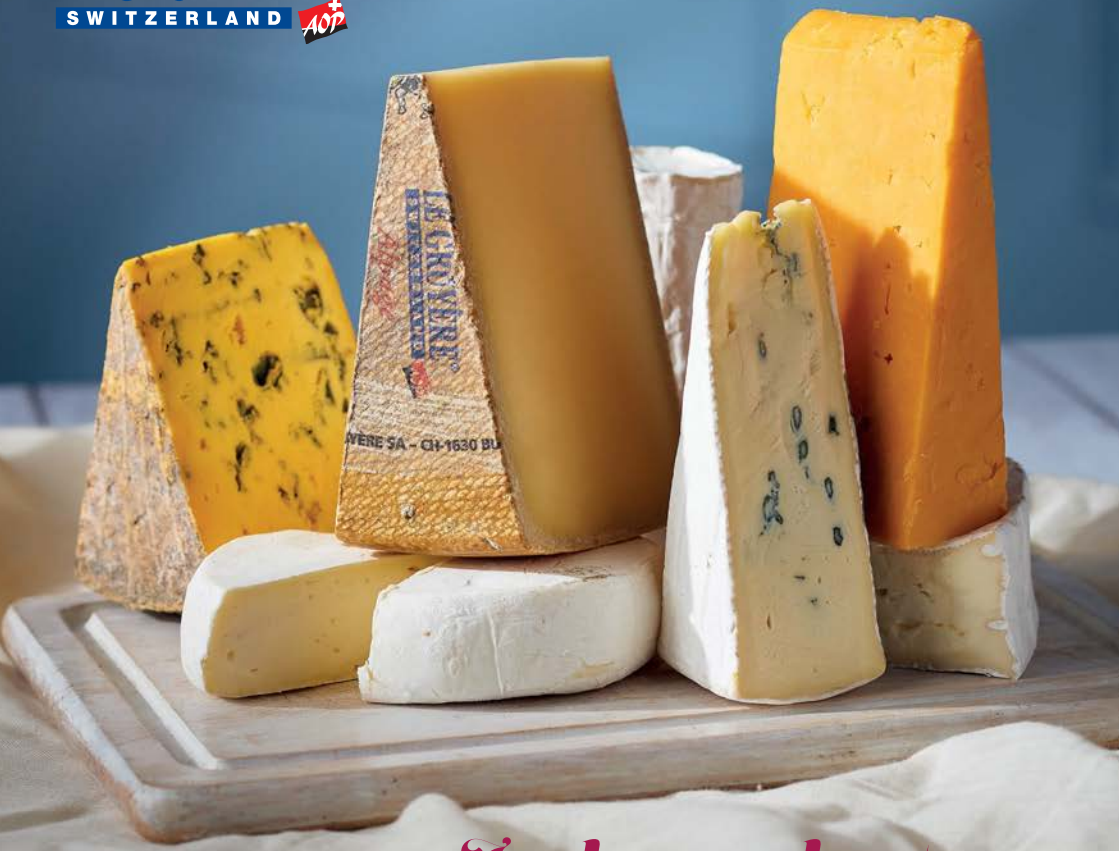
2022

INSPIRATIONAL Cheese RETAILERS

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Independent Heroes

Invaluable advice, stories and more from behind the scenes at Britain's best cheese shops


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Welcome

Welcome to the second edition of *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*: a run-through of some of the UK's most exciting and successful cheese shops, as chosen by professionals and cheese-loving consumers across Great Britain.

While the shadow of Covid-19 still looms and uncertainty hangs in the air, what isn't in question is the innovation and inspiring stories that can be found within the artisan cheese sector. As ever, independent retail has proven to be an invaluable resource of ideas, support and inspiration across the food industry and beyond, and the *Speciality Food* team – together with Le Gruyère AOP – is proud to shine a spotlight on this year's top shops.

I hope you enjoy reading this publication as much as we enjoyed putting it together.

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How We Put This Guide Together

The *Speciality Food* team, in partnership with Le Gruyère AOP, is proud to present the second edition of *Inspirational Cheese Retailers*: a celebration of the independent cheese sellers across the UK which have proven to be stand-out businesses over the past twelve months.

The publication was originally inspired by the hard work and dedication the artisan cheese sector showed during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as before and since, and I'm proud to report that the retailers profiled within these pages have well and truly kept up the mantle and provided the industry with sturdy foundations, role models and inspiration yet again.

HELEN DAYSH
HEAD OF MARKETING UK AT LE GRUYÈRE AOP

LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP

We are delighted to once again be sponsoring Inspirational Cheese Retailers in order to educate and inspire independents across the UK. For generations, Britain's cheesemongers have been vital to the popularity and appreciation of Le Gruyère AOP and other great cheeses from around the world, and by supporting this project we hope to motivate more cheese lovers to take on this valuable work.

In order to get to the heart of the industry, the *Speciality Food* team, together with Le Gruyère AOP, communicated with both the sector and cheese-loving consumers across social media and an online survey to gather a list of independent cheese retailers which deserve to be celebrated. People responded in their droves, and while it was a challenge to whittle the list down to those to be featured in this publication, we couldn't be happier to present the following Inspirational Cheese Retailers to you.

Some of the retailers profiled were nominated as a result of the innovation they demonstrated over the past year, while others were put forward by industry professionals and consumers who have come to value the service they provide very highly indeed.

We've also revisited some of the retailers profiled in *Inspirational Cheese Retailers 2021* to find out how they've been weathering the past twelve months. I hope you'll find the experiences of these innovative cheese professionals as inspiring as ever.

We have no doubt that each and every one of the cheesemongers within these pages will offer inspiration and ideas ready to be applied to your own business. After all, one of the greatest strengths of the fine food industry is its ability to stand together. I hope that you will learn from and enjoy the stories within this publication.


CHEESE ETC







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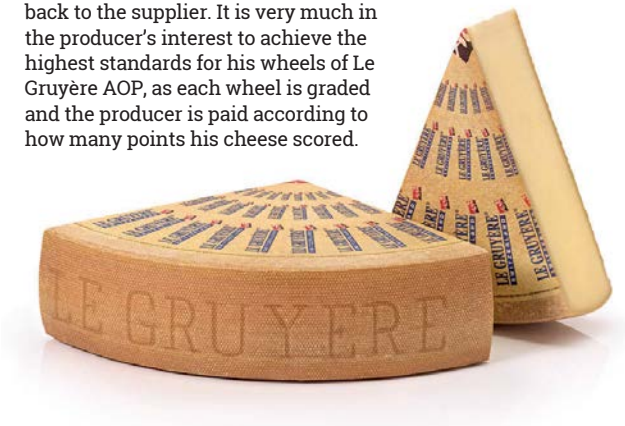
The cornerstone of the great cheese counters are very often the Continental classics, and few can match Le Gruyère AOP in terms of quality, tradition, provenance, and, of course, taste. Cheesesellers can choose Le Gruyère AOP Classic, which is matured for between five and nine months and offer a creamy, floral taste, or Le Gruyère AOP Réserve, whose 10 month minimum maturation brings to the table deep flavours and a crystalline crunch – or they can stock both, and most do.

Quality is king

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

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

> "THE RULES WHICH GOVERN THE CONSISTENCY AND QUALITY OF THIS CHEESE ENSURE THAT THE FINISHED PRODUCT HAS THE UNIQUE AND SUBTLE FLAVOURS WHICH LIFT LE GRUYÈRE AOP ABOVE ANYTHING MACHINE-MADE"



STOCK ONLY GENUINE LE GRUYÈRE AOP

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



The true taste of rural Switzerland

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

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



An international favourite, made by artisans

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

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

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Inspirational Cheese Retailers 2021: Revisited

> THE INAUGURAL INSPIRATIONAL CHEESE RETAILERS PUBLICATION HIGHLIGHTED SOME OF THE MOST VALUABLE BUSINESSES IN THE SECTOR

The independent cheese sector experienced a year like no other in 2020, when the world around them – not to mention a number of cheesemaker suppliers and their usual ways of working – crumbled. The inaugural Inspirational Cheese Retailers publication, originally published as a response to the crisis and in celebration of the vital role that independents across the UK took on to support the industry, highlighted some of the most valuable businesses in the sector.

In the following pages we revisit these impressive independent cheese businesses, mongers, delis and farm shops to find out what the year has held for them since publication – as well as how they're planning to tackle 2022.



RICHARD HOLMES
MANAGING DIRECTOR

Cryer & Stott

For West Yorkshire-based Cryer & Stott, 2021 has seen success across its channels. "Once lockdown ended we've seen strong growth in the hospitality sector with +20% on 2019 sales," says Richard Holmes, managing director of Cryer & Stott. The wholesale arm of the business has been stable, with independent retailers continuing to support the business. "It's been encouraging to see the number of new start-ups too," says Richard, demonstrating that the past few years of challenges could well pave the way to fresh growth for the industry.

The Cryer & Stott team has been busy creating new cheeses and strengthening ties with Swiss suppliers to bring their cheeses into the UK. "Product development progressed in 2021 with our new cheese, Sheffield Forge, which has been well received – winning Bronze at the World Cheese Awards." Also positive has been the business's relationship-building efforts with small producers.



Valuable lessons have been learned over the past two challenging years, with Cryer & Stott becoming more dedicated than ever in "ensuring the quality of service we provide and being flexible in an ever-changing world, which can in turn create new opportunities."

> WE ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT ENSURING THE QUALITY OF SERVICE WE PROVIDE AND BEING FLEXIBLE IN AN EVER-CHANGING WORLD, WHICH CAN IN TURN CREATE NEW OPPORTUNITIES

PLANS FOR 2022

This proactive approach continues into 2022, during which time they plan to develop their bespoke cutting and prepack lines, and "growing our family business with the same core values."

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La Fromagerie

PLANS FOR 2022

"It is our 30th Year in business so we will be doing a lot of different events, dinners, suppers and bringing producers into these plans too," says Patricia. "I also want to write another book but this time about La Fromagerie and its daily life and the people, producers and places that are part and parcel of what we do. We also want to keep moving forward and evolving so opening another place could happen, or working with young entrepreneurs to start their business is also something that we are interested in too – how we can work together to make it happen. One thing for sure is that La Fromagerie will not stand still, as there is still so much that can be achieved and created."

"La Fromagerie started the year with fresh eyes," begins La Fromagerie's owner, Patricia Michelson. "We had a busy and successful Christmas 2020 maintaining what could have been quite different by looking at our strengths and how we could deliver the same service to our customers without compromising." The online arm of La Fromagerie became more important than ever in 2021 - "and continues to be so". Evolution plays a huge part in La Fromagerie in 2022: "This is evolving all the time and is something we will be working on with new ideas going forward," says Patricia.

Brexit has been a challenge for the business, despite Patricia and her team feeling "as ready as we could be for the onslaught of paperwork, delays, resistance from some of our European producers and general confusion in understanding how to move forward." The challenge did not defeat them, however, and the shop is full of cheese from all over Europe and the UK, with Oregon's Rogue River Blue arriving in time for Christmas. The shop is also stocking "wonderful confectionery, and festive fare from near and far that somehow managed to get through all the red tape and arrive intact."

"Above all we wanted to prove that Covid-19 and Brexit will not stop us moving forward," says Patricia. "We see ourselves as a service and giving good service to our customer is not only important but also vital to ensure that people come shopping on a daily basis.

> "ONE THING FOR SURE IS THAT LA FROMAGERIE WILL NOT STAND STILL, AS THERE IS STILL SO MUCH THAT CAN BE ACHIEVED AND CREATED"

For Patricia, the most heartening development to come out of 2021 was the generation of young entrepreneurs starting up. "I got in touch as I am always intrigued by individuals with a passion for their product or produce. So many think La Fromagerie is all about European cheese but we have a lot of produce from very small local and rural makers that we love to showcase in the shop; their ethos runs along the same path as ours and it all fits in perfectly.

The online opportunity

The digital side of La Fromagerie experienced rapid growth as a result of Covid, and there are no plans to slow this down any time soon. "We absolutely loved doing the virtual tutorials and live tasting events," says Patricia. "It brought a whole new audience into our world and allowed lots of people outside of London to experience the La Fromagerie cheese tutorials that used to take place in-store." While the success of this new venture is still being felt, some customers are hopeful that in-person sessions will return soon – demonstrating that far from an alternative to the previous format, online is an additional service the business's customers want provided.



