has just strengthened those bonds."



MONTGOMERY'S CHEDDAR
Traditionanl cheddar made in Somerset.
montgomery cheese.co.uk



WESTCOMBE CHEDDAR
A deep and complex flavour
westcombedairy.com



BRIE DE MEAUX DONGÉ
Full-flavoured, with a Camembert-like fruitiness.



KEEN'S EXTRA MATURE CHEDDAR
Moist, tangy and powerfu.l
keenscheddar.co.uk

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SCOTTISH STALWART

George Mewes Cheese

LOCATION: GLASGOW AND EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND
OPENED: 2010 **FOUNDER:** GEORGE MEWES

George Mewes loves nothing more than sharing his passion for farmhouse cheese in his shops in Glasgow and Edinburgh. Typically, the stores are overflowing with customers sampling cheeses, chatting and having a good laugh with the staff.

But 2020 was different. Although George kept the shops open throughout the pandemic, with only one household allowed in at a time the usual buzz was missing. Despite George's own disappointment, customers were impressed by the extraordinary service that the team provided throughout the lockdown. George Mewes Cheese went the extra mile to serve regulars and welcome in newcomers and to continue its ardent support and representation of artisan cheesemakers in Scotland.

"We have had a lot of positive feedback of how lucky the customers are that we've stayed open and the service that we've given them," George says. "We've worked hard."

"We all have to work together"

When the pandemic first hit the UK, George Mewes was quick to realise that with restaurants and hotels shut, cheesemakers would be hugely impacted. "We spoke with several cheesemakers and our suppliers about the volume that they had to shift," he says. Once the team had identified which cheeses were at risk of going to waste, they cut prices in order to keep stock flowing out the door.

"We helped shift a lot of the volume of farmhouse cheeses to keep everyone in business. The last thing we want is any British farmhouse cheese to go out of business," George adds. "It's amazing the British farmhouse cheese that we have, and the quality of cheeses that come through. We want to keep that going."

He recognises the role his shops play in the lives of his customers as well as his suppliers. In addition to cheesemakers and dairies, George Mewes Cheese supports a number of local producers in Scotland, from chilli jam makers to creators of Scottish tablet. "This is their livelihoods, so we make sure that we're supporting many small producers. We all have to work together," he says.

> "THE BRITISH FARMHOUSE CHEESE THAT WE HAVE IS AMAZING, AND THE QUALITY OF CHEESES THAT COME THROUGH. WE WANT TO KEEP THAT GOING"

HOW TO... RUN A NEWSLETTER

George has found newsletters to be the perfect way to communicate with and educate customers. The shop's weekly newsletter has more than a thousand subscribers, and includes information about the latest cheeses, as well as offers and other announcements. "It's been very, very positive for us," George says. He finds it to be a valuable way to share his zeal for farmhouse cheeses. "People love to hear about the products and read about the products. We do everything possible to get our message out there about the products that we sell."

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Getting the word out

Although George has been able to keep his shops open throughout the pandemic, staying in contact with his customers has meant shifting more towards digital means of communication. "We have been very proactive when it comes to Instagram and Facebook and Twitter," he says. The shop also has a weekly newsletter, which is filled with information about its cheeses in order to educate and excite customers about local Scottish varieties.

But while these ventures have been successful, for George nothing will replace the experience of sharing the joy of cheese in-store. "I love being face-to-face with the customers and seeing their impression when you give them a taste of something because you believe it's so good. Because you believe that these cheesemakers are one of the hardest workers in the whole UK," he says.

"To make cheese is not an easy thing. To look after the animals, to milk the animals, to care for the animals, to make the cheese, to mature the cheese – it's such a difficult job. So I like to get that message out to people, to say, 'Taste how amazing this is. Haven't these cheesemakers done such a fantastic job?'"





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SHOPPER STALWART

London Cheesemongers

LOCATION: CHELSEA, LONDON
OWNER: JARED WYBROW **OPENED:** 2016



PLANS FOR 2021

"This year's difficulties have put some plans on hold and brought others forward. We will look to improve our online service and continue to plan for the relaunch of our tasting room in the spring," says Jared.

For a retailer reported to have a spontaneous, rather large, purchase of Le Gruyère AOP as the reason for launch, London Cheesemongers has utilised solid business nous to form an endeavour which has become a must-stop resource for its local community – especially since the announcement of a UK-wide lockdown in early 2020.

Indeed, the business has gone from strength to strength since setting up at London Markets in 2014. With the passion of owner Jared Wybrow translating into strong sales and a loyal customer base, its foundations were tested during 2020 but shown to be iron-clad thanks to an invaluable combination of responsive management and an adaptive approach.

"The story goes, I loved the Gruyère from Fort de la Tine so much that I went out and bought 200kg of it – this maxed out my credit card but started me trading from various food markets in London," says Jared. "Every penny I earnt went back into the business to buy a larger range of cheeses and attend multiple markets at the same time. After almost two years and a lot of hard work I had enough to take advantage of an opportunity for my first shop in Chelsea." Four years later, this smart and responsive approach has demonstrated its true mettle by proving to be a pillar of the cheese-loving community in its local area of Chelsea.

