

# The big cheese



Patricia Michelson, owner of La Fromagerie, tells *Oliver Thring* about the best cheesemakers

**S**upplement?" cries Patricia Michelson. "How dare they call it that! You look at a menu, everything reads beautifully, then right at the end it says, 'Cheese supplement: £5.' They don't attach any meaning to it — the word is like poison to my heart."

Michelson has staked her livelihood on cheese in all its forms. As the owner of La Fromagerie in London for 25 years, she has done more than anyone to improve Britain's knowledge and appreciation of it. As well as her three shops, all in smart, villagey bits of the capital, La Fromagerie has a thriving wholesale business and supplies restaurants across the country.

The newest branch is on the car-free and picturesque Lamb's Conduit Street in Bloomsbury. To select the 200 or so cheeses she supplies, Michelson rigorously vets each producer, visiting — with her colleagues — up to 60 farms a year. "We prefer farm-made cheeses using milk from a farm's own herds," she says. "That means you know how they're rearing the animals, the pasture they're grazing on and the man making the cheese itself."

When she started the business, British cheesemaking was dominated by huge factories and economies of scale. Taste and quality suffered as a

## CHRISTMAS CHEESEBOARD

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MARBLE CHEESEBOARD: DAVID NELLOR

Photographs  
Nathan Pask

**1 STICHELTON**

*Welbeck Estate,  
Collingham Farm,  
Nottinghamshire*

This distinctive blue cheese is made by hand-ladling milk. It's also set slowly, allowing the flavours to progress naturally into the dense, creamy paste, with a gentle spice of blue. It is not a stilton, but a true original.

**2 HAFOD**

*Bwlchwern Fawr Farm,  
Llangybi, Lampeter, Wales*

Hafod incorporates milk from Ayrshire cows that graze on meadow pasture rich in wild plants for most of the year. It has a rich character with a subtle, earthy quality and a melting end taste.

**3 BOSWORTH ASH LOG**

*Statfold, Staffordshire*

A matured, rounded goat's cheese with a closed, textured rind dusted with charcoal. The flavours are nutty and it has an enticing fudge-like texture.

**4 BIX**

*Nettlebed Creamery,  
Oxfordshire*

This buttery cow's cheese from Rose Grimond's dairy farm has cream added to the curds, giving it an unctuous feel. There's a dense, grassy sweetness, with a yoghurt twang at the finish, the rind imparting a hint of mushroom.

**5 MAIDA VALE**

*Village Maid Cheese,  
Riseley, Berkshire*

A soft Guernsey-milk cheese with a rind washed in ale from the local Uprising Brewery. It gets a kick from the ale, its earthy, hoppy character contributing to a satisfying salty edge.

**6 SINGLE GLOUCESTER**

*Dymock, Gloucestershire*

This is lighter than double Gloucester, with a lower fat content as skimmed milk is mixed with full fat. Savoury and nutty, it has PDO status, meaning it can be produced only in Gloucestershire with milk from pedigree cattle.

result. "You need to pay a bit more for something that gives you real goodness," she says. "Cheese is tainted by vacuum-packing. And a small amount of slow-ripened cheese gives you as much calcium as a huge portion of cheap stuff, which is bulked out with water and full of preservatives and other chemicals."

A raft of young British cheesemakers have been quietly changing things: Michelson has showcased some of their work for her Christmas cheeseboard (left). "I meet lots of young people who are disillusioned at the thought of office life, or who have degrees but can't get 'ordinary' jobs," she says. "So they are going back to the land and what it provides. By making cheese, you are developing processes that humans have been doing since time immemorial."

Michelson started her business by chance. One winter's day in 1990, she was on a skiing holiday in Méribel, France. The weather was awful, and at the top of a mountain she fell, losing sight of her husband, Daniel, and ending up off-piste, alone, with visibility almost at zero. She climbed over ice and rocks, eventually reaching the treeline. "I arrived back in the village exhausted and starving," she says. "I walked into the first shop I could see: it was called La Fromagerie. I had only 10 francs but it bought me a piece of Beaufort, and as I nibbled it on the way home, I couldn't believe how much better I felt."

She decided to buy some cheese to take back to Britain and ordered "une pièce" of Beaufort — without realising that meant an entire cheese. "The cheesemonger drove up the hill in his little van to deliver a 35kg cheese," she says. "I couldn't bear to send him away, so we stuffed it in the back of the car." Michelson wondered if there might be a market for it, and persuaded friends visiting pricy restaurants to mention that she was keeping France's best cheeses in her shed. Within a couple of years she had sold her house to raise funds for her first shop in Highbury, north London, complete with a walk-in cheese room. The food writer Nigel Slater was her first customer — some ventures really are blessed.

Michelson still eats cheese every day. "It's the answer to all of life's ills," she says. "Parmesan is the best hangover cure — have a little as soon as you wake up. I've got good teeth, strong hair, you name it. I put it all down to cheese." ■