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Chorlton Cheesemongers

Similarly to businesses across the food and drink industry, Chorlton Cheesemongers has had a rocky year. "Business has generally been good," says owner Chris Hallam, "but we've had peaks and troughs as I'm sure many retailers can relate to. 2021's edition of Inspirational Cheese Retailers, in which the business was recognised and celebrated, was just one part of the positive response the team got for their efforts during the challenging recent past. "It was lovely to have the recognition from industry last year, particularly for something we're so passionate about, and a lot of our customers have said how much they value that."

This thumbs up from the cheese-loving community is still ongoing, with a new audience emerging as time goes on. "Every day we have new customers discovering us for the first time, and as a still relatively new enterprise, we really feel like we've established a solid loyal customer base to build from."

Chorlton Cheesemongers has always had a wide-reaching vision at its core – it featured in last year's publication in part due to its impressive sustainability credentials - and the team is continuing the good work with aplomb. "It's challenging balancing the everyday running of the shop with some of the outreach work we plan to do, though we've achieved a lot of things this year - we're particularly happy to be involved with supporting Eatwell MCR, a collective of chefs, food and drink producers and those working in hospitality, to provide meals to those living with food inequality." Chorlton Cheesemongers' staff has been bringing its mission to local schools, talking about the way they work and letting the children in on the secrets and skills of cheesemaking, as well as running tasting and pairing events to introduce people to the wealth of artisan cheeses available to them.

"On our sustainability mission, we're getting further along the zero-packaging route and now offer 'fill your own' on milk and eggs," says Chris. "One of the biggest things for us has been getting back to visiting farms and dairies to get closer to the makers and producers, so we can share their story directly with the customer. Slow but steady progress!"

Lessons learned

Despite its young age, the business has learned that evolution is key to a successful business - "there is no normal!" says Chris. "We're coming up to our second full year of trading, and we're still keeping ourselves very flexible to pivot with the changes that are still occurring as the pandemic continues. It feels like this is the right way to go at the moment, so no resolutions for change – ask us for 2023!"

PLANS FOR 2022

"We've got some projects planned to get out and stay with some of the cheesemakers, so our newer staff members can follow the process through from pasture to finished cheese and learn the art of making from the makers themselves," begins Chris. "We're working on recapturing our waste heat from the cooling system for further sustainability running the shop. Lots of things in the pipeline, from new cheeses and products, working with the local community, and bringing even more great cheese to the people of the Greater Manchester region!"



"LOTS OF THINGS IN THE PIPELINE, FROM NEW CHEESES AND PRODUCTS, WORKING WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY, AND BRINGING EVEN MORE GREAT CHEESE TO THE PEOPLE OF THE GREATER MANCHESTER REGION!"

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Courtyard Dairy

You'd be forgiven for thinking that a business as world-renowned as The Courtyard Dairy would have easily weathered the storms of 2021, but as for independent fine food retailers across the board it was "very variable," according to owner Andy Swinscoe. "Thankfully when one area of the business was quiet another one would be busy!"

As it happened, the rise in interest in artisan cheese and small-scalemakers kept heads above water. "We were sustained by people still showing a good interest in traditional farm cheese across the board, and the numerous staycations which brought a lot of new business past our door as they visited the area," says Andy. While the business's hospitality customers stopped ordering for obvious reasons, it "bounced back strong" when the situation allowed, which meant that cheese sales held up well – "by and large" – despite Courtyard Dairy losing the corporate virtual business it gained during the pandemic.

Building connections

For a business as passionate about supporting small-scale cheesemakers as Courtyard Dairy, it's only natural that the team is itching to get back on the road after a tumultuous period. "It was a challenging year with staffing levels caused by self-isolation and trying to minimise contacts at the beginning of the year," says Andy, "but we still spent time visiting cheesemakers and trying to develop our relationship with them." Although many relationships were maintained and fostered during this time, Andy says that more work can be done in this regard. "I feel that the turmoil of the last year meant we need to get back out on the road supporting and encouraging new and existing cheesemakers as our primary focus," he says. "Here's to making that a 2022 resolution!"

A simultaneous mission that was a stand-out success, however, was Courtyard Dairy's plan to "champion, support and sell as much traditional raw milk cheese as possible." Indeed, the business managed to maintain and increase the volume of farm-made cheese through the door.

Moving forward, Andy and his team plan on continuing to increase the way they interact and spread their knowledge to customers and cheesemongers. "My main resolution is get every staff member to visit a minimum of two cheesemakers a year to help with this and to enhance the retail experience." Of course, the internet is a helpful tool here: "The way we offer tasting booklets and video introductions online is to be increased to facilitate this, but for me it is about trying to get people valuing retail and getting them confident and out into our shop again."



PLANS FOR 2022

"We have just finished enlarging our shop to provide more 'a personal shopper experience' for each customer and it not be so crowded," says Andy. "The next stage of our development is to build a brand new basement in which we can hold and mature cheeses to provide a point of difference and talking point within the shop; for example being able to taste the same cheese matured in different way and environments that way showcasing the variety and impact that you can get even within the same cheese. We plan on offering tours through this space too, so that the public can see the real nuts and bolts of cheese, how it is made and matured. At the same time we are building space to streamline our packing and goods in/out operations, a bigger museum space and an area that hopefully we will be let out to become a bakery/cafe! Big plans afoot but all in keeping with trying to not diversify too much away from making the location all about cheese."

> "BIG PLANS AFOOT BUT ALL IN KEEPING WITH TRYING TO NOT DIVERSIFY TOO MUCH AWAY FROM MAKING THE LOCATION ALL ABOUT CHEESE"

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New Market Dairy

For cheesemonger and maker Martin Gott, the past year has not been without its challenges. "Business has been up and down, mainly due to lockdowns in the early part of the year and the cumulative impact of the pandemic overall," he begins. "It's been a difficult and challenging time for us and for many small businesses like us. But we've adapted and been creative and resilient in our approach, introducing a variety of click and collect cheese boxes and steadily building up an eMarketing capability to communicate directly with our subscribers."

Despite the hospitality arm of the business being "nearly totally wiped out" it is now seeing a reassuring slight upturn in trade, and the loyal food orientated audience in Altringham "means that we have been able to retail face to face pretty much all the way through and we are on track to break even and perhaps even make a small profit, which is unexpected," says Martin.

New Market Dairy has been able to stay proactive throughout the past 12 months, including staying open as an essential retailers selling farm-produced apple juices and ciders to its retail customer base alongside cheese and cheese-related condiments, but the core mission of the business during this time was supporting Britain's small cheesemakers. "Our biggest focus has been on acting as a sales outlet for the many small UK based cheese producers dotted about, including our own dairy in Cumbria," says Martin. "The UK cheese industry was at one point very close to collapse. Thankfully, retailers like us played a small part in helping to sustain these producers and provide them with somewhere to sell their cheeses, which was especially pertinent due to the lack of trade within the hospitality sector, which many of them relied on."

Of course, as Martin says, "Happily, the British public stepped up, mostly in light of several articles by highly respected food writers urging people to buy British artisan cheeses, which had the desired effect."

Looking forward into the new year, Martin and his team are largely resolving to not take anything for granted. "What have we learned is fairly straight forward, and that's to be flexible and to always be prepared to change business direction as the need arises. Thankfully, we are small enough to be nimble in the way we react without impacting the business model too much."

> "THANKFULLY, WE ARE SMALL ENOUGH TO BE NIMBLE IN THE WAY WE REACT WITHOUT IMPACTING THE BUSINESS MODEL TOO MUCH"

PLANS FOR 2022

Coming up, Martin and the New Market Dairy team plan to, "consolidate our position online and increase the range of cheese and related condiments that we stock to cater for ever increasing demand," he says. "Alongside that to continue to develop our core retail market, the continue to collaborate with other producers and as things return to a more normal footing to explore the possibility of running events cheese tasting again with like-minded businesses, which is something we had started to do in late 2019 before the pandemic hit."

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Funk

While stories of challenge and strife have been abound over the past couple of years, for some business Covid-19 has presented opportunities not to miss. "2021 has been great for the business," says Alan Watson, head of cheese at The Cheese Bar and Funk. "Ever since the changes in May we've seen each location grow and find its own identity. We've had a calendar year with strong growth and are using this to line up future projects within British cheese."

With its multiple sites spanning retail and hospitality, the Cheese Bar team could have been in real trouble as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, but Britons' love of cheese – a factor also at the heart of this business – came to the rescue.

Key to the business's success is its close relationships with the people producing the cheeses they sell. "We continue to buy the majority of our products directly from cheesemakers, and this close working relationship ensures the best scenario for all parties." Not only does working directly with a success retail and hospitality empire mean solid support for the makers, but it means that Funk is able to present to its cheese-loving customers produce at its very best. "We can tweak the age profile of the cheeses," he explains, "and ensure the very optimum quality but also give the best margins to the makers."

REVISITED

PLANS FOR 2022

The coming year will bring more opportunities for expansion. "We've recently taken a lease on a railway arch in central Leeds. This primarily was to give us more space for our Christmas orders – every year we need more and more space! We have exciting plans for this space in 2022," Stephen reveals. "It's in

George & Joseph



When the pandemic struck, Stephen Fleming, owner of George & Jospeh, stepped in to offer an invaluable service to customers who were shielding or stuck at home. By supporting customers in their time of need, he built strong relationships – and a lucrative arm of the business via an e-commerce shop. 2021, he says, was another good year for the shop. "We've continued to develop and expand our website, and we've recruited some great people into the shop team, including a cheesemonger from Paris!

Word of the year

Resilience is the word at the centre of Funk's 2021. "We've learned the true meaning of resilience, to our suppliers, the guests and most importantly our team members," says Alan. "We've always relied on having a strong team within the company to help spread the word of good cheese, and this year that's been more prevalent than ever."

PLANS FOR 2022

"The Cheese Bar team are always looking forward and attempting to push the boundaries of cheese, whether it's a cheese barge, cheese conveyor-belt or something totally different," says Alan. "Of course I cannot give away our secrets for 2022, but let's just say watch this space!"

> "THE CHEESE BAR TEAM ARE ALWAYS LOOKING FORWARD AND ATTEMPTING TO PUSH THE BOUNDARIES OF CHEESE, WHETHER IT'S A CHEESE BARGE, CHEESE CONVEYOR-BELT OR SOMETHING TOTALLY DIFFERENT"



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We've restarted live events, our wedding cheese service and our wholesale offering," Stephen says. For cheesemongers, the hard work is never over.

Business booms

The e-commerce business is still going strong. "It's now a major strand of our business, and we've found we are sending out more cheese nationally than ever before, so it's definitely extending our reach," Stephen says. "We've hired a dedicated online order supervisor to look after this side of the business." With a strong framework in place, Stephen took the opportunity to relaunch George & Joseph's wholesale service using the same ordering and delivery infrastructure that retail customers use. "We brought in more than double our projected turnover for this service in the first three months it was running, and it continues to grow," he says.

> "THE LAST YEAR HAS OPENED THE EYES OF CUSTOMERS AS TO WHAT THEY ACTUALLY HAVE ON THEIR DOORSTEPS"

As the digital shop flourished, more customers were also seeking out a bricks-and-mortar experience, and live, in-person events have been hugely popular. "We still see a healthy turnout for our virtual tasting events, but our in-store tasting evenings are selling out every month," Stephen says.

Customers are craving experiences, and local shops are here to offer them. "The last year has opened the eyes of customers as to what they actually have on their doorsteps. We're fortunate in that there is a brilliant local community around our shop, and that we have a great range of independent shops next to us in Chapel Allerton," Stephen says. Thanks to the local support for George & Joseph's physical shop in 2021, there exciting plans are taking shape on the horizon. "The search will be on for another site for a second retail shop in 2022."

The Little Cheesemonger



2021 was a year of big changes for Rhuddlan's The Little Cheesemonger. After opening her second shop, owner Gemma Williams has pushed forward with plans for a maturation room, all the while rolling with the punches of the pandemic. "It's been a rollercoaster of ups and downs. You take each month as it comes," Gemma says.

Peaks and troughs

Thanks to the shop's location near a seaside resort, The Little Cheesemonger welcomed droves of visitors over the summer amid Brits' staycation holidays. More tourists mean more cheese sales, especially when it came to local varieties. "They were all interested in what was local. They wanted to experience the food from the area."

But with the euphoric peaks in traffic came the difficult troughs. "It's constantly changing. You just get used to having a busy summer, and then it stops and the locals come back and want their usual orders." Stock, too, is no longer predictable as supply chain issues bite. "I've always had Reblochon in stock for the last four years, and then suddenly Reblochon is not available. It's madness."