Its ability to offer a moveable feast – providing customers with what they want and need, when they want and need it – has proven to be a valuable asset to London Cheesemongers, as well as to the local area it serves. "We want to be reliable at all times,

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



PARMIGIANO REGGIANO
A sharp, complex taste with a strong savory flavour and gritty texture.
parmigianoreggiano.com



PEVENSEY BLUE
Unctuous texture, immediate, milky balanced flavour.
hello@pevenseycheese.co.uk



BARON BIGOD
Rich, mushroom and cabbage flavours with a sharper, more acidic contrast.
fenfarmdairy.co.uk

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including during a pandemic," Jared explains. "Consistency is key!" As well as continuing to supply shoppers with top quality cheeses, the business diversified to become an even more valuable local asset. "We are grateful to be able to continue providing our service to our customers by adapting hours, delivery options and adding some good non-cheese necessities such as fresh bread. We support our community this way and they are very appreciative."

Adapting business to suit the ever-changing climate has been witnessed across all sectors – before Covid, and after too, no doubt – but London Cheesemongers have undoubtedly done it with aplomb. Opening seven days a week has proven popular with customers, as has the utilisation of same-day delivery within local parameters. Loaves from Little Bread Pedlar are delivered to the Chelsea shop daily, and pairing suggestions for drinks to enjoy alongside the retailer's cheese are shared on social media channels as well as in-store.

> "WE ARE GRATEFUL TO BE ABLE TO CONTINUE PROVIDING OUR SERVICE TO OUR CUSTOMERS BY ADAPTING HOURS, DELIVERY OPTIONS AND ADDING SOME GOOD NON-CHEESE NECESSITIES SUCH AS FRESH BREAD. WE SUPPORT OUR COMMUNITY THIS WAY AND THEY ARE VERY APPRECIATIVE"

London Cheesemakers' early adoption of an approach which makes it at once a solid, dependable, and yet ever-evolving proposition for consumers, offers a taste of fine cheese retail to come.



ST JUDE
A small, soft, mould-ripened cheese with flavours that vary by season.
stjudecheese.com



FETA
A pickled curd cheese that has a salty and tangy taste, which is enhanced by a brine solution.



BURRATA
A fresh cheese made from a mix of mozzarella and cream originating from the Apulia region of Italy.

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FAMILY FEEL

WHAT'S THE PLAN FOR 2021?

"I'm hoping 2021 sees some sort of return to normality, though I don't think we're out of the woods yet," says Daniel. "I'm looking forward to getting back to projects that were put on the back-burner by the events of 2020, including the redevelopment of our website and the introduction of an online sales platform."



Godfrey C Williams & Son

LOCATION: SANDBACH, CHESHIRE **FOUNDER**: THOMAS WILLIAMS **OPENED:** 1875

While independents across the UK strive – and succeed – in establishing a family feel to their shops, for Cheshire-based Godfrey C Williams & Son it's an integral part of the business's framework. The company was established in 1875 by Thomas Williams, who collected local farmhouse cheeses to sell in the shop; his son Griffith later took the helm before his own son, Godfrey, opened his eponymous shop in 1957.

> "OUR SENSE OF FAMILY EXTENDS TO NOT JUST TO OUR CUSTOMERS AND STAFF, BUT OUR SUPPLIERS, TOO"

Local food and drink producers have long been championed at the shop, and customers have always been treated like an extension of its founding family, but current project manager – and great, great grandson of Thomas Williams – Daniel Williams says that the role of family goes even deeper than that.

"Family is central to our beginnings, our story, and our future," he says. "It's key in decision-making, a source of knowledge and advice, and as a support network." Of course, working in such close proximity to loved ones isn't always smooth sailing.

"It's not without its challenges, but the rewards of working with family certainly outweigh these," he continues.

When the world plunged into lockdown as a result of the outbreak of

LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP



Covid-19 in March 2020, the thoughts of the team at Godfrey C Williams & Son immediately turned to their customers. "We have close relationships with many of them, so it was only natural to put them first," says Daniel. The team came up with practical solutions to make the suddenly challenging situation as pain-free as possible for their customers: "We deliberately set out minimum spend to quite a low amount, to remove any barriers to entry. We also sourced items that we don't usually stock, such as postage stamps, newspapers, fuses and lightbulbs." Godfrey C Williams & Son also rallied with local businesses – such as the butcher and greengrocer – to provide joint deliveries. For all these efforts, the team found that it was often the most simple part of the process – a smiling face – that made their service all the more valuable to their customers: "Sometimes it was something as small as a friendly doorstep conversation that had the most powerful difference to someone's lockdown," Daniel states.

Connection is at the heart of what Godfrey C Williams & Son stands for, and knows no bounds in terms of who is welcomed into the fold. "I would say our sense of family extends to not just to our customers and staff, but our suppliers too." The team makes a special effort to forge relationships – "forget trade fairs or sales calls, some of the best conversations about cheese and the industry can be had in the kitchen of a cheesemaker's farmhouse" – and is proud to have maintained relationships which have lasted for decades, with some transcending generations in both the Williams family and that of the cheesemaker.



