

Defying comparisons

Barely two years old, Nettlebed Creamery is already turning heads with its hard-to-categorize cheeses. PATRICK McGUIGAN visits the Oxfordshire farm to see how they are putting their organic raw cows' milk to use.

We're playing a game of 'cheese associations' at the long table in Nettlebed Creamery's office and kitchen, which looks out over the green Oxfordshire countryside. The company's St Bartholomew cheese, which is named after the village of Nettlebed's church, is being scrutinised by the team before being sent to potential buyers, and I'm trying work out what it reminds me of.

Made in 2kg rounds with unpasteurised organic cows' milk from owner Rose Grimond's family farm, the semi-hard cheese is described as Alpine in style, and there's no denying there's a Comté-like sweetness and nuttiness. But it also has a long savoury edge that is more akin to cheddar and the size and shape is reminiscent of a tomme. Then there's the earthy rind and springy texture, which is not far from Saint-Nectaire.

"We've had people comparing it to German cheeses and even Appenzeller," says Grimond as she accepts another slice from head cheesemaker Tee Scotthorne. "When people talk about cheese, they like to have references and co-ordinates on a map, but St Bart's really has its own character."

Much of the cheese's distinct personality comes from the use of raw milk from the 2,000-acre Merrimoles Farm, which has been in the Fleming family (as in James Bond novelist Ian Fleming) for more than 100 years. Run by Grimond's mother and aunt (nieces of the late author), the organic farm has a herd of 130 cows, which are a cross of Holstein Friesians, Montbeliardes and Swedish Red. They produce "some of the best milk on the planet", declares Grimond proudly.

It's treated with the utmost respect in the cheese room, as I witness for myself, watching Scotthorne and assistant Ali Lees carefully pour curds into moulds and pat them into place by hand. As she checks acidity levels with a probe, Scotthorne says that the complex natural bacteria in the unpasteurised milk is integral to cheese's unique flavour, but also brings its own challenges.

"It can become frustrating working with raw milk because it is constantly changing. You make a cracking batch and think 'Why can't it be like this all the time?'. But that's the excitement of unpasteurised milk.



Cheesemaker Tee Scotthorne (top left) and founder Rose Grimond (top right) have created a soft and a semi-hard cheese at Nettlebed

You can never take your eye off the ball."

Grimond's path to setting up the 250 sq m creamery in January 2015 is an unusual one. An Oxford graduate and former actress, she spent five years selling produce from Orkney at Borough Market and to top London chefs after falling in love with the Scottish archipelago as a child – her grandfather Jo Grimond was the MP for more than 30 years.

"My stall was next to [French cheese company] Mons and we all used to end up having a pint with

the Neal's Yard gang after work," she says. These proved useful contacts when the future of the family farm came up for discussion and Grimond wanted to move out of London to raise a family with her novelist husband James Scudamore. "There's a saying in farming that you get big, get different or get out, so we started thinking about what we could do with the milk," she says. "I looked at ice cream, but found people in the cheese sector to be so open and friendly."

The new-build creamery was

jointly financed by Grimond and the farm with the 22cm width of an individual wheel of St Bartholomew integral to the design. "We knew we wanted a total capacity of 60 tonnes – that seems to be a good level to create a sustainable cheese business – so we worked out how much space we would need in the maturing rooms using the diameter of the cheese and worked backwards," she says.

St Bartholomew takes between four to six months to mature, so to help with cashflow Nettlebed launched a soft, triple cream cheese, named Bix after a nearby village, last year. With its wrinkly

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geotrichum rind, it looks a bit like a Charolais but is made with cows' milk and tastes like Chaource, but Scotthorne is quick to point out that it has its own attributes, including a mousse-like centre when young and a consistent, creamy texture as it matures. Both cheeses are listed by Paxton & Whitfield and local wholesaler Blackwoods, while Harvey & Brockless is due to launch them next month.

Even with customers such as these, producing 60 tonnes of cheese a year is still some way off. Grimond hopes to make 10 tonnes this year, but the creamery was set up in such a way that half the building is currently sub-let to a catering company and start-up goats' cheese company Norton & Yarrow, which gives Nettlebed breathing space to grow at a steady rate.

"I did my sums before we started and calculated that once we get over 10-12 tonnes, the business starts to make sense," says Grimond. "In the longer term, we have the capacity to grow more, but it has to be managed. My heroes are Stichelton and Tunworth. If I can grow the business to anywhere near what they have done then I'll be delighted."

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