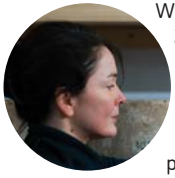
A sense of normalcy is slowly returning thanks to the revival of markets and events, but Gemma adds, "We're still having to make exceptions, and we're still having to adapt." For example, the shop has had to find a balance between virtual and in-person events as social distancing rules have remained in place in Wales throughout the pandemic. "What we've had to do is split the events into in-person and online. "The best way we found to do it was do a 50/50 – a small amount of people can come in the shop and the rest do it online. Some people actually prefer to join online, and some people prefer to be in the actual shop itself and do it together," Gemma says, so the system appears to be working. While the rollercoaster ride has brought big successes to the small shop, Gemma is hoping for a slightly smoother journey in 2022.

PLANS FOR 2022

The new year will bring another healthy mix of physical and online growth. Gemma had planned to hold cookery demonstrations in her new space in 2021, but Covid restrictions prevented this. "The suppliers who I was getting in to collaborate with to do the demos are still really keen, but I think it all depends on what things look like and what we're allowed to do." In the meantime, she will focus on building her online presence. "There's so much more business online than ever before," Gemma says.

LE GRUYÈRE SWITZERLAND AOP

The Fine Cheese Co



When looking back at 2021, Ruth Raskin, cheese care and quality manager at The Fine Cheese Co, sees another strong performance from British cheese in the face of tough circumstances. "If you think 2020 saw that huge explosion in e-commerce, you would imagine that in 2021 this might have really taken a step back." Quite the opposite, in fact. "We've still managed to hold on to a really good percentage of that growth. And other areas have grown too as things open up – wholesale has become much, much busier," she says.

The power of collaboration

In 2021, The Fine Cheese Co was recognised for its work collaborating with industry players both large and small to help cheesemakers through a troubling time. These relationships have now evolved to form new partnerships. Through 2020, Ruth says, the business was constantly checking in on cheesemakers to see what needed selling and where they needed support, but in 2021, when that was no longer necessary, The Fine Cheese Co kept up its interactions with British cheesemakers.

Collaborations have also continued through events, which were held virtually and in person throughout 2021 – from an in-person sake and cheese pairing masterclass to virtual cheese and wine evenings with the Wine Society. "Those collaborations are really fun," Ruth says. "You get to put together great combinations to introduce to people." These relationships add real value to the business – and the wider industry. "There's still lots of working with other people, making really positive combinations. Rather than just ploughing through on your own, if you can introduce other people, you can come up with something even more exciting.

"From a year where there was that real sense of peril for British cheese, I think it's turned around and become an incredibly strong year. People really have their eyes open to how special the British cheese industry is."

PLANS FOR 2022

The Fine Cheese Co plans to double the size of its London shop and develop its second site where the maturing rooms and offices are located. It is also looking further afield to its relationships with cheesemakers on the Continent. "We've got a big programme in place to improve our European cheese. We've got great, strong relationships with all the British cheesemakers that we work with, and we want to make sure that we have just as good relationships with our European cheesemakers, because that's really important to us too."

The Cheese Lady



"The stars were aligned," says Svetlana Kukharchuk, owner of The Cheese Lady in Haddington, of her experience during 2021. Last year, everything started coming together for the cheesemonger: a new shop, a new website and a new book. "It's been a crazy busy year for us," she continues.

In May, Svetlana acquired a new premises four times the size of her previous shop that was gutted, renovated and ready to welcome customers by June. "It's brighter and more spacious. We can offer more cheeses and other products so there's a better customer experience now in the shop," Svetlana says. "And in addition to what we previously used to have, we now have also a micro café where people can sit down and enjoy some cheese and wine."

Personalising the experience

A month later, The Cheese Lady launched a new website with changes that made it easier for customers to explore new cheeses and find recommendations, all without coming into the shop. "During the lockdown we had so many orders coming through the website, and people were giving their feedback in a constructive way about where we could improve things."

PLANS FOR 2022

Following the initial launch of the larger shop, Svetlana has big plans for her new on-site maturation room. She'll soon begin experimenting with maturing cheeses to put her own stamp on products in her shop. Education will also be in the spotlight, as Svetlana will be launching a brand new Cheese Connoisseurship Programme.

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The Cheese Shop Nottingham



Rob Freckingham, who runs The Cheese Shop Nottingham with his brother Webb, is well aware of the challenges currently facing the sector independent retail sector. "It's been difficult. Footfall has been a big issue," he says, "but the biggest issue last year was staffing." Recruiting staff has been tough, but Rob says the shop continues forging ahead – and there is plenty to be excited about in the artisan cheese sector.

Promoting British makers

In fact, the shop has been focusing more and more on British cheese over the last year. In the wake of Brexit and the climate crisis, Rob says it's only natural to stock products that you can buy on your own back door, where you can. "Realistically, that's where we should be going," he says. "It's got to be better to be buying stuff in this country than shipping it from all over the world." Local restaurants are making the same moves in order to boost their eco credentials, Rob says, and luckily, he sees an influx of smaller dairies on the horizon thanks to a growing interest in artisan cheese. "Look at Chiswick Cheese Market," Rob says. "It's massive. It seems to have grown virtually overnight. To me, that is always a good sign."

To keep the industry relevant in the years to come, Rob says mongers must champion their British cheesemakers. "We're lucky where we are. We've got Billy Keven at Colston Bassett. We've got the Skailes at Cropwell Bishop. We've got Dovedale Blue, which is just around the corner from us. We've got Mario Olianas in Leeds making Leeds Blue and his Pecorino, which is fantastic," Rob says. "I just look at it like that. These people started out with nothing. He was making cheese in his bathtub, and now he's got his own dairy. And I just think that's brilliant. They're the people we need to support."

The Freckingham way of showing their support is through videos on Instagram and Facebook made under the guise of Doctor Cheese. "I still do the silly videos when we get time at the moment," Rob says. "They've been a godsend. That has snowballed on the back of everything, and now whenever I'm at the supermarket or filling up diesel in the van, people will say, 'Hey Doctor Cheese!'" For those who don't have the benefit of a Doctor Cheese persona, what's Rob's advice? "All you can do is keep plugging away, hoping that your next customer is one that shouts about you from the rooftops."



PLANS FOR 2022

2022 will bring the shop a revamped website. "We haven't done anything with it as such in 2021. We just let it plod along." Once staffing is under control, dedicating more resources to the online shop is top of the priority list. "We'll look at it. Refresh. Think of new things. And we go again."

> "ALL YOU CAN DO IS KEEP PLUGGING AWAY, HOPING THAT YOUR NEXT CUSTOMER WILL SHOUT ABOUT YOU FROM THE ROOFTOPS"

By August, Svetlana not only had a new shop and website, but she had also launched her first book, *The Cheese Connoisseur's Handbook*, which she had written in lockdown. It quickly became a category best-seller on Amazon, and Svetlana has been excited to see how customers interact with it in-store. "People come and grab the book in the shop. It's great. People are interested to learn more about cheese," she says. Svetlana has a passion for education, and she finds that the book also sparks conversations in the shop about different cheeses and pairing ideas. "Personalisation is very important for us. You can't have a one-size-fits-all solution," she says. "I don't just tell customers what I enjoy. They come in and ask 'what would you recommend?' and I say 'I need to find the best cheese for you. So let's chat'."

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Slate Cheese

As a destination cheesemonger located in the picturesque seaside towns of Southwold and Aldeburgh in Suffolk, Slate Cheese felt the full impact of the 'summer of staycations' in 2021. "We had a really, really busy – bordering of frenetic – time with everybody visiting the Suffolk seaside. The summer months were really great for us, although it stretched us in terms of staffing," says Clare Jackson, director of Slate Cheese.

Before the busy summer period was a much quieter patch – but the shop took this in its stride as well. "There's less adrenaline and fear around it than in 2020," Clare says. "Being locked down at the beginning of this year for that period of January through to March, in some ways we'd been through it before. So it's just a question of settling down and using that time to do some quite exciting things." For instance, during last year's lockdown, Slate obtained a licence to sell alcohol so they could begin stocking shelves with English wines. The team also discovered new, tasty pairings to introduce their customers to. "We tried to see the positives of quieter times and do things to evolve and expand our offering, and that's been really well received both on our website and in our shops," she says.

Online opportunities

The quieter periods also meant less stress on staff. Slate is just one of many cheesemongers and makers struggling with staffing. The labour shortages are reflected in their stock, too, as some suppliers haven't been able to provide cheeses due to staffing issues. While gaps in the rota cause a headache, inflation is also sending prices to higher for retailers, and Clare says everything from energy bills to wages are on the rise.



But 2021 offered challenges and opportunities in equal measure. Slate saw its online business grow in the early days of the pandemic, and Clare and the team worked hard to ensure that growth continued well into the year. "We've really consolidated that growth, and we've worked hard to keep communicating with customers who have purchased from us online," she says. More and more consumers around the country are keen to stock up on fresh food online from speciality retailers. "They can browse and shop at their leisure, then pick a time that's convenient to them and get it delivered. That's been a good thing that people have taken from their shopping experiences during periods of lockdown," Clare says. The team used social media and newsletters to keep in touch with customers and encourage repeat orders, to great success. "We've now built up a really nice group of people who are regularly buying from us online, so we can have a wider group of cheese lovers. And I think that was a real bonus of last year."

PLANS FOR 2022

Once the Covid crisis settles down, Clare wants to focus more on how Slate can be part of the sustainability solution by cutting its own carbon footprint, from packaging to deliveries to energy use. She also can't wait to start arranging stunning cheese cakes for weddings again. "That's something we were just starting before the pandemic days. We're getting some lovely inquiries and bookings for celebrations in 2022, which are back up to some really impressive displays of cheese."

> "WE TRIED TO SEE THE POSITIVES OF QUIETER TIMES AND DO THINGS TO EVOLVE AND EXPAND OUR OFFERING, AND THAT'S BEEN REALLY WELL RECEIVED BOTH ON OUR WEBSITE AND IN OUR SHOPS"

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Sheridan Cheesemongers



According to Kevin Sheridan, the co-founder of Sheridan's Cheesemongers, Ireland's independent retail scene is quite different to that of the UK. "We're on such a different trajectory to the UK, in terms of where we're coming from with very few independent stores," he says. But a food culture is growing, and Kevin adds that it's "taken a leap forward" in recent years during the pandemic. For indies in Ireland, the sector has never been stronger. "It's really innovative. The standard has really pushed up," Kevin says.

So where does this leave Sheridan's? Covid, of course, was the dominating factor last year. The environment swung between very strict lockdowns to an almost full reopening in the summer. And the effects on business were as one would expect. "When restaurants were closed, people were purchasing more online. As restaurants open, that reduces the spend. So starting off, we were extremely busy in the shops and online, and then that slowed down as restaurants opened."

Opportunities vs challenges

Sheridan's online presence has been strong during the pandemic thanks to its use of meal solutions for scratch cookers. But in 2021, the playing field levelled between online and in-store shoppers. "It's still hard to judge where it really is as a means of shopping, because things have been up and down," Kevin says. But even in the most open periods, online sales were strong – if not at their lockdown highs. Kevin is confident that e-commerce will continue to attract punters. "I think we will retain a good chunk of that new customer base as another option for shopping," he says. "I don't think it's a case of there's online shoppers and there's retail shoppers. I think there's a big group who would use both depending on the situation. It's another option for the customers."

But while online shopping has opened Sheridan's to customers who are further afield, its cheese selection from one country in particular has dwindled as the retailer was met with closed doors. Because of the complexities of importing British cheeses post-Brexit, Sheridan's didn't have any British cheeses on its counters for the majority of 2021. Transport was the biggest issue, as hauliers wouldn't work with retailers who only wanted small shipments of chilled products. After months of struggling, Sheridan's finally has a solution – but paperwork and new costs are still making the process onerous. But while there are plenty of cheeses for Irish customers to choose from, it's the British makers who Kevin feels are missing out. "It's not like there's a shortage of cheese, but it's a shame for those lovely cheese makers. The people suffering are really the cheesemakers in England."

Challenges certainly remain with Brexit and Covid on the table, but today Sheridan's is ready to deal with anything. "2020 was so unknown, coming into it nobody knew what's going to happen. In 2021, we were a little bit more prepared for the unknown. People are continuing to enjoy and get solace from their food."

PLANS FOR 2022

Sheridan's continued to expand its retail concession and establishments last year, and it will do so this year as well, Kevin says. The wholesale side of the business, which supplies other independent retailers, is also going from strength to strength, with more on the cards for 2022. "It's more growth, and doing all the work behind the scenes, improving the infrastructure to be able to handle it," Kevin says. "At the moment, it's more of the same."