BEST-SELLING CHEESES



BELTON FARM RED FOX
Intense and complex flavours.
beltonfarm.co.uk



BURTS BLUE
A creamy taste with subtle tangy notes.
burtscheese.co.uk



APPLEBY'S CHESHIRE
Delicious, grassy, piquant flavours.
applebysdairy.com



CORNISH YARG
Fresh, lemony and creamy, with an irresistible crumble.
lynherdairies.co.uk



NORTHERN BLUE
Creamy, steely and sweet. A powerhouse blue cheese.
shepherdspurse.co.uk

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DIGITAL PIVOTER

The Cheese Shop Nottingham

LOCATION: NOTTINGHAM **OPENED:** 2004
FOUNDERS: WEBB AND ROB FRECKINGHAM



"I don't think all social media is good," admits Webb Freckingham of The Cheese Shop Nottingham. He and his brother Rob, who are co-directors, are not ones to over-share details of their breakfasts or passing thoughts online, but for promoting their business, social media has been a lifesaver throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

Webb, also known to locals as Doctor Cheese, takes centre stage in front of the camera for weekly videos on Facebook and Instagram championing the latest cheeses to arrive at the shop. "We decided to do it to say we were open, and to let people know that we were still here," he explains. Now, the videos have grown into a new way to engage and connect with customers.

> "WE'VE GOT TO KEEP BANGING THE DRUM. WE NEED TO HELP EVERYBODY IN THIS IF WE'RE GOING TO GET THROUGH IT"

Becoming a social butterfly

"I haven't got millions of followers. I'm not Jamie Oliver," says Webb. "I'm not on a personal crusade, I'm just doing it for the real reasons." For The Cheese Shop Nottingham, the real reasons behind their move into the digital world are the significant numbers of small, struggling cheesemakers around the country and beyond.

"We've got to keep banging the drum," he adds. "We need to help everybody in this if we're going to get through it." By using the shop's social media accounts to boost sales of artisan cheeses, Rob and Webb are helping to ensure the survival of independent, small-scale cheeses.

Customers have been incredibly receptive to The Cheese Shop Nottingham's pivot to digital. On Facebook, the videos receive dozens of likes, as well as comments and shares, proving them to be a fantastic way to build the shop's community during the pandemic. "I'm getting people asking me 'can you mention me?' They want

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to be mentioned in my cheese shout out," Webb says – and he's all for it. "If you can bring a smile to people's faces at this time of problem and hassle and grief, it's got to be a good thing."

Delivering success

Nottingham's cheese lovers were also keen to take advantage of the shop's new website and delivery options, especially as access to the shop was cut off at times in lockdown.

The Cheese Shop Nottingham's website got up and running in May, and although it was already in the works before the pandemic hit, it was perfectly timed for Covid-19. The business offered click and collect services out of their back door – "It was a bit like prohibition: contraband cheese," says Webb – as well as local and national delivery.

The brothers were surprised to be sending out parcels of cheese around the country – though some of their online business still came courtesy of the shop's well-established relationship with its customers. For instance, one former Nottingham resident who moved away has still ordered cheese every month since the website has been up. "It's a win-win situation," Webb says. "But I do think it's about communication as well, and being open."

Keeping an open mind led The Cheese Shop Nottingham into many successful ventures last year, including virtual tastings. Rob and Webb made their first foray into digital events after a company approached them about hosting a wine and cheese evening for their colleagues. "It's amazing, we sent out 18 cheese hampers for them. That's come from people seeing the social media," Webb says.

Rob and Webb are cheesemongers through and through, and that means they love sharing their passion for cheese in the shop – but as their experience in 2020 showed, they can do plenty of good for farmhouse cheese online, too.

HOW TO... PROMOTE CHEESE WITH VIDEO

Rob and Webb found social media – and especially video – to be a useful tool to get the word out about farmhouse cheeses as their online sales grew. "It's very difficult to explain a taste on a website," Webb explains. Over the cheese counter, drumming up sales is straightforward when customers can taste a sample of the cheese on offer, but online he found words weren't doing their cheeses justice. To get a step closer to the in-store experience, they use video to show cheeses off and talk about tasting notes and pairings.

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SAFETY HERO

Bayley & Sage, Parsons Green

LOCATION: SOUTH WEST LONDON **OPENED:** 2010



PLANS FOR 2021

Bayley & Sage is set to open its ninth site in Belgravia in early 2021.

Since its first site in Wimbledon Village was opened in 1997, Bayley & Sage has grown a portfolio of eight delis – in Parsons Green, Battersea, Fulham Road, Northcote Road, Turnham Green, Wandsworth and Chelsea – and has long been renowned for its focus on great food and exemplary service.

In 2020, when the vital role that independent retailers play in the community came to the fore, the investment Bayley & Sage puts into the customer experience was clear for all to see – and its Parsons Green outpost particularly stood out to the cheese retail community as worthy of note.

"It is paramount that all people feel safe, secure and happy when entering our stores, now more than ever," says Jennie Allen, owner of the Bayley & Sage family of shops. The deli drastically evolved its retail offering as a result of the outbreak of Covid-19: "No more loose olives or loose dried fruit and nuts, all our bakery items are now wrapped. We closed the charcuterie counters and even the coffee machines in the first lockdown."

Today, the boldest USP of Bayley & Sage is its absolute focus on maintaining the safety and enjoyment of the customers venturing into its stores. This takes two forms: physical safety tools, "Masks, visors, sanitiser, markers on the floor and screens are all new additions in the stores," says Jennie; and an evermore conscientious effort to ensure that customers feel safe, secure and happy while on Bayley & Sage premises. "As well as a person by the door, greeting people and controlling the numbers in the stores, we do what we have always done, acknowledge people, chat to them, make them feel valued and comfortable by offering outstanding fresh food in a friendly and knowledgeable manner."

