

Raw TALENT



Soft sell: raw milk
farmhouse brie

A new generation of British cheesemakers are taking on the French at their own game by using unpasteurised milk to make boundary-pushing cheeses

Words/Patrick McGuigan

Tim Jarvis and Dave Holton are young, bearded and deeply into fermentation, but they don't get their kicks from craft ale. Their obsession is organic raw milk, which they turn into a soft feta-style cheese called Graceburn that is marinated in rapeseed oil, peppercorns, thyme and garlic.

The co-owners of Blackwoods Cheese Co in Kent are part of a new wave of young artisan producers, who are following in craft brewers' footsteps by taking British cheese in exciting and unexpected directions, much to the approval of chefs (Graceburn has appeared on the menus of Hawksmoor and Trinity among many others).

"It's a good time for cheese in this country," says Holton, who hails from Australia where, ironically, punitive legislation means raw milk cheese is rare. "These things come in waves and each generation does something different. There's some really good new cheesemakers on the scene and there's a lot of dialogue about the science of cheesemaking. It used to be people followed a recipe, but now they understand better how to adapt what they're doing as the milk varies."

First set up in 2013 in a unit in South London, Blackwoods moved to its new home on the Commonwork Organic Farms last October and has plans to double production this year. Watching the cheesemakers in action as they ladle wobbly blobs of curd into plastic moulds and taste test experimental products, it's easy to see why their cheeses are popular with chefs. They are handmade artisan products that express the Kent countryside (through unique microbes in the raw milk) in much the same way wine reflects terroir.

At wholesaler Harvey & Brockless, category manager Owen Davies says the dynamism of British cheese stands in contrast to what's

happening across the channel. "Young British producers are coming through that are making some really innovative products at a time when French cheese is barely changing," he says. "In Britain we're not restricted by AOCs in the same way as on the Continent, so our cheesemakers can take inspiration from around the world and create their own unique cheeses."

Recent additions to the company's range of artisan cheeses include Rollright, a washed-rind cheese made in Oxfordshire by twenty-something producer David Jowett, plus a raw milk Brie-de-Meaux-style cheese Baron Bigod, made by young couple Jonny and Dulcie Crickmore in Suffolk. Harvey & Brockless' own cheesemaking operation, Cheese Cellar Dairy, has also developed a range of delicate raw milk goat's cheeses, including Ashlynn and Blanche.

"It used to take several years for a cheese to be perfected, but there is a better understanding of the science of artisan cheesemaking now," says Davies. "Young cheesemakers are able to draw on all the experience and knowledge that has gone before them and create really good cheeses quite quickly. They are open to pushing new boundaries and trying new things. We see that with our own cheesemaker, George Bramham, who studied at the School of Artisan Food. He developed our new cheeses after spending time in France learning from producers over there."

Wholesaler Premier Cheese has also developed its own products by buying young 'blank' cheeses from small producers and washing them at its Bicester HQ. The range includes Topsy Billy, a goat's cheese doused in cider; Windsor Blue washed in whisky; and the beer-treated Boxer. The rinds of these cheeses have a pungent whiff, but the interiors are relatively mild and creamy to create a balance of flavours. "We wanted to create something unique and different using regional cheeses

PROMOTION

Eat to the bleat

Harvey & Brockless launches three raw milk goats cheeses

Based in Worcester, the Cheese Cellar Dairy is Harvey & Brockless' artisan cheesemaking operation. It's headed up by George Bramham, who trained at the School of Artisan Food. After 18 months of research, including a stint making goats cheese in the Loire Valley, plus a fair few arguments about cheese names, the company is revealing three new cheeses. All are made with raw milk from Treworgan Farm near Ross-on-Wye.

Blanche

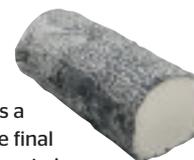
Who knew a log of goats cheese could be so darn sexy?

Sporting a wrinkly alabaster coat, underneath which lies a mousse-like paste that is as white as snow, Blanche is a sensuous little cheese. At two weeks old, there's a perfumed aroma of dark forest honey on the nose, which carries over in the final flavour - think honeysuckle, herbs and a peppery tingle. But the cheese intensifies as it matures, with a gooey layer just beneath the rind.



Clara

Blanche's dark, brooding sister is sprinkled with a layer of ash, which makes a telling contribution to the final flavour and texture. The paste is slightly denser and much creamier with a buttery flavour cut through with lemony notes and hints of freshly cut grass. The dark grey rind contrasts with the white paste, making Clara a star of the cheeseboard.