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Introducing 2022's Inspirational Cheese Retailers

> WE ARE PROUD TO HIGHLIGHT THE BUSINESSES WHICH HAVE WORKED TIRELESSLY TO SUPPORT THEIR INDUSTRY AND COMMUNITIES

Independent cheese retailers are an invaluable part of the fine food industry, and we are proud to highlight the businesses which have worked tirelessly to support their industry and communities over the past 12 months and beyond in the following pages.

Each of the these independents has evolved to suit the ever-changing market of the past couple of years; adapting their range to fit the needs of a changing clientele, ensuring that they are supporting the cheesemakers who supply them, and innovating to be as valuable as possible within their ecosystems.

We hope you find their stories as inspiring as we do.

CHEESE FOR ALL

The Cheese Hamlet

LOCATION: DIDSBURY, MANCHESTER
OPENED: 1972 **OWNER:** JOHN AXON

FAMILY VALUES

"We have many customers and their families who have visited the store since we opened nearly 50 years ago, many of whom we consider not only customers, but also friends," says John. "Our loyal and amazing team members also embrace the same ethos we have, and we get many comments from our customers about the team and the service we provide."

While many independent food businesses are family-run, not nearly as many can claim to have created a bona fide family feel for customers, staff and suppliers alike. But that's just what The Cheese Hamlet offers in droves. Opened in Didsbury, a "fashionable Manchester suburb" in 1972 by the father of current owner John Axon – who has run the business for the past three decades – the shop has been a "real family labour of love," John explains. "Three generations of the family are still regularly involved, and we all enjoy sharing our passion for cheese and fine foods."

Creating a community

The team behind The Cheese Hamlet has always put the local community first as a thanks for the support they were seen at the start of the shop's journey. "We try to repay the support they offered by being active with the local traders association, civic societies, charities and local schools that now educate some of our first customers' grandchildren and great-grandchildren," explains John.

As well as being ever-present within the community it supports, The Cheese Hamlet ensures that it is welcoming to customers of all tastes and budgets. "Our range of cheeses vary from the traditional mature block Cheddars at the economical end of the price structure through to higher end cheeses such as Ossau Iraty, Beaufort and Valencay (to name a few) for the more discerning cheese buyers. Having such a wide array of cheeses allows us to appeal to multiple demographics of customers."

Team effort

The team behind The Cheese Hamlet truly stepped up and stood together over the past challenging two years. "We are grateful to have wonderful relationships with all staff members who have worked with us throughout the years, and we could not be more thankful for all their help this year," begins John. "To relieve the pressure caused by staff shortages, we enlisted the help of family, friends and past employees to assist with home deliveries, stock collections and hamper packing. So, a big thank you to all of our

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amazing Cheese Hamlet community who have kept us running throughout this year."

Changes were made across the "boutique-style" shop to allow for lockdown requirements, but one in particular caused issues: social distancing. The retailer was limited to three customers in the shop at a time, which meant that the team had to innovate to survive. "While at the start of lockdown in early 2020 we produced a printed list of items available in the store for customers to order from home, it was certainly not the most effective way to portray our fantastic products to our customers." A deep dive into e-commerce was the answer, and while the team "dabbled with mail order back in the days of dial-up internet" they couldn't have known the positive impact that dedicated investment would bring. "With the help of a local website designer, we designed a new website and implemented a click and collect service which has proven to be highly successful," says John. The Cheese Hamlet now happily straddles both bricks-and-mortar retail and e-commerce. "While our main business is still and will continue to be our bricks and mortar store, the mail order business has certainly been a great addition, adding not only new customers from far afield but also allowing us to service our retail customers who have since moved away from Manchester."

Like many *Speciality Food* readers, The Cheese Hamlet felt the strain of supply chain issues in recent times and has relished the strengthened relationships with suppliers that have been the result of more direct contact.



"Over the years, we have struck up great relationships with many cheesemakers and fine food producers, but as our range continued to grow we have used wholesalers to coordinate orders and streamline the supply of products." While this efficient method of securing products saved time and energy, it created distance between maker and seller – a side effect that was pushed aside by the team. "It was lovely to speak to all of our suppliers directly again and support each other through the challenges that the pandemic has caused," says John.

Looking forward, the team at The Cheese Hamlet has simple but admirable plans: "to continue to serve amazing cheeses and fine foods to our local and local customers." Exciting plans are afoot to promote the business's passion to a wider audience through tastings and online promotions, but something tells us that the business will remain a steadfast pillar of the community for generations of the Axon family to come.

BEST SELLING CHEESES



QUICKES VINTAGE CLOTHBOUND CHEDDAR
A rich intense cheese with a delightfully crumbly texture and huge depth of flavour, from buttery and umami to caramel.



LE PREMIER CRU GRUYÈRE
A Swiss cheese with a dense texture and a lingering fruity, floral flavour. Aged for at least 12 months.



COLSTON BASSETT STILTON
A traditional blue cheese with a rich and creamy texture and complex flavour.

> "OUR LOYAL AND AMAZING TEAM MEMBERS ALSO EMBRACE THE SAME ETHOS WE HAVE AS A FAMILY, AND WE GET MANY COMMENTS FROM OUR CUSTOMERS AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY ABOUT THE TEAM AND THE SERVICE THEY PROVIDE"

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CHEESE ICON

FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY

"A particular focus for us has been our environmental sustainability," says James. "Making a positive impact on people and our planet is fundamental to the sustainability of our business and has kept Paxton & Whitfield thriving in our third century of trading. We have committed to publishing a list of our sustainability actions each year – some examples from the past year include us launching 100% sheep's wool insulation across all of our outgoing mail order parcels; using Ecofleet Cargo Bikes to deliver our food service cheese to London restaurants and delis with zero emissions; re-designing our gift boxes to have no lamination, less ink usage and fewer travel miles; and designing our new Head Office layout to use as much of the existing fittings and structure as possible to avoid material wastage."



Paxton & Whitfield

LOCATION: JERMYN STREET, LONDON
OPENED: 1797 **MANAGING DIRECTOR:** JAMES RUTTER

It's not for nothing that Paxton & Whitfield is one of the very best known cheesemongers across the world – not to mention within the UK. Its history is certainly enviable; its origins began in 1742 when Stephen Cullum set up a cheese stall in Aldwych market. As London became increasingly affluent, Sam Cullum (Stephen's son) moved the cheese business closer to his wealthy customer base, near to Jermyn Street where a Paxton & Whitfield is still located today. Ironically, it is their names, not his, which grace the shop fronts today.

Paxton & Whitfield still continues the principles of its founders back in 1797 and pioneers artisan cheese and handmade fine foods to great success – the business's empire has grown from one shop to three bricks-and-mortar sites and thriving e-commerce and wholesale arms. "We're proud to have held the Royal Warrant of Appointment to every monarch since HM Queen Victoria in 1850, and today we have two shops in London, one in Bath, our online business, and a thriving wholesale business; selling to department stores, delis, hotels and restaurants," explains James Rutter, managing director.

Paxton & Whitfield's rich history is undoubtedly a source of connection and inspiration for its staff. "Being an independent British food business which is still trading and thriving after 225 years is certainly inspiring to all our team," says James. "It's so rewarding to be part of a business with such a rich heritage – something that we don't take for granted and that our customers really appreciate too." Customers truly relish this history. "We speak to many loyal customers who have an annual Christmas visit to our shop to select their Christmas cheese which was started by their grandparents and they still continue the tradition today."

The business celebrates its 225th

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> DESPITE THE CHALLENGES, WE'VE ACTUALLY INCREASED THE RANGE OF CONTINENTAL CHEESES ON OUR COUNTERS TO COMPLEMENT THE OUTSTANDING RANGE OF BRITISH CHEESES THAT WE SELL

birthday in 2022, and the team is calling upon its loyal customers from near and far to recreate its lost history. "Unfortunately much of the detail of Paxton & Whitfield's history was lost in a fire at the Jermyn Street shop after World War II and our precious archives were destroyed," explains James, "so we're seeking memories, photos and stories to help us to piece together more details of our history. We plan to compile and publish these stories throughout the year. For every one we publish, we will plant a tree in 2022 as part of The Queen's Green Canopy project."

Retail icon

All independent retailers know that customers and evolution are king, and the generations of staff behind Paxton & Whitfield hold these principles to their hearts. "We have always focused on customer experience and innovation, whilst never losing sight of the fundamentals of sourcing incredible tasting artisan cheese," says James. "We were one of the first cheese retailers to sell online, one of the first to offer a cheese subscription and one of the first to supply wedding cheese cakes." Thankfully, this expertise is now being shared through The Academy of Cheese, which the business was at the forefront of launching and continues to teach today.

It's this sharing of skills and passion that sets Paxton & Whitfield apart from a lot of other businesses in the field. "Over the past 12 months, we have delivered regular online cheese tasting experiences on Friday evenings to customers across the UK," explains James. "We always monitor our customer feedback closely and we're proud of our world-class Net Promoter Score (a measure of customer satisfaction) for these tasting experiences – it's been a really enjoyable way to connect with customers and taste incredible cheese together."



NEW AND CLASSIC FAVOURITES AT PAXTON & WHITFIELD



SCHNEBELHORN
A hard, creamy, Swiss cheese with a satisfyingly sweet flavour.



CREMOSO
A sweet, milky, creamy cheese with unrivalled ooziness and guaranteed wow factor.



BLUE CLOUD, BALCOMBE DAIRY
A mild creamy blue with a slight salty tang, similar to Gorgonzola Dolce.



MINI MAIDA VALE, VILLAGE MAID DAIRY
Tangy and punchy in flavour, with a buttery texture.

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COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Forest Deli

LOCATION: COLEFORD, FOREST OF DEAN **OPENED:** 2018
FOUNDERS: SIMON AND DEBBIE JONES



BEST SELLING CHEESES



BROOKE'S DAIRY ANGIDDY
A local Brie made from Jersey Cow Milk in the Wye Valley.



CAWS CENARTH PERL LAS
Why we opened – there was nowhere local to buy it.

While a love of cheese runs throughout pretty much all independent fine food retailers, for Coleford's Forest Deli it truly is at the centre of what they do. Owned and run by husband and wife team Simon and Debbie Jones, the shop is centred around the cheese counter.

The deli's cheese offering is the pride and joy of co-owner Simon – the in-house expert on all things cheese – and his passion for sampling local produce is the driving force behind their impressively wide range. "A lack of quality cheese locally and a passion for tasty local food and drink led us to take the plunge, and we haven't stopped building on a desire to offer the widest range of local produce and something a little bit different for the community since," says Debbie.

Debbie's love of cooking and appreciation for artisan producers rounds out the shop's offering; a trained chef, she makes all of the homemade items for the deli including sausage rolls, quiche, scotch eggs, soup and cakes. "Everything we do and select for the shop is done with thought and care," Debbie says, "and we provide a personal touch throughout. The cheese counter is at the heart of the shop, and we pride ourselves on providing an extensive range and variety of cheeses to suit all tastes and budgets."

> "THE CHEESE COUNTER IS AT THE HEART OF THE SHOP, AND WE PRIDE OURSELVES ON PROVIDING AN EXTENSIVE RANGE AND VARIETY OF CHEESES TO SUIT ALL TASTES AND BUDGETS"



Relationships are key

Connecting with customers to provide optimum service is core to the Forest Deli proposition. "We love to make recommendations and work with our customers to provide something a bit different every time they come in." Cheese care is top of the list of housekeeping duties, and the pair make sure that their cheese is in "tip top" condition at all times. "It really is so crucial that every piece of cheese is checked every single day and the counter is always interesting and inviting," she explains.

The frequent change the industry has felt almost daily in recent times has hit the shop hard, but being flexible and

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able to constantly adapt has been key to Forest Deli's survival and success. "We went from being a predominantly retail business two years ago to becoming much more of a delivery and online business during the lockdowns, and now with increased footfall we are enjoying welcoming customers back into the shop in a Covid-safe way." The end of the lockdowns did not spell the end of the e-commerce arm of the business, however. Indeed, this has now been expanded to offer cheese aficionados across the UK a taste of the local area.

Challenges and opportunities

Of course, it's not only getting great products in front of the shop's customer base that has proven challenging. "Intermittent supply issues have also been a key thing in the last year," Debbie says, "but by having the ability to adapt and work with our local suppliers means that we've been able to have a good continuous supply." Being considerate towards these suppliers has reaped dividends too, with the team ensuring that all suppliers are paid as quickly as possible in order to build up strong and positive business partnerships.