> "IT'S IMPORTANT TO BE RESPECTFUL, ALWAYS, AND TRY TO HAVE A LAUGH WHERE WE CAN. IN A WORLD WHERE YOU CAN BE ANYTHING, BE KIND"



Bayley & Sage has long been respected for the service and experience the passionate team offers, but Jennie's professional pride reached a peak during the period of unprecedented challenge in early spring. "Never have I been as proud of the team as I was during March 2020," she says. "When faced with enormous difficulties, uncertainties and challenges they continued to do what we do best: welcoming, helping and chatting with everyone that enters our stores. We continue our aim to have customers leaving our stores happier than when they arrived."

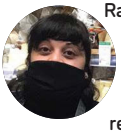
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As the loyalty that consumers within local communities continue to display for their most-loved independent retailers grows, Bayley & Sage's invaluable efforts to keep their customers safe, secure and happy while in their shops shines through as an example to businesses across the retail spectrum.



STAFF SPOTLIGHT



Rachel, head of deli at Bayley & Sage Parsons Green, was specifically highlighted during *Speciality Food*'s research for *Inspirational Cheese Retailers* as a member of staff who particularly exemplified perfect customer service during these troubled times. Here, she shares her thoughts on the efforts we can all make so customers feel at home:

"We need to understand the customer and make them feel safe by doing simple things like wearing gloves, masks and keeping our distance. It's important to be respectful, always, and try to have a laugh where we can. In a world where you can be anything, be kind. All of mankind is in the same boat for this pandemic, and we should, first and foremost, see each other as the people we are; doing this shows me that I have the best customers."

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



PITCHFORK CHEDDAR
Golden with a smooth, closed texture. Clean bright flavours, which range from savoury and mustardy, to hints of honey with a long finish.
trethowanbrothers.com



GORGONZOLA DOLCE
Very creamy and spreadable, a sweeter Gorgonzola.



BARON BIGOD
A Brie-style cheese with a crumbly texture at the core
fenfarmdairy.co.uk

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GRASS ROOTS CHAMPION

New Market Dairy

LOCATION: ALTRINCHAM **OPENED:** 2019 **OWNER:** MARTIN GOTT



Founded by a cheesemaker – Martin Gott, producer of Lake District Cheese St James – New Market Dairy is about as close to the grass roots of the cheese industry as it's possible to get. The shop opened in New Market Square in October 2019 to local applause, and it's no wonder; not only does the shop bring quality cheese to the customers of Altrincham (since day one the cheeses on offer were selected by the cheesemaker himself), but within months it provided its customers with a way to help support the British artisan cheese industry in the wake of Covid-19: by launching a dedicated cheese box and working harder than ever to connect consumers with the land at the heart of the cheese they're purchasing.

Considering Martin's proximity to the cause, it's perhaps only natural that this should be on the business's To Do list as soon as Covid's impact on the cheese industry was made clear. He,

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> WORKING AT BOTH ENDS OF THE SUPPLY CHAIN GIVES US AN INTERESTING PERSPECTIVE, SEEING BOTH THE PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION OF OUR CHEESE FIRST HAND. IN THE AGE OF THE GLOBALISED FOOD CHAIN, NOW MORE THAN EVER, IT'S IMPORTANT TO RECONNECT WITH OUR LOCAL PRODUCE. IN A SENSE, THE MARKET STALL BRIDGES THE GAP BETWEEN PRODUCER AND CONSUMER; IT CONNECTS FOOD (RURAL) WITH PLACE (URBAN). I KNOW IT SEEMS TRIVIAL BUT CITIES AND URBAN POPULATIONS ARE AS DEPENDANT NOW THAN EVER BEFORE ON THE FARMING SYSTEMS THAT SUSTAIN THEM

together with partner Nicola Robinson, runs Holker Farm in Cumbria and produces both the iconic St James and Crookwheel cheeses – both popular with retailers and consumers across the UK – while maintaining an ethos of supporting fellow farmhouse cheesemakers and running their farm using regenerative agricultural methods. "We are supporting farming systems that in turn encourage biodiversity and sustain rural communities," says the team, "valuing and preserving a perishable resource and making bloody good cheese with it."

Tireless efforts

The New Market Dairy team never falters in recognising their business's responsibility as a valuable link in the cheese industry chain, as well as a tireless champion of the work dairy farmers and cheesemakers do. While Holker Farm continued production of its cheeses throughout the pandemic, not all cheesemakers were able to do the same as a result of the pause of foodservice, and pressures brought about a long time before Covid-19 was on our radars – such as lowering milk prices and its inherent undervaluing – have dealt a dramatic blow too. As a result of these challenges, New Market Dairy works enthusiastically to promote the value of Britain's cheesemaking circle. "The farmhouse cheese community is incredibly diverse with hundreds of small producers dotted around the country all making cheese unique to their own farms, yet traditional cheese methods are overwhelmingly overlooked by industrial practices, whilst milk is undervalued by the mass consumer (supermarkets), you only have to see milk prices to appreciate that," they write on a blog on their website.