Ashlynn

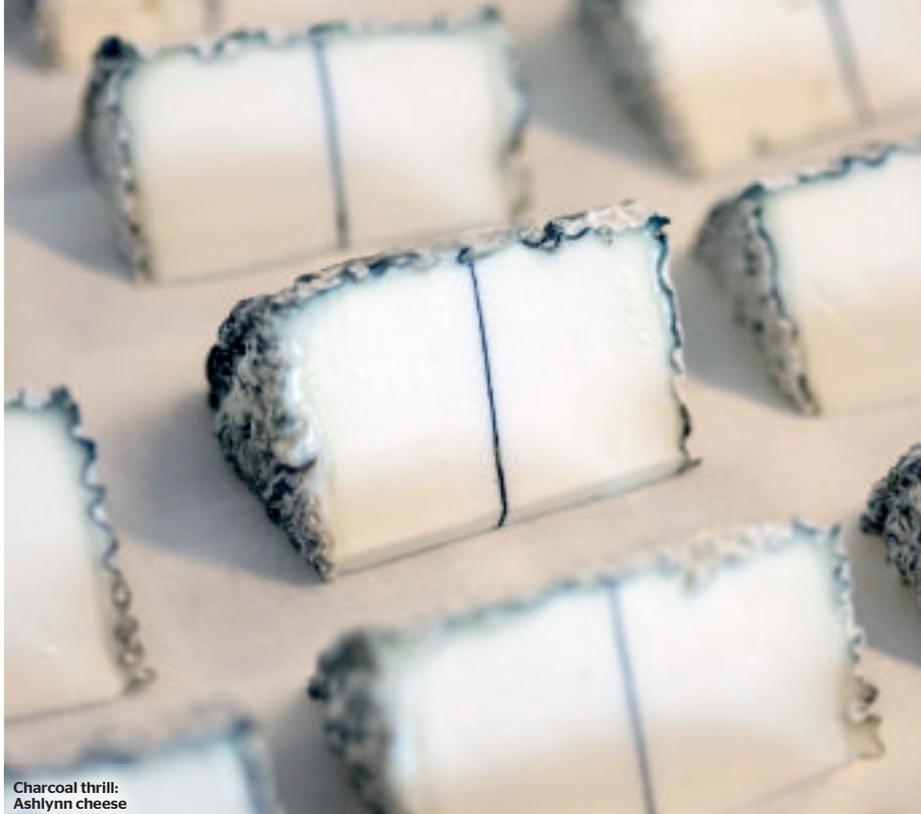
Ashlynn has a striking monochrome appearance thanks to a pure white interior set against a dark ash-coated rind and thin line of charcoal running through its centre.

Ashlynn's delicate appearance belies a sultry complexity. The paste is fabulously buttery, but a spear of lemony sharpness pierces the richness and opens up intriguing savoury depths and a tingle of spice. The breakdown that develops beneath the rind becomes increasingly runny and intense as it matures.



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Charcoal thrill: Ashlynn cheese



and ingredients,” explains co-owner Amnon Paldi. “Demand for these kinds of artisan cheeses is going up, but they are tricky to make. You need the know-how, the space and the time.”

While new-wave British cheeses offer restaurants plenty of opportunities, they also present challenges. Staff and customers are familiar with Stilton, Cheddar and Brie, but are unlikely to have heard of Rollright and Ashlynn. The answer, says Ann-Marie Dyas, co-owner of the Fine Cheese Company, is communication.

“The British are up for trying new cheeses,” she says. “It’s one of my pet hates that on a menu you find lyrical descriptions of the dishes and the wine, but it just says ‘selection of cheeses’. It’s essential there are at least two people on duty who know the cheeseboard really well. They need to present the cheeses and talk to customers. We supply information and tasting notes for all our products.” She adds that new cheeses should be introduced in stages rather than all at once with a familiar core range regularly supplemented by fresh additions.

This is something also recommended by Rhuaridh Buchanan at Buchanan’s Cheesemonger, which supplies restaurants

In Britain we’re not restricted by AOCs in the same way as on the Continent, so our cheesemakers can take inspiration from around the world

including Galvin at Windows and Elystan Street.

“If you look at high-volume restaurants with dozens of staff, you’re less likely to introduce lots of new cheeses in one go, but there is still room to include one or two as long as people are able to explain them,” he says. “With small indies and restaurants that can manage a cheese trolley there’s more opportunity to change the board more frequently and have that one-to-one time with the diner.”

Improving cheese knowledge across the hospitality sector is a key aim of the newly launched Academy of Cheese - a set of qualifications that works along similar lines to the Wine & Spirit Education Trust, building up to the Master of Cheese. Harvey & Brockless is a key backer of the initiative and Owen Davies says the one-day Level 1 course is a good introduction for chefs and front-of-house staff to learn how cheeses are made, the different styles, flavours and textures, and with what to pair them.

“It will be exciting to see how that develops and improves knowledge across the industry,” he says. “Restaurants need to empower someone in their front of house team to be responsible and really know their cheese.”

Whey to go: Brie-de-Meaux style cheese Baron Bigod



Five of the best new-wave British cheeses

Somerset Ricotta, Westcombe Dairy, Somerset

The leftover whey from Westcombe’s unpasteurised cheddar is used to make this fabulous ricotta, which is light and fresh with a well-judged salty kick and rich, milky flavour. Drizzle with top notch honey for cheese nirvana.

Graceburn, Blackwoods, Kent

This feta-style cheese, marinated in oil laced with peppercorns, thyme and garlic, is a very different proposition to the overly salty and sour supermarket versions. It has a gentle lactic tang from the raw cow’s milk plus aromatic

notes from the marinade and a long, salty finish.

Ashlynn, Cheese Cellar Dairy, Worcester

The ash-coated rind and thin line of charcoal that runs through the centre of this soft goat’s cheese contrasts beautifully with the white paste. Creamy with racy acidity and a tingle of spice.



St Bartholomew’s, Nettlebed Creamery, Oxfordshire

A sweet, nutty Alpine-style cheese made with

organic, unpasteurised cow’s milk. Aged for six months, it has a smooth, pliable texture and complex flavours of caramel and hazelnuts. A real beauty.

Rollright, King Stone Dairy, Oxfordshire

This is a soft cow’s milk cheese with a peachy washed rind that imbues the buttery interior with remarkably complex and delightful flavours. Think fresh dough, herbaceous notes and a savoury depth.