Forest Deli has also been working in close partnership with local retailers, providing customers with an invaluable service. "During the pandemic we were able to provide a delivery service for those customers who couldn't come shopping, including shopping for them from other shops," says Debbie. "As one of the few shops open we became almost a community hub/information service for those who did come shopping!"

This 'support local' mindset stretches beyond a retail-plus service to benefit the local economy as a whole. "We work directly with over 50 local businesses and also raise funds for local charities to ensure that we support our local economy as much as possible."

Coming next

A smart approach to fine food retail has stood Forest Deli in very good stead thus far, and the team is excited to continue the evolution for the new year. "We anticipate a much more blended approach of in-store retail and online shopping, with some significant website improvements already under development," says Debbie. The deli's cheese offering will continue to evolve too, "with new cheeses, featuring new small producers but always presented with our Forest Deli customer service, and a variety of cheese-based events featuring highly on the to do list."

The team isn't resting on its laurels when it comes to opportunities such as the growing market for visitors. "As more and more UK visitors are discovering the Forest of Dean, we will be offering bespoke services for day trippers and self catering visitors."

TIP FOR SUCCESS

"Running your own business can be daunting, overwhelming and all consuming (especially when you are in both a personal and business relationship) but if you adopt an attitude of 'never be afraid to try' then your business and will continually evolve," says Debbie. "It's also important to have different points of view in a business relationship; if everyone agrees that every idea is the best idea ever, then you very easily can end up making costly business mistakes. Some of the best ideas can be spontaneous and intuitive but they still need to be able to stand up to business scrutiny from another person's point of view," says Debbie.

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AGEING PROS

IJ Mellis

LOCATION: EDINBURGH **OPENED**: 1993
DIRECTOR: RORY MELLIS

Originally started by Iain Mellis in 1993 following many years spent in the cheese industry, Edinburgh's IJ Mellis has become an iconic cheesemonger – no wonder when the business has such insight at its core. "He opened his first retail store in Edinburgh's old town on Victoria Street after locating a damp, small, cave-like premises, ideal for maturing and selling cheese," explains Iain's son and now director of IJ Mellis, Rory.

"After two years he opened his next store in the west end of Glasgow and was joined by my mum, Karen. Mum's background was in nursing, and when she joined my dad in the business, she brought with her a warm and personal touch which is something we encompass in our customer service style and are well known for," he continues.

This valuable combination of expertise and great customer service is something that fine food independents are rightly famed for, and something which the IJ Mellis team offers in droves. Rory joined the business in 2018 to develop the wholesale and e-commerce arms, as well as planning and opening The Cheese Lounge – a cheese and wine bar located at the back of the Morningside store – and today IJ Mellis has five retail stores in its arsenal, located in Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews.

The Mellis family's in-depth experience of cheese maturation has stood the business in very good stead. "With Dad's background in dairy science, we certainly have the edge on other retailers to take cheeses further and keep them stored at the best possible condition at our maturing rooms in Leith before making their way to our loyal customers," explains Rory. "But above all else, I believe that as we are a family-owned and operated business, our passion for cheese and genuine care for our customers is evident in all that we do. Whether it's our cheesemongers talking through different cheeseboard options and offering tasters in our stores, to our warehouse assistants who carefully cut, wrap and deliver all over

RORY'S FAVOURITE CHEESES



ALP BLOSSOM
This cheese provides a balanced flavour with an additional and surprising floral kick.



PITCHFORK CHEDDAR
Clothbound with lard then matured for 10-12 months to develop its signature flavour.

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the UK, each person does their bit to make sure we are providing the best possible service."

Change is good

As it has for many businesses across the fine food sector, the primary challenge for IJ Mellis recently has been keeping on top of the changing consumer market. "Throughout the last two years the business has changed to cater to the different buying habits of our regulars," says Rory. "I think that because we are a close-knit team, we can adapt quicker than other larger businesses and react to our customers' needs and that has been a huge advantage for us as a business during this period.

Rory has a philosophy around hard times that we can all learn from: "The word 'challenge' can sometime have negative connotations, but challenges bring change and progress. So, as long as you stick to your fundamental ethos, change is almost always good!"

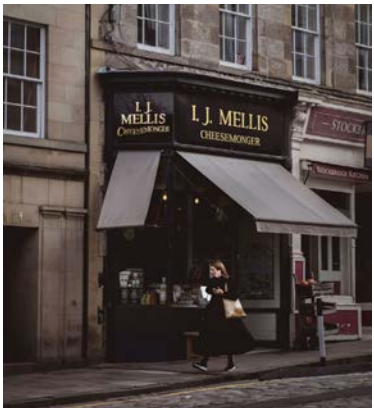
The shape of IJ Mellis has changed "considerably" over the past three years, but Rory is facing the future with typical attention to quality and stability. "The growth of our e-commerce community has allowed us to reach more customers further afield. However, we have still focused on providing our trade customers with quality service and products and placed a big emphasis on making sure our retail customers feel the same way," he says. "Sales have increased online; however, we are still

> "WE STRONGLY BELIEVE THAT NOTHING CAN REPLACE HUMAN INTERACTION AND THERE IS NO BETTER WAY TO SELECT YOUR CHEESE THAN BY RECEIVING A TASTER FROM THE BLOCK IN ONE OF OUR STORES"

seeing just as many lovely, loyal faces walk through the front doors of our retail shops, wine bar and even maturing rooms in recent years. We strongly believe that nothing can replace human interaction and there is no better way to select your cheese than by receiving a taster from the block in one of our stores."

Plans for 2022

Continuing the positive work is on the cards for the near future. "I suppose like many other businesses our goal is to keep growing whilst providing quality products and good service," says Rory. "We have been delivering to trade customers south of the border and picking up from a lot more cheese from cheesemakers recently. We want to continue to develop that side of the business in 2022. We are also excited to perhaps add additional cheese and wine bars round the city catering to more cheese and wine lovers in Scotland and further afield. The rest of our ideas can remain a mystery..."



FAMILY MATTERS

"Dad has grown the business from an idea in his head to a beautiful community of cheese lovers here in Scotland and further afield," says Rory. "My family's passion for the industry shows just what can be done if you love your job. We work very closely with cheesemakers, small scale producers and local suppliers to help develop their businesses and reach wider audiences too. Family business usually work very well as you can come to decision quickly and most of the time together. Be inspired by the great suppliers, business and customers around you and you'll go a long way."

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QUALITY FIRST

House of Bruar

LOCATION: BLAIR ATHOLL, CAIRNGORMS
OPENED: 1993 **OWNERS:** MARK AND LINDA BIRKBECK



BEST SELLING CHEESES



CAVE AGED GRUYERE
The award-winning Gruyère AOP has long been revered for its unique flavour.



ISLE OF MULL FARMHOUSE
A hard cows milk cheese, Cheddar-like, with punchy flavours.



STRATHDON BLUE
This creamy cheese yields to the touch and fills the mouth with a fudgy texture with notes of salt and steel.



STRATHEARN
This cheese's rich, semi-soft texture contrasts very well with its flavoursome whisky washed rind.

Quality service and exceptional teamwork are the cornerstones of a well-run fine food business, and this is especially apparent at House of Bruar – one of Scotland's most renowned shopping destinations. The fact that House of Bruar is a family business – it was established by husband and wife Mark and Linda Birkbeck in 1993 – plays a large role in the team's decision to work directly with 90% of its foodhall suppliers. "Relationships are extremely important to us and we work very hard to establish long-lasting relationships, not only with suppliers but also with our staff and customers," says Robert Thain, foodhall buying manager.

Happy staff, happy business

Quality runs through the skillset of the team's members as well as in the shop's stock. "We always look to invest in our staff through training and further opportunities," says Robert. "For example, over the years we have put some of our delicatessen staff on several of the Guild of Fine Food training courses, and the information they learn there they bring back and share with the rest of them." Not only are staff members thoroughly trained, but they bring kudos of their own. "We are extremely proud to boast the fact that we have Britain's Young Cheesemonger of the Year 2016 amongst our staff, and while she is no longer the delicatessen manager, she is now the foodhall assistant manager. Her story reiterates one of our core values of supporting and encouraging our staff to grow and develop within the business."

This reputation for excellence goes beyond the walls of House of Bruar; "the reputation of our delicatessen has led to our staff being approached to do judging at The Royal Highland Show in recent years, which is a huge credit to them for their hard work and dedication to making the delicatessen a success."

Despite the relatively large size of House of Bruar compared to other independent retailers, the team was able to stand by each other in support of a shared mission. "Although we have

> "THE WAY EVERYONE PULLS TOGETHER WHEN THINGS ARE TOUGH AND HELPS EACH OTHER IS SOMETHING THAT EVERYONE ASSOCIATED WITH THE HOUSE OF BRUAR SHOULD BE VERY PROUD OF"

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several different departments on-site we are ultimately one team who all work together to achieve the goals we set ourselves," says Robert. "This teamwork is what brings us together as a business no matter what journey we have taken to get here, what skills we have or what role we play within the business. This teamwork has never been more apparent than during the last 18 months or so throughout the Covid-19 pandemic."

Adapt to survive

This environment of support and celebrating success proved invaluable as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic began to be felt, and the business had to adapt at pace. "The inspiring thing about our business is our ability to very quickly react to an ever-changing world," says Robert. "It is true what they say, that when things are tough you either sink or you swim. The delicatessen, foodhall and The House of Bruar as a whole have proven that we can definitely swim. The way everyone pulls together when things are tough and help each other is something that everyone associated with The House of Bruar should be very proud of."

Despite having to close the majority of the site for a proportion of last year, the team at House of Bruar were thankfully able to keep the foodhall open - "albeit to a reduced degree". The main challenges faced at the delicatessen related to staffing, and the management of a small, dedicated team newly faced with a big increase in online sales. While the business already had in place a well established mail order arm, the unprecedented sales which came through at the start of the lockdown proved a challenge. "In order to try and combat this as best we could the decision was made to limit some of the products available and also the sizes of cheeses. By doing so, this allowed for a more targeted approach and gave the opportunity for more forward planning in terms of pre-cutting wedges of cheese for the online orders.

"Although things have been gradually getting back to 'normal' there are still many well documented challenges facing the industry as a whole such as supply and staffing issues. The House of Bruar is no exception to these challenges, but we will continue to move forward as a team as we have done through the whole pandemic."

WHAT'S NEXT?

"Given what we have all been through in the last 18 months or so and with the increasing uncertainty caused by another Covid variant, the sensible approach is to be cautious but still optimistic," says Robert. "We will be taking stock of where we are and the first priority at this moment in time is looking after our staff and continuing to provide the same first class service to our customers that we have always done. We will enhance our offering and improve the customer experience in order to maintain our high-quality reputation."

POSITIVITY CHAMPION

The Cheese Society

LOCATION: LINCOLN **OPENED**: 1997 **OWNER:** KATE O'MEARA



BEST SELLING CHEESES



LINCOLNSHIRE POACHER
A hard, mature cheese that is somewhere between a Cheddar and a Swiss mountain cheese.



DELICE DE BOURGOGNE
A decadent triple-cream cheese. Rich and full-flavoured with a smooth, velvety, melt-in-the-mouth texture.



BARON BIGOD
An exquisite Suffolk made, bloomy unpasteurised cows milk cheese.

While fine food businesses across the UK and beyond have been dipping their toes into e-commerce for the first time over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, The Cheese Society began as a solely mail order business. Founder Kate O'Meara had prior experience in the fine food retail sphere; prior to setting up The Cheese Society she had owned a delicatessen – where the cheese element of the business was her greatest passion – and when a site became available she decided to blend online and bricks and mortar to great effect. "Our cheese shop and café is still in this premises to this day," explains Kate's daughter and now owner of The Cheese Society, Lucie, "and we operate our mail order, which has organically grown, from a nearby warehouse."

Open to all

The relationship between shopper and seller is key to the success of The Cheese Society, and the team takes their responsibility of making fine cheese approachable to all seriously. "Specialist products like cheese and wine can be daunting," says Lucie, "but everyone knows what they enjoy when they taste it. We always offer tasters in our shop; try before you buy is essential, and there is no right or wrong when it comes to flavours – everyone can taste slightly different profiles and nuances in the cheeses they try."

Offering a friendly and approachable service is at the heart of The Cheese Society, and the team prides itself on having positive and supportive relationships with customers and suppliers alike. "We have a lovely relationship with our customers and cheesemakers, and one of our main points of focus is to make each day at The Cheese Society as friendly and enjoyable as we can," says Lucie. "We don't take ourselves too seriously, however we take our cheese very seriously indeed!"