Connecting food with place

New Market Dairy's efforts to support the industry have seen it travel the length and breadth of the UK, sourcing from other cheesemakers including Appleby's Cheshire and Westcombe Dairy, in order to bring their goods back to their Manchester audience. Their website now boasts a slick e-commerce functionality, and deliveries are available around Greater Manchester. These services, along with the market stall, which is at the core of the business's mission, were launched as part of the team's plan to "bridge the gap between producer and consumer [which] connects food (rural) with place (urban)".

With an authentic connection to the mission they serve, and a passionate team behind it, New Market Dairy is an invaluable asset to the farmhouse cheese industry it so proudly works within.

CHEESES SUPPORTED BY NEW MARKET DAIRY



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



APPLEBY'S CHESHIRE
Delicious, grassy, piquant flavours with an earthy complexity.
applebysdairy.com



ST JUDE
A small, soft, mould-ripened cheese with flavours that vary by season.
stjudecheese.com



MRS KIRKHAM'S LANCASHIRE
Raw cow's milk cheese with a buttery crumble.
mrskirkhams cheese.co.uk

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FARMHOUSE HERO

Slate Cheese

LOCATION: SUFFOLK **OPENED:** 2017
FOUNDER: CLARE JACKSON AND JOHN ORMEROD

Stories circulated through the cheese industry in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic about the cheeses at risk of being lost to Covid-19. "Animals go on producing milk, regardless of whether there's a pandemic going on," says Clare Jackson of Slate Cheese. "The cheese in maturing rooms was ripening, and you can't stop that process happening."

But for Clare, the story that brought to life the pain that the sector was facing was the decision by Innes Cheese to close shop. "That was it – a couple of generations of cheesemaking disappearing, which was such a loss," Clare says. "When that happened, it really scared us into action."

> "THE WHOLE HERITAGE OF CHEESEMAKING IN THIS COUNTRY, AND MAKING SURE THAT THAT DIDN'T GET LOST, WAS REALLY IMPORTANT TO US"



Getting the word out

Slate stepped up to add its voice to those calling for the public to support Britain's farmhouse cheesemakers.

Although footfall in the shop was down, Slate's online sales were keeping the business going, and the team made the decision to support the Got Milk Fund, a crowdfunding initiative aimed at saving Britain's dairy industry. The Fund ensures surplus milk does not go to waste by redistributing dairy supplies to those in need. Slate donated £1 for every online order it received in June and urged online customers to add their own donation at checkout.

Slate was also supportive of industry initiatives like the British Cheese





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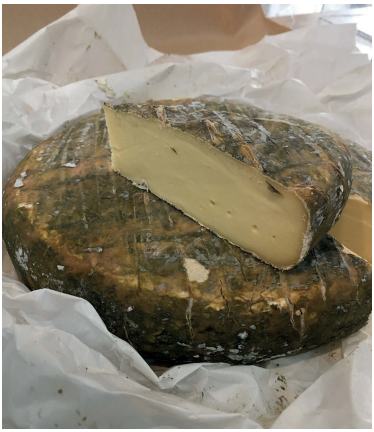
Weekender, an event by the Academy of Cheese to raise the profile of farmhouse cheeses. "It was a brilliant weekend, and it really got people talking about British cheese," Clare said.

Sharing the passion

What struck Clare most about the struggles that the cheese industry faced throughout the pandemic was the waste – not just of ingredients, but the possibility of wasting the care that cheesemakers put into their cheese, and wiping away a great part of the country's heritage.

"[Considering] the time and the care that artisan cheesemakers in this country put into making and maturing their cheese, the thought of that waste happening just horrified us," Clare says. "The whole heritage of cheesemaking in this country, and making sure that that didn't get lost, was really important to us."

Back in 2017 Clare and her father John Ormerod opened Slate Cheese to feed their passion for high quality, farmhouse cheese, and it's since become a personal mission to continue spreading the word for the industry. "For us, it's about helping people to discover cheese," she explains. "It's still a process



of discovery for us. We have that excitement and enthusiasm and passion for cheese – particularly British cheese – and want to share that with people.

Showing customers the differences in the tastes and textures is one of Clare's great joys.

"There's such a difference between cheese that you can buy in supermarkets and the artisan farmhouse cheeses that you can get in shops like ours, and there's a real process of highlighting that difference." Throughout the pandemic and beyond, she aims to keep doing just that.

HOPE FOR 2021

While some farmhouse cheeses were lost in 2020, other cheesemakers forged ahead with new releases. "We're now seeing a couple of new cheeses come onto the British scene, so it feels more hopeful going forward," Clare says. Slate is keen to highlight a new entrant on the Suffolk cheese scene: St Helena (pictured left), a washed rind semi-firm cheese made by Blake Bowden in collaboration with Julie Cheyney of St Jude Cheese. "All credit to them for having pushed that forward in keeping with their goal of developing that cheese during a tough year," Clare says.

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EDUCATION CHAMPION

No. 2 Pound Street

LOCATION: AYLESBURY **OWNER:** JAMES GRANT **OPENED**: 2010

Independents are rightfully recognised and appreciated for the passion they bring to the business of selling fine food and drink, but No. 2 Pound Street, the Buckinghamshire-based retailer overseen by former restaurateur James Grant, is deserving of a particular highlight. Having focused his attentions on running restaurants in London for many years, James opened the deli in 2010, balancing both foodservice and retail until a period of ill health led him to take time off and the decision to "come back stronger" and give the shop business his all.

Forging strong relationships with cheesemakers and sharing his excitement for what they do is key to the success of his retail business, and has been an important part of the company's DNA since launch. His team now sells between 50-60 different cheeses, leaning towards raw milk varieties due to what James describes as a "raw milk bias".

"Over the last few years I've got to know lots of great cheesemakers and have had lots of fun with them," says James. "During lockdown in particular I've forged strong relationships with them, and have spent Mondays and Tuesdays driving to various producers and connecting with them.

"As well as being able to get the profile of cheeses that I want for my shop and customers, and am also able to be genuinely enthused about the cheese that I'm selling."

In some ways, the Covid crisis has sorted the wheat from the chaff and led shoppers to consider what they really want from the cheese they're buying. "Jamie Montgomery, of Montgomery's Cheddar, told me that he believes that consumers have developed a taste for great cheese – they've learned to understand it," James explains. "Supermarkets got it wrong in the first lockdown; their delivery services meant that the majority of consumers got left behind, and so they decided to venture into delicatessens and cheese shops and experience something brand new.



PLANS FOR 2021

"I was lucky enough to win a big grant, which I will be using to smarten up a couple of barns that we have on-site. One will contain a micro kitchen, and the other a tasting room where we'll host Academy of Cheese courses and wine courses."

> "IF I CAN INSPIRE A RAFT OF PEOPLE TO SUPPORT THE CHEESEMAKERS WHICH MAKE 2-3% OF THE PROFIT THAT INDUSTRIAL CHEESEMAKERS MAKE, I'VE WON. I WANT TO TURN THE HIGH STREET BACK INTO A PROPER INDEPENDENT HUB, WITH A CHEESEMONGER, FISHMONGER, GREENGROCER AND SO ON. THERE'S A GROWING NUMBER OF PEOPLE INTERESTED IN THIS MESSAGE AT THE MOMENT, AND IT WON'T BE TOO LONG BEFORE OTHER BUSINESSES START DOING WHAT I'VE BEEN DOING FROM THE START, BUT IT'S GRATIFYING TO KNOW THAT I WAS ONE OF THE FIRST TO DO IT"

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"They're beginning to understand why the cheese we sell costs more than the cheese available in supermarkets – it's a matter of education and recognition of the true value of cheese."

This is a mission which James has truly taken to heart. "Cheesemakers are very passionate about what they do, as I am about giving people the very best. For me, It's all about the people behind the cheese. They're not sitting back on their yachts and losing sight of what it's all about, miles away from the grass roots of the cheese they're selling." There are many cheesemakers who don't want the lifestyle that money brings, James explains, and that's the kind of cheesemaker he wants to work with and support. "Some cheesemakers are happy to be subsistent," he says, "and if we all really considered that message and applied to our own lives the world would be a better place."

By taking the time to engage with customers, sharing the stories behind the cheeses his team sells and making sure that they understand the true value of what they're buying, James has uncovered an uncompromising route to success. "After I explain the background to a cheese to customers, their eyes are on stalks!" he says. "People want grass roots – it's so important that I give them the story and background information they need to entertain their guests around the dinner table while they're eating the great cheese I sold them."

As well as bringing team members along for the ride when he visits cheesemakers up and down the UK, James conducts regular cheese tastings with his staff to ensure that they fully understand and appreciate the products they're selling. "We talk about things like how the cheese is made and the breed of cow that produced the milk, and I share the stories that I gleaned from my conversations and interactions with the cheesemaker. From there, they take the information and share it as they see fit in order to connect with customers. "I took a team member on a trip recently, and when he returned to the market stall and a customer showed an interest in the cheese he'd just travelled to see made, his eyes lit up! That's exactly what I want; for my team to be excited about what we sell."

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



BIGGER BLUE, ERRINGTON CHEESE
Raw milk blue goat's cheese. Smooth and slightly sweet.
erringtoncheese.com



SINODUN HILL
A ripened goat's cheese pyramid, similar to a Pouligny.
nortonand yarrow.co.uk



WITHERIDGE, NETTLEBED CREAMERY
Aged in hay which lends grassy notes to the rind.
nettlebed creamery.com

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LOCAL CHAMPION

George & Joseph

LOCATION: CHAPEL ALLERTON, LEEDS **OPENED**: 2012
FOUNDER: STEPHEN FLEMING

2020 was a year of unprecedented challenges for cheesemakers and mongers, but it's hard to find a business that adapted as quickly to the 'new normal' – or with as much care for its local community – as George & Joseph Cheesemongers.

Business boomed in lockdown, and George & Joseph went the extra mile to ensure that both new and old customers could enjoy a special treat – or get the essential supplies that supermarkets were lacking throughout the pandemic. In and out of the shop, George & Joseph was there for locals when they needed it the most.

Delivering locals a lifeline

Founder Stephen Fleming said George & Joseph was inundated with orders as the Covid-19 crisis hit. To keep up with demand, he revived a service offering free delivery within six miles of the shop. "We'd always offered it, but no one had ever taken us up on it," Stephen explained. From just one or two orders over the last few years, suddenly George & Joseph's online business was exploding.