Happy staff result in happy customers, and making sure that the team working at The Cheese Society are content and satisfied with their work plays a huge role in maintaining a positive environment. "We want everyone to enjoy their working day at The Cheese Society as much as possible – a happy team creates happy service so

> "ONE OF OUR MAIN POINTS OF FOCUS IS TO MAKE EACH DAY AT THE CHEESE SOCIETY AS ENJOYABLE AS WE CAN. WE DON'T TAKE OURSELVES TOO SERIOUSLY, BUT WE TAKE OUR CHEESE VERY SERIOUSLY INDEED!"

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it's something that flows through the business," explains Lucie.

Despite the team having solid experience in mail order cheesemongering, the huge influx of demand "shifted to a larger and faster pace for us literally overnight", explains Lucy. "Luckily we had the space and a happy and willing team to accommodate the increase so we worked through." While this surge meant that not all of the business's most popular cheeses were available all of the time, thankfully customers were open to experimentation with new-to-them cheese options. "They often welcomed trying something new and discovered new favourites along the way," Lucy says, "and nothing beats the feeling of that lovely email or call coming in thanking us for our delicious delivery and how much happiness it brought – it makes our work so rewarding."



What's next?

"We look forward to carrying on trading and building on our cheese knowledge," begins Lucie. "Our online presence is growing beautifully and that's the area in which we can accommodate growth. However, we're not a company that focuses on growth and expansion, we're here to offer the best produce, knowledge and experience we can to our customers across all areas of the business." Of course, happy customers remain of the utmost importance. "We want each customer to feel valued and heard so that they receive the right cheeses and products for them," says Lucie. "It's easy to get caught up in expansion but that brings its own challenges and can disrupt the balance. We hope to keep offering a friendly and approachable service, supporting and learning from our cheesemakers and being involved in the wonderful cheese community."

A SUPPORTIVE SECTOR

"The support of fellow cheesemongers has been really noticeable recently," says Lucie. "There has always been a wonderful culture (excuse the pun) within the cheese industry where we open up and discuss challenges with each other. This dialogue and support grew further, and some solid friendships and mutual respect has really grown over the cheese retail community. There was a strong drive to support British cheesemakers which both retailers and the public got behind and ensured the survival of many key cheesemakers. We are just so lucky to be involved in an industry that consists of such kind and supportive people."

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FAMILY VALUES

The Cotswold Cheese Company

LOCATION: MORETON-IN-MARSH, STOW ON THE WOLD, BURFORD
OPENED: 2006 **OWNERS:** JON AND LISA GOODCHILD



While kitchen table projects are the backbone of the fine food industry, it's always an inspiration to discover a family-run business which has not only made a great success of itself but has stayed true to its roots. The Cotswold Cheese Company is one such business. Founded in 2006, then taken on by Jon and Lisa Goodchild in 2010, it has transformed from a single site bricks-and-mortar shop to a buzzing online emporium and three-strong retail empire.

"We're a family business and we value every customer far and wide," says Jon. This far-reaching outlook is a thoroughly modern approach to independent retail, and yet the family home is still the hub of the business's decision-making. "Cheese stocking decisions are taken around our table at home," Jon explains, "and we really personally believe in the products we sell." This personal approach has served the family business well in the time it's been in operation, and it extends to the responsibility the team feels to support local and UK cheesemakers. "Our focus is to primarily support British cheesemakers and their products, highlighting local artisan cheeses and their quality," he continues.



An evolving model

As it was by businesses across the industry, the impact of Covid-19 was keenly felt by The Cotswold Cheese Company. "The business changed significantly when Covid first appeared and we had to adjust accordingly, and quickly. The initial challenge – as it was for all fellow retailers – was managing retail with Government restrictions, including supporting our staff, adapting opening hours and managing social distancing." The team had to learn fast to be able to cater to the "ever-changing" shopping habits from lockdown, but, Jon says, "it is beyond lovely to say that the biggest challenge for us was meeting that demand."

Of course, the appreciation of customers from near and far fed into the momentum. "Our customers supported us more than ever, and there was a clear behavioural shift to support independent retailers." Thankfully, this support was to be seen across all of The Cotswold Cheese Company's platforms:

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> WE DON'T WANT TO GROW EXPONENTIALLY, WE WANT TO STAY FOCUSED AND CONSISTENT IN OUR SERVICE AND CONNECTION WITH OUR CUSTOMERS. ANYONE CAN SELL CHEESE, BUT PASSION AND CONTENTMENT WITH WHAT WE DO, WHAT WE SELL AND HOW WE DO IT IS OF THE UTMOST IMPORTANCE TO US

"We subsequently saw a significant increase in online sales to be delivered both locally and nationally," says Jon.

This move to online, far from being a speedy fix to an unexpected problem, has proven to be a sound investment into the future of the company, incorporating benefits for both consumers and local food businesses. "Developing a community of loyal online customers has been monumental for us," explains Jon. The retailer has made other smart tweaks, too. "With community in mind, we've also evolved our offering to our local customers by setting up a free local delivery within 10 miles for purchases over £20. Organic growth through our community is so important to us – something we're proud is now reflected in the growing number of local restaurants who use us as their supplier. Our business model has developed: we created a successful, independent franchise in Burford run by the wonderful Janet Wells. We're always looking for ideas on how to be present whilst still maintaining a direct connection to our customers."

Despite this inspirational evolution, perhaps what most stands out about the story of The Cotswold Cheese Company is the team's steadfast commitment to doing things right in a world of growth at all costs. "We are happy just as we are," explains Jon. "We don't want to grow exponentially, we want to stay focused and consistent in our service and connection with our customers. Anyone can sell cheese, but passion and contentment with what we do, what we sell and how we do it is of the utmost importance to us."

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE COTSWOLD CHEESE COMPANY?

"The future is to maintain a strong connection in all aspects of the business, from our CCC family to our relationships with everyone in the cheese industry," says Jon. "Our son Tom manages the store in Stow on the Wold, our daughter Hat oversees the brand, Janet is the queen of Burford and we have a great team across stores who we rely on, namely Nicola who manages our Moreton-in-Marsh store. Everyone gets involved, from supportive family and friends to our young nephews and nieces cutting cheese in the shops as weekend jobs – their enthusiasm and knowledge is great to see. This team is the future of our business!"

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CUSTOMER HERO

Cheese Etc



LOCATION: PANGBOURNE, READING **OPENED:** 2005
OWNERS: ALI AND JEN GRIMSTONE-JONES

BEST SELLING CHEESES



TWO HOOTS BARKHAM BLUE
Rich blue taste, smooth buttery texture.



NORTON & YARROW CHEESE BRIGHTWELL ASH
Tangy cheese with an ashed rind and pleasant light texture.



HAMPSHIRE CHEESE COMPANY TUNWORTH
Asoft, white-rinded cheese wonderfully reminiscent of Camembert.

If you're looking for a shop that celebrates community spirit and togetherness, look no further than Cheese Etc, The Pangbourne Cheese Shop. The cheesemonger, which has been owned by Ali and Jen Grimstone-Jones since 2015, is filled with more than 100 cheeses carefully selected from artisan producers. However, it's the shop's ability to put their customers at the heart of everything they do which makes them stand pride of place in their local community.

Covid's legacy

While Jen recognises that Covid has been a nightmare for many businesses, for Cheese Etc it was a largely positive – if incredibly manic – period of growth. By a stroke of fate, the pair had launched a new website just two weeks before the first lockdown hit. "We went from doing two online orders a month to doing 100 a week," Jen says. With just Ali and Jen holding down the fort while other staff members were furloughed, they put in long hours each day to serve customers in the shop, then package up deliveries for the courier.

Over this period, they saw their turnover double, though Jen concedes it was "amazingly stressful. Everyone

> "WE'VE GOT LOADS OF NEW CUSTOMERS THAT COME IN JUST FOR A TINY BIT OF CHEESE, BUT MORE TO TALK RATHER THAN TO ACTUALLY DO ANY SHOPPING"



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I know tells me how they spent lockdown seeing their kids and spending time at home and how lovely their gardens were. We didn't see our children or our house for days on end," she says. While keeping business ticking over was certainly on their minds, the main priority was supporting their community. "People were ringing us up saying they couldn't get a hold of bread or eggs. So, we now sell eggs and flour, and they're really popular," Jen says. "We just did our best to get in what people wanted."

From chasing down tinned tomatoes to collecting shopping for customers who were wary of going out, Cheese Etc's dedication to the community was apparent – and it has continued in the wake of Covid. "We're all in it together," Jen says. "Pangbourne is such a lovely community. We all look out for each other around here."

Connecting with customers

The community feeling extends beyond the limits of the shop doors. In Pangbourne, Jen says, everyone knows everyone. "If we don't see a couple of our customers from one week to the next, we'll give them a call and check they're okay. We know lots of our customers by name, and that's just a lovely thing of working in this kind of place. You get to know people."

The lockdowns during the pandemic were tough on those who couldn't go out or who were suddenly working from home on their own. Cheese Etc became a gathering place for locals looking for a chance for human-to-human connection. "People would just pop in here for a couple of minutes just to talk to somebody," Jen says. "We've got loads of new customers that come in just for a tiny bit of cheese, but more to talk rather than to actually do any shopping." While the online side of the business is still very busy, the Cheese Etc team has also started meeting the faces behind the names of online orders as e-commerce customers venture into the shop. However they shop, Cheese Etc is happy to greet their customers. As Jen says, "People are supporting smaller businesses, and it's lovely to see."

EXPANDING INTO ZERO WASTE

As well as running Cheese Etc, Jen and Ali have opened a zero-waste shop just a couple doors down. The expansion was a purely practical measure at first, giving the team a place to pack their huge number of online orders for Christmas 2020. Once the Christmas rush was over, they decided to transform the retail space into a loose larder shop, which Jen says has been very popular. She's encouraging customers to have a say in what they stock. "We want it to be a community shop," Jen says. "We had somebody in saying that he couldn't find nigella seeds anywhere. So we got in nigella seeds, and actually loads of other people have said that's brilliant because they were looking for them too." The space will also welcome customers for cheese and wine evenings in the near future, expanding the shop's brand even further.

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FRIENDLY FEEL

The Cheeseboard of Harrogate

LOCATION: HARROGATE, NORTH YORKSHIRE
OPENED: 1981 **FOUNDER**: GEMMA AYKROYD

BEST SELLING CHEESES



HARROGATE BLUE
Luxuriously creamy blue cheese made with milk from Yorkshire cows.



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



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

Creating a warm and welcoming environment is part and parcel of the fine food experience. From quaint cheesemongers to sprawling delis, the theatre of artisan cheese is much more than an act – it's built on real relationships between customer and shopkeeper. The Cheeseboard of Harrogate has spent four decades building bonds with the local community, and Gemma Aykroyd and her team of friendly and knowledgeable staff ensure that every customer's visit is an experience.

Artisan champions

Home to more than 200 speciality cheeses, The Cheeseboard's visitors could easily be overwhelmed by choice, but Gemma and her team make certain that products are approachable for newcomers and cheese experts alike. "We try to stock whatever is the demand of the customer, as well as tempting our customers with cheeses they have never tried before," Gemma explains. At her shop, questions and tasters are encouraged. "We offer samples, which is key to selling, but also have a knowledge of where the artisan cheeses are produced, who produces them and what they taste like," Gemma says.

The team are steadfast supporters of artisan cheesemakers, and their dedication is evident in their passion for the product. "We all love working at The Cheeseboard, which creates a happy shop and happy customers," Gemma says. "All my staff have been with me for a minimum of five years, and my manager, Gilly, has worked here for 18 years!"

Experienced staff members have worked to carefully cultivate a welcoming atmosphere, and their efforts are "key to making the experience as pleasurable as possible," Gemma says. "The main aim of The Cheeseboard is to create a warm environment to shop where nothing is too much trouble." The team has built friendships rather than transactional relationships. "Many of our customers have become friends, and that's a really special relationship."

> "MANY OF OUR CUSTOMERS HAVE BECOME FRIENDS, AND THAT'S A REALLY SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP"

Carrying on through Covid

The Cheeseboard's hardworking staff and loyal customers have made it the success it is today. Support from local shoppers has seen The Cheeseboard through 40 years – an anniversary that was celebrated in late 2021 – and through the pandemic. "As soon as the pandemic hit, I panicked and furloughed all my staff except one," Gemma admits. This would prove to be a mistake as the shop remained as busy as ever, with customers ordering hampers and cheese boxes to send to loved ones during isolation "They were long days, but I was so relieved and thankful for the loyal support from our customers."