The online ordering and delivery service was "invaluable" to locals – particularly those who were shielding. "To some people, we deliver just one loaf

> "TO SOME PEOPLE, WE DELIVER JUST ONE LOAF OF BREAD, OR ONE OR TWO PIECES OF CHEESE. THAT'S PROBABLY COSTING US MONEY TO FULFILL THAT, BUT TO KEEP OUR CUSTOMERS IN A GOOD PLACE, IT'S WORTH DOING"







HOW TO... SELL ONLINE

"Start small. Rather than trying to do everything, we picked out our 20 or so bestsellers, and got them online because we knew that would cover the large majority of what people wanted. Pick the things that you know sell well, and concentrate on getting them online and getting used to delivering and doing it well. Then, create a system you can stick to. We take all our orders through the website so they are all in one place. Whether on paper or online, have some simple rules and stick to them."

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of bread, or one or two pieces of cheese. That's probably costing us money to fulfill that, but to keep our customers in a good place, it's worth doing," Stephen said.

At the start of the pandemic, George & Joseph only had a few cheeses listed on its website, so to ensure that locals could access all that the shop had to offer, the cheesemonger took the incredible step of shifting nearly its entire offering to its website – including basic provisions like eggs, bread and milk.

"It's a time-consuming job, taking photographs and writing descriptions, but now we're beginning to reap the benefits of all that hard work."

Looking out for locals

George & Joseph is supported by a wealth of loyal customers who praise the team for its cheese knowledge and insight as well as the role that the shop's events – in person and, now, online – have in bringing the community together.

Thank you letters and positive feedback filled Stephen's inbox after the lockdown – but it wasn't just regulars who were showing their appreciation. Supermarket loyalty went out the window at the start of the pandemic, much to the benefit of those like George & Joseph who were prepared to step in to support their local communities.

"We had a lot of new customers coming in who were self-confessed supermarket addicts," Stephen said. "They found that we had plenty of stock, we had nice, friendly staff, we didn't have big queues. People felt safe with us," he added.

Looking back, Stephen is proud of the way the business responded to the crisis, and credits Covid-19 with providing the kick that he needed to make some big changes. "It's been a very strange year with Covid, but in a way we've shifted the business forward several steps," he says.

With a host of interactive online events planned for 2021, George & Joseph will undoubtedly continue to play a significant role in the local community – something that's needed now more than ever.

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



LEEDS BLUE
A gentle, mild blue. Very creamy, most similar in texture to a Gorgonzola.
olianas.co.uk



BARON BIGOD
A creamy, white bloomy-rind cheese, with long-lasting warm earth, farmyard and mushroom flavours.
fenfarmdairy.co.uk

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ECO WARRIOR

PLANS FOR 2021

"Cheese is such a simple thing – you just need cheese, a customer, and a knife – but we haven't been able to experience proper customer tastings since we've started, so we're looking forward to being able to do so when things get back to normal. Being able to offer tastings properly will be like opening the shop again! We used to put a bit of cheese on a piece of paper and hand it over to customers, but we haven't been able to do that since masks came in. Our vocabulary has very much improved, though!"



Chorlton Cheesemongers

LOCATION: MANCHESTER **OPENED:** APRIL 2020 **OWNER:** CHRIS HALLAM

While food businesses across Britain have made efforts to boost their sustainability credentials, few have done so with such a running jump as Manchester's Chorlton Cheesemongers. Having opened in April 2020, just as lockdown took hold in the UK, the retailer hit the ground running.

The team's main focus when it comes to sustainability is in sourcing considerately. By working only with small cheesemakers, they can have confidence and often first-hand experience of the animal welfare and land and soil management credentials of the produce they sell. Owner Chris Hallam is passionate about making sure that none of the products on Chorlton Cheesemongers' shelves are sourced from farms that use intensive farming or mass production practices; instead, ethical, sustainable farming is at the heart of each of the shop's suppliers.

"Working with small producers with small herds is the most sustainable way to source cheese," Chris explains. "We like to work with small businesses which have small herds on small farms, and show incredible diversity in their farming techniques." Just like the retailer, these businesses have the long-term picture in mind when it comes to the way they run their establishments. "They know that their livelihoods depend on the cheese they produce being the best, so they look after their land and business in order to be able to provide that," says Chris.

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> THERE'S A HUGE NUMBER OF GREAT CHEESES IN THE UK, SOME OF WHICH ARE MADE BY QUITE LARGE-SCALE, ALMOST INDUSTRIAL DAIRIES, BUT OUR EMPHASIS HAS BEEN ON SMALLER CHEESEMAKERS WHO PRODUCE CHEESE USING MILK FROM THEIR OWN LAND – THEY KNOW THAT THE QUALITY OF THAT MILK AFFECTS THE QUALITY OF THE CHEESE, PLUS HOW THE LAND HAS BEEN CARED FOR

This approach suits the area's thriving vegan and vegetarian population, too, who often have questions regarding the sustainable farming practices used by the cheesemakers that Chris sources from. And it is useful to be able to justify – "in a non-defensive way" – to customers who might need clarification on why Chorlton Cheesemongers' cheeses are more expensive than those found elsewhere.

As well as making sure that the businesses feeding into Chorlton Cheesemongers are sustainably minded, Chris and the team have put in a number of processes with their suppliers and landlord which minimise its impact on the environment, too – what's more, they plan to continue to make such changes as time rolls on. First on the list is the rejection of all single use plastic – a challenge within the cheese retail sector, for which wrapping cheese in clingfilm is a useful tool (they use alternatives wherever possible, and are currently using non-paraben clingfilm for health reasons during the pandemic). This was a non-negotiable from the word go, says Chris; thankfully the business didn't have to alter its plans to suit the new Covid climate. They use biodegradable – within an impressive 12 weeks – bags and pots from Greenman Packaging, and customers are encouraged to bring and reuse their own bags. Deliveries are available through carbon-free, car-free service Chorlton Bike Deliveries at a cost of just £2.50 (Chris and the team supplement a generous £1.50 per delivery).

Sustainability also runs through the Wilbraham Road shop. Electricity is supplied by renewable energy business Ecotricity, while its chiller units are low-energy static coil evaporators.

"The chiller system we use is a gravity cooler – no fans, reducing electric consumption," explains Chris. "It's more expensive, but long-term we can use the energy that it generates to heat our water and get rid of our gas boiler." Cleaning products are as environmentally friendly as possible while maintaining hygiene standards, food waste is minimised, and the team has developed mutually beneficial relationships with local businesses in order to avoid excessive fuel usage for suppliers.

BEST-SELLING CHEESES



MRS KIRKHAM'S LANCASHIRE
Raw cow's milk cheese with a buttery crumble.
mrskirkhams cheese.co.uk



BARON BIGOD
A creamy, white bloomy-rind cheese with a silky texture.
fenfarmdairy.co.uk



BRIGHTWELL ASH
Tangy cheese with an ashed rind and pleasant light texture.
nortonandy arrow.co.uk



LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP

Know your Gruyère AOP

- Gruyère AOP is available in the UK in two types, AOP Classic and Gruyère AOP Reserve
- Gruyère AOP is produced with raw, unpasteurized milk
- Gruyère AOP is natural – no additives or GMOs are used
- Gruyère AOP is naturally gluten and lactose free
- Every wheel of Gruyère AOP must be aged five months before it can be sold. Some wheels are aged for up to 18 months
- Gruyère AOP originates in the pretty Swiss town of Gruyères
- A single wheel of Gruyère AOP weighs around 35kg

BE CERTAIN YOU'RE BUYING REAL GRUYÈRE AOP:

Each wheel of Gruyère AOP carries important information on its rind, which guarantees the authenticity of the product and allows you to trace it back to its point of origin.
The Casein Mark and Date of Production guarantees the authenticity of your wheel of Gruyère AOP

Dairy Number: this allows buyers to trace the cheese to the the dairy which made it

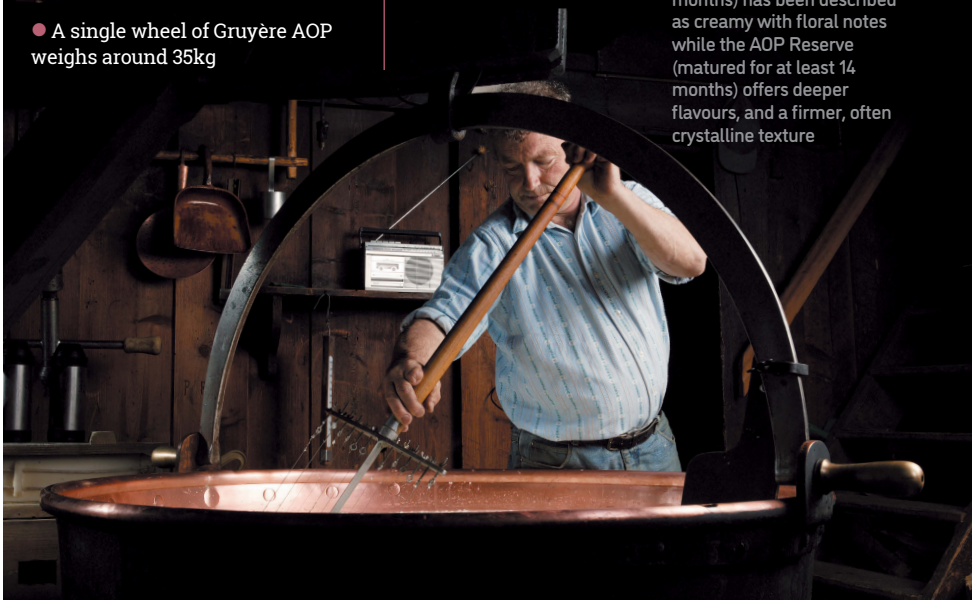
Heel Marking: Each wheel is stamped with the words Le Gruyère AOP and offers assurance that this is real Gruyère AOP from Switzerland

APPEARANCE

A wheel of Gruyère AOP has a yellowy-brown rind and hard texture, the paste being an ivory yellow in colour

FLAVOUR

Flavour will vary depending on the age of the cheese. Gruyère AOP Classic (matured from six to nine months) has been described as creamy with floral notes while the AOP Reserve (matured for at least 14 months) offers deeper flavours, and a firmer, often crystalline texture



LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP

After 6 to 9 months, the cheese is aromatic and smooth and just right for palates that prefer a mild flavour. After 10 months, the mature Le Gruyère AOP Réserve will impress all lovers of full bodied cheese. A few cheese wheels are matured for up to 18 or even 24 months. These will appeal to connoisseurs of particularly strongly flavoured cheese. The maturation length may vary but the quality always remains outstanding!

Get creative and don't be afraid to experiment! The richness and flavor complexity of Le Gruyère AOP pairs with everything you love to eat with cheese. For cooking inspiration, visit **gruyere.com/recipe**



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