The hard worked paid off. "Since opening up again," Gemma says, "we have carried on our delivery service and

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HIGHLIGHTING LOCAL MAKERS

Although the shop sells British and Continental cheeses, special bonds have been forged with local makers. "We have been fortunate to be able to visit a small farm and dairy in Middlesmoor where Stonebeck Wensleydale is produced," Gemma says. "We shut the shop for half a day on a Wednesday and went off as The Cheeseboard team. It was inspirational, fascinating and humbling to see how a tiny working farm keeps going year-round with such a small team, and to produce top-quality cheese."

customers have remembered our hard work and continued to support us even more. I feel so happy and humbled by the support that we were able to carry on and build on our business at this tricky time when so many have suffered."

Building the business post-pandemic will also include a digital push. "We have a website which works well for us, but we have never had a shopping cart. It sounds very backward and old fashioned, but we like to be able to chat to our customers and recommend alternatives if something isn't in stock," Gemma says. However, she's bitten the bullet and plans to launch a new website in 2022. "I have owned The Cheeseboard for 21 years and feel it has only now really turned a corner. I feel excited about the future and hope we can carry on growing."



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EXPERIENTIAL RETAIL

Farmer Copleys Farm Shop

LOCATION: PONTEFRACT, WEST YORKSHIRE **OPENED:** 2003
FOUNDERS: ROB AND HEATHER COPLEY



Running a successful shop takes a great deal of time, passion and dedication – and these are just a handful of the sparkling qualities on display at Farmer Copleys, run by Rob and Heather Copley. While the farm is home to pick-your-own events, a café and even glamping sites, the deli counter is at the beating heart of the operation – for the team and customers alike. "Myself and the team strive to be the best we possibly can be and to keep the customer's experience fresh, interesting and real," Heather says, "and of course, cheese forms an integral part of this journey."

Adapting and expanding

The customer's cheese journey begins with the shop's Queen of Cheese, Debbie, who is responsible for selecting a range of local, British and Continental cheeses. While Heather assists, she admits, "What Debbie doesn't know about cheese really isn't worth knowing." With the cheeses chosen, Debbie focuses on transferring her vast knowledge with the rest of the team, encouraging them to try the cheeses as they go.



Samples are key to the artisan cheese experience, but like other retailers, Farmer Copleys' deli proved its resourcefulness by adapting in the pandemic. For instance, some tasting events were still able to go ahead outdoors. "Le Gruyère were fabulous with their lovely outdoor pop-up sampling station – it really added to the retail experience." And experience is what it's all about at Farmer Copleys. Covid didn't derail the team's laser-sharp focus on the customer experience, as Heather explains, "We weren't going to let the pandemic stop our Farmer-Copleys-style friendly, safe retail experience."

What's more, new customers were visiting the shop in their droves during the pandemic, and the team believed it was important to display artisan cheeses in their best light to newcomers. "We wanted to showcase cheeses to new customers and keep them coming for years to come."

During the pandemic, the deli became as much as 600% busier, presenting opportunities for growth. A larger deli opened at the end of May 2021 and the Copleys couldn't be happier with it. "Not only has it alleviated the bottleneck we had in the shop, but it's also reduced queues, increased the ranges offered and has its own specially designed customer-facing cheese cutting block in the middle of the counter."

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WHAT'S ON FOR 2022

Farmer Copleys is always dreaming up new plans, Heather says, and often they're quirky. For the new year, the team ran a ski lovers' evening that involved customers showing up in their ski wear for an evening of Alpine dishes made on-site. Not only was fondue and gluhwein on-trend with the winter Olympics, but it also offered an outlet for those who can't travel. "It's a prime example of keeping ideas and experiences fresh at Farmer Copleys," Heather says.

Spotlight on quality

The new and improved deli counter gives the team greater opportunities for interaction with customers, meaning more chances to drive sales of local favourites. One of the deli's bestsellers is Shepherds Purse's Yorkshire Blue, produced in Thirsk from Yorkshire cows that graze just two miles away from the creamery. "With its creamy, lasting taste profile and smooth and buttery texture, it's popular all year round," Heather says. The team also champions quality artisan cheeses from around the length and breadth of the UK. Pitchfork Cheddar, made by Trethowan Brothers

> "WE WEREN'T GOING TO LET THE PANDEMIC STOP OUR FARMER-COPLEYS-STYLE FRIENDLY, SAFE RETAIL EXPERIENCE"

is a favourite in the Copley household as well as at the farm shop's deli counter, thanks as much to its great taste as its name, which appeals to the countryside-loving community. "The name coupled with the trust that customers have in us and our selection means it is growing rapidly in popularity." A strong relationship with the customer is at the heart of Farmer Copleys, and the bonds the farm shop has built are made to last.

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SHOPPER STALWART

Mainsgill Farm Shop

LOCATION: RICHMOND, NORTH YORKSHIRE **OPENED:** 2001
FOUNDERS: ANDREW AND MARIA HENSHAW

In the market town of Richmond, North Yorkshire, is an ever-expanding farm shop dreamt up by Andrew and Maria Henshaw. "We've always prided ourselves at Mainsgill by how we've grown over the years to give more variety and offer a customer experience," Maria says. The past two decades have brought big changes for the shop. When it originally opened in 2001, only local, English cheeses were sold, but today, the counter has expanded to include many different British and Continental varieties. "We listen to our customers and what they're interested in, and we follow suit," Maria says.

Re-engaging with shoppers

Mainsgill's forward-looking ethos has led the farm shop through a series of expansions, which ramped up its simple farm shop format to include a tea room, butchery, gift shop, granary and more. The most recent refurbishment project was scheduled for 2020, and the building works began in February, just before the first national lockdown. "It was a very nervous time for us because we'd committed heavily with investment," Maria says. "You always worry when you expand," she continues, but to have to go through the pandemic at the same time as a major construction project was doubly difficult.



Although it was growing, the shop stayed nimble and adapted quickly. "We did click and collect and home deliveries before the lockdown because we knew it was going to happen," Maria says. And Covid-19 brought in flocks of new customers "It re-engaged us with a lot of the local community. A lot of people who weren't going to the supermarket came to the farm shop," she says.

As well as boosting engagement with newcomers who've now become regulars, the extension allowed for an expansion of the cheese counter. A wrap-around display was created centrally in the main foodhall area which showcases the shop's cheeses. Visiting the cheese counter is an experience for the customer, from the friendly staff to the cutting area where the team offers a personalised experience. But equally important to Mainsgill is catering to customers who know exactly what they want. Pre-packed cheeses and cheese truckles are displayed in easy grab-and-go formats. "Customers can see the price, they can pick it up, and the variety is really, really good."



A GREEN FUTURE

Mainsgill's expansion in 2020 incorporated new forms of renewable energy, including solar panels and a biomass boiler to boost its standing in terms of eco-friendly practices. "We're watching our green credentials, and we're going to go more into that this year as well," Maria says.

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> WE'VE ALWAYS PRIDED OURSELVES AT MAINSGILL BY HOW WE'VE GROWN OVER THE YEARS TO GIVE MORE VARIETY AND OFFER A CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Showcasing makers

As well as a vast and varied selection, Mainsgill offers a huge library of knowledge about each producer. The team hosts cheese tastings on-site with producers of artisan cheeses from near and far, giving customers a chance to taste and explore the stories behind fantastic cheesemakers. "It's about building that trust and that loyalty," Maria says. The team has also taken trips to see the making of renowned brands in person. "We stock Gruyère d'Alpage cheese, and we were lucky enough to be taken by Le Gruyère AOP off into the mountains to see where d'Alpage cheese is made," Maria says. "It was absolutely fascinating. I'm a dairy farmer's daughter, but it's a different way of milking cows." With this first-hand knowledge, the team can faithfully tell the stories of their cheeses to customers. "It's good to showcase producers," Maria adds.

What's next? "At Mainsgill, we never, never stop," Maria says. The to-do list now includes an expansion of the tea room to better feed into cheese counter sales. "It's really good to incorporate these by putting cheese on the menu," she adds. No pandemic is slowing this farm shop down.



ARTISAN EXPERT

Lewis & Cooper

LOCATION: NORTHALLERTON, NORTH YORKSHIRE **OPENED:** 1899
DIRECTORS: JONATHAN HINDLEY, DR DAVID GEARY, DAVID PEARS



Founded more than a hundred years ago in the quintessential North Yorkshire market town of Northallerton, Lewis & Cooper has developed into a world-renowned gourmet food shop, recognised far and wide for its local delicacies and fine foods. Over the decades, the shop has even garnered a reputation as the 'Fortnum & Mason of the North'.



Today, 123 years on from its founding, the shop continues to operate at the same site where George Lewis and Binks Cooper first put their stake in the ground. While Lewis & Cooper's operations are vast – ranging from a foodhall to a tea room – and its reputation has been built on the premium quality of its hampers, the in-store delicatessen, which is home to a 300-strong cheese offering, is central to its success.

Delicatessen manager Julie Oxley-Hoyle says championing each and every cheesemaker behind these artisan products is a key part of her role. "Being a cheesemonger is a challenge. It is very much evolving as tastes and the industry change," Julie says. "I think it is a great privilege to sell these cheeses, which are so lovingly made." As well as stocking traditional favourites in its core range, Lewis & Cooper adds guest cheeses into its huge offering as they become available and the team discovers them. This ever-changing array provides excitement for customers and staff alike. "I love the seasonal cheeses as it's something to look forward to!" Julie says.



> WE HAVE SOME CUSTOMERS WHO HAVE BEEN COMING HERE FOR OVER 50 YEARS, AND WE PRIDE OURSELVES ON THE QUALITY OF THE CHEESES AND THE SERVICE WE OFFER

LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP





British cheeses are big sellers at Lewis & Cooper, and Julie and her team are always looking for new makers to shine a spotlight on. "We keep a lookout for new products and invite producers in to sample and meet the customers where possible," she says. The team's expertise reaches far and wide. "Staff on the counter are encouraged to offer samples and tell the story of the cheeses. We are on the high street and that gives us lots of opportunities to promote artisan cheeses to people that might not come across them."

Looking back and moving forward

Being part of such an esteemed tradition is not something that Lewis & Coopers' current staff members take lightly. "We are immensely proud of the cheese counter, and it is a great responsibility to build on the legacy of my predecessors," Julie says. The chiller units are packed with a superb range of products sourced from small, local producers and favourite foreign delicacies from international suppliers, too. "We have some customers who have been coming here for over 50 years, and we pride ourselves on the quality of the cheeses and the service we offer."

While the spirit of the shop remains firmly rooted in tradition, Lewis & Cooper has always been a forward-looking establishment. The shop has rolled with the changes that new developments and technologies bring, including catering for online demand for its hampers since 2008. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the team had to adapt to reach their loyal customers locally and nationally through online delivery services, and new products were given a boost with a shout-out on the shop's social media platforms.

Lewis & Cooper has plans for the coming year, too, from introducing a new loyalty scheme to continuing to find exciting and novel ranges and products to stock in the shop. With one foot in its traditional past and the other in an innovative future, Lewis & Cooper is ready for anything that may come its way.

BEST SELLING CHEESES



YORKSHIRE WENSLEYDALE
Creamy, crumbly and flavourful, made to a time-honoured recipe.



SNOWDONIA BLACK BOMBER CHEDDAR
Loved for its immense depth of flavour and smooth, creamy texture.



SHEPHERDS PURSE YORKSHIRE BLUE
Creamy, sweet and mild. An ideal starting point for blue cheese.



LE GRUYÈRE AOP
A classic and surprisingly versatile Swiss cheese.



PARMIGIANA REGGIANO
A sharp, complex taste with a strong savoury flavour and gritty texture.

LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND AOP



TRADITIONAL ICON

Hinchliffe's

LOCATION: HUDDERSFIELD, WEST YORKSHIRE
OPENED: 1929 **FOUNDER:** ALLEN HINCHLIFFE

BEST SELLING CHEESES



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



SNOWDONIA BLACK BOMBER
Loved for its immense depth of flavour and smooth, creamy texture.

For a business that lays claim to the title of Britain's oldest farm shop, Hinchliffe's has a long and noteworthy history. From the farm's earliest days, when Allen and Betsy Hinchliffe would deliver eggs locally in a horse and cart, to the business as it stands today, freshly rebuilt in 2019 and complete with an in-house butchery and bakery, restaurant, farm fresh eggs, and, of course, a well-stocked deli counter.

As Simon Hirst, partner at Hinchliffe's, notes, the number of cheese counters in the UK has dwindled. "Supermarkets are pulling out, and they're closing down deli counters because they don't find them cost effective or they're wanting to move away from them," he says.

But the dedicated service that customers can expect at a farm shop or deli offers something different, which harks back to the shop's early days of trading. "It's nice that the public have somewhere to go where they get something better than branded plastic cheese. It's nice to keep that alive as a traditional deli."

A varied selection

When it comes to their customers, deli manager Mel says there is an even split between those who come in knowing exactly what they'll buy and those that want to pick the brains of the cheesemongers. "You do have your customers that definitely know what they want and are quite knowledgeable about cheese," she says. "But then you get the ones that ask a lot of questions." These customers are often drawn towards local cheeses, and staff are more than happy to share their vast knowledge about local varieties.

As a farm shop, it's no surprise that Hinchliffe's puts a strong emphasis on Yorkshire cheeses. "The whole ethos of the farm shop for us is to try and

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> WE CAN'T COMPETE ON PRICE FOR ARIEL LIQUID, BUT WHAT WE CAN DO IS OFFER SOMETHING THAT PEOPLE CAN'T GET FROM THE MULTIPLES. AND THERE'S ALWAYS A MARKET FOR PEOPLE TO COME AND FIND THAT



showcase as much that is homemade or local as possible," Simon says. But the team can certainly appreciate the strengths of other cheesemaking nations across Continental Europe. Indeed, these tend to be the most popular options among customers. "There's always a market for a Brie de Meaux or Le Gruyère AOP, which presently there aren't what you might call English alternatives for. They can't all be an English or Yorkshire cheese," he says with a laugh. "We've got to be as varied as possible."

Supporting local

During the pandemic, many consumers rediscovered an appreciation for their local businesses and sought out shops that offered an experience with each visit. And like many other speciality retailers, Hinchliffe saw its sales fly in the initial pandemic period. They have since levelled off at around double the pre-Covid rate, and these new consumer habits are sticking, Simon says. "Peoples' shopping habits are more fragmented. So, thank goodness, people don't do one big shop in Tesco anymore. They will come and find more independents. They will split the shopping up, and they'll get things from Lidl or Aldi, they'll get things from a major supermarket and then they'll also come to someone like us.

"We can't compete on price for Ariel liquid," Simon continues, "but what we can do is offer something that people can't get from the multiples. And there's always a market for people to come and find that."



THE BIG REBUILD CONTINUES

Hinchliffe had to totally rebuild in 2019 following a catastrophic fire in 2010. "Those two years have flown by, but there are still things to be to be done," Simon says. One big plan for 2022 is to transform a six-acre lawn into a picnic area, where customers can enjoy a pre-ordered meal from the deli, separate from the restaurant. "When the restaurant was shut due to Covid, the deli was extremely busy because it was one thing people could do, to come and get a coffee, a freshly made sandwich and some homemade cake," Simon says. "And we need to build on that if we can."

SUPPLIER CHAMPION

Chatsworth Estate Farm Shop

LOCATION: BAKEWELL, DERBYSHIRE **OPENED:** 1977
FOUNDER: DUCHESS OF DEVONSHIRE





OVERCOMING COVID-19 CHALLENGES

Like many retailers, Chatsworth Estate Farm Shop found that during the pandemic, product availability was challenged as supply became erratic. But the hard work of building relationships with suppliers paid off. "Fortunately, our good supplier relationships held us in good stead, and we were able to provide our customers with a reasonable range most of the time, whilst taking a pragmatic view we maintained our prices throughout the pandemic and continue to do so," Mike says.

Tucked in a corner of the Peak District in Derbyshire, Chatsworth Estate is a sprawling site on nearly 2,000 acres of picturesque landscape. In addition to its stunning location, Chatsworth Estate Farm Shop offers an enviable selection of exciting products, many of which are made by local producers.

For Mike Routley, buyer and development manager at the farm shop, stocking unique products is a point of pride, especially when it comes to the deli selection. "Where many retailers have moved to pre-pack offers for cheese, we pride ourselves on maintaining a large cutting cheese counter selling over 100 different types, and offering knowledgeable customer service," he explains. Mike and the team work hard to highlight suppliers from the area as well as premium producers from around the nation. "We work directly with local producers, such as Hartington Creamery, and other larger UK distributors to ensure great quality and a wide range of choice for our customers. We take pride in our service and our cheeses."

Strong bonds

Over its decades in operation, Chatsworth Estate Farm Shop has nurtured relationships with the producers who supply the shop to ensure the best possible service is offered to the customer. "Working directly with local suppliers, we can build relationships and understand their business better in order that both parties can bring the cheeses to our customers at the very best quality, maintaining consistency and availability," Mike says. In order to spotlight small artisan makers from around the UK, the shop regularly offers a Cheese of the Month, which is made even more special by its pairing with a speciality bread from a local artisan baker.

As well as championing producers, providing a second-to-none service for customers involves offering superior knowledge of the products that the farm shop stocks. "Cheese knowledge is key, and our staff are trained accordingly, with some attending the Academy of Cheese courses," he says. But Mike ensures that staff also get out of the shop and the classroom to meet producers up close and personal. "We take the opportunity to visit local producers to learn about the process and characteristics of their cheeses," he says.

Thanks to the two-way relationship the farm shop has established with suppliers, makers are also welcomed through its doors to host customer

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BEST SELLING CHEESES



CHATSWORTH CHEESE DEVONSHIRE GOLD
This blue vein cheese is beautifully creamy and very hard to stop eating.



HARTINGTON CREAMERY PEAKLAND WHITE
A unique fresh, young cheese matured for just two weeks.

tastings. These are great for morale and business, Mike says, as meet the maker events encourage customer interactions and boost sales

New for 2022

Looking to the future, Mike hopes that the coronavirus pandemic will soon fade to allow the farm shop to continue doing its best work. "We believe that the counter offer and the customer service, where we are able to engage with customers and tell them about the cheese, make other suggestions and promote the values of local and artisan cheesemaking, are our core strengths. So, we are hoping to be able to do cheese tastings again with our suppliers, continue with staff training and maintain our monthly offers," he says.

As well as ramping up tastings, the shop will host a number of cheese and wine evenings in the café in 2022, all going well. "Local artisan cheese suppliers will present their cheeses, which will have been paired with a variety of wines from our local wine supplier," Mike says. For it is through close-knit relationships with local makers and collaborations that Chatsworth Estate Farm Shop shines its brightest.



> "WE BELIEVE THAT THE COUNTER OFFER AND THE CUSTOMER SERVICE, WHERE WE ARE ABLE TO ENGAGE WITH CUSTOMERS AND TELL THEM ABOUT THE CHEESE, MAKE OTHER SUGGESTIONS AND PROMOTE THE VALUES OF LOCAL AND ARTISAN CHEESEMAKING, ARE OUR CORE STRENGTHS"

LE GRUYÈRE® SWITZERLAND

Welbeck Farm Shop

LOCATION: WORKSOP, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE
OPENED: 2006 **FOUNDER:** JOE PARENTE

BEST SELLING CHEESES



WELBECK STICHELTON
Juicy acidity and toasty, biscuity notes towards the rind.



LINCOLNSHIRE POACHER
West Country Cheddar meets Comté in this cheese.



SPARKENHOE RED LEICESTER
Complex and balanced, nutty and mellow.

Nestled in Sherwood Forest is Welbeck, one of the great traditional landed estates. The estate is home to an established artisan food community, including a bustling farm shop. The shop hosts a range of products that are made on the estate, from artisan breads and pastries to real ales brewed at the Welbeck Abbey Brewery. For cheese lovers, Welbeck Dairy is the star of the show. Located just five minutes away from the farm shop, the dairy produces fresh raw milk from the estate's herd of pedigree Holstein Friesian cows. As well as stocking the shelves of the farm shop, this also goes on to create Stichelton blue cheese, a firm favourite at the tills.

Balancing global and local

While there is a strong cheese heritage right on the estate's doorstep – including an on-site ageing room full of maturing wheels – the cheeses on offer at Welbeck Farm Shop extend well beyond what is produced on-site. "We pride ourselves on a bountiful counter of traditional farmhouse cheeses from the UK and Europe," says David Wall, who oversees the cheese and deli business at Welbeck. "We spend time with our fantastic suppliers developing a selection of cheese that's a mix of well-loved

> "WE ENCOURAGE CUSTOMERS TO SAMPLE CHEESE AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE; CUSTOMERS NEED TO BE INVOLVED AND INTERACT WITH THE STAFF SO THAT WE CAN FIND THE RIGHT CHEESE FOR THEM"



favourites and some that might be a little different or that are really good for a short season," he continues.

"We only sell traditional farmhouse cheese, and everything we stock, across the whole shop, is taste tested before making its way in front of our customers." This laser-focus on quality ensures that customers will always be wowed by the contents of Welbeck's cheese counter, no matter where they originated. "We predominantly sell British cheese, but we also have a few from France, Italy and Switzerland," David says.

Welbeck's flexibility towards promoting both the hyper-local and the gems from further afield showcase the shop's determination to sell the very best fine food. "We are lucky to have Stichelton being made on the same estate as us, but we also work with some of the finest cheese wholesalers in the business," David continues. The team recognises that a strong groundwork is essential for selling their products. "It's our relationship with the suppliers that allows us to offer such a good range," he adds. "Their knowledge is really helpful."

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Covid's lasting impact

When the pandemic hit, Welbeck managed to hold its nerve and continue serving a panic-buying public. "The pandemic brought more footfall our way, with many customers unhappy with service and experience in the supermarkets," says Oliver Stubbins, general manager at Welbeck Farm Shop. Welbeck's rural location and the amenities of the estate meant that it quickly became a destination for consumers, even during the pandemic. "It's not the way that we would want to have done it, but our sales have increased, and we're grateful customers have trusted us enough to keep coming back, even during the worse periods of the pandemic."

From Welbeck's stand-out role in the community during the pandemic, it's clear that offering customers a quality experience is at the top of its agenda. Heading into 2022, Oliver says the shop's sights are set higher. "We would like to keep growing, to expand further," he says. "We are finalising plans for an extension to the building to allow more in-house produced goods." At this rate, they'll certainly need it.

COLLABORATION

When hospitality was closed in the early stages of the pandemic, Welbeck worked with suppliers to help struggling cheesemakers. "We changed some of our range to accommodate their cheeses or offered them at a discounted price to help them move stock," David says. This has remained as a lasting legacy of the pandemic. "We have carried this on even though the catering industry is back up and running now." As well as collaborating with cheesemakers, Welbeck's team work together in-house to boost sales and promote products. "I am helped a lot by working with a great kitchen team at our café who will come over and try cheese so that we can make it an integral part of a dish on their menu, which means the cheese gets a chance to appeal to a wider audience."

How to enjoy Le Gruyère AOP

The consistent flavours of Le Gruyère AOP have played a huge part in earning and maintaining its worldwide popularity as well as numerous awards. Its distinctive yet subtle flavours are both unique and versatile, making it popular with consumers of all ages as well as delicious served in a number of ways.

Each age option of Le Gruyère AOP is delicious served on a cheeseboard and will suit a range of consumer preferences, but there are a myriad of other uses for it, too.

Add to a salad or pasta dish for an easy flavour boost, or use in a croque monsieur toasted sandwich or French onion soup. Possibly the most famous way to serve Le Gruyère AOP is in a traditional Swiss fondue – simply melt together with garlic and white wine and serve.

LE GRUYÈRE AOP IS WIDELY AVAILABLE IN TWO AGES, BOTH OF WHICH DISPLAY SUBTLE DIFFERENCES IN FLAVOUR:

Le Gruyère AOP Classic (aged six-nine months)
Nutty, sweet and refined – delicious melted and popular with fans of mild cheeses

Le Gruyère AOP Réserve (aged 10 months and up)
Aromatic and full of flavour – its complex, mature flavours make it a popular choice for a cheeseboard

Le Gruyere AOP Alpage can also be purchased seasonally - a fresh but distinctive flavour redolent of alpine pasture.

EVERYONE'S INVITED TO ENJOY LE GRUYÈRE AOP

As well as being delicious, Le Gruyère AOP is naturally gluten and lactose-free, meaning that coeliacs and lactose-intolerant cheese lovers can enjoy the cheese too.

> "LE GRUYÈRE AOP'S DISTINCTIVE YET SUBTLE FLAVOURS ARE BOTH UNIQUE AND VERSATILE, MAKING IT POPULAR WITH CONSUMERS OF ALL AGES AS WELL AS DELICIOUS SERVED IN A NUMBER OF WAYS"



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