

DRINKING

Beirut's got bottle

Lebanon's wines are getting the platform they deserve, thanks in part to a community bookshop. *By Alice Lascelles*

The Beirut café and bookstore Aaliya's Books has weathered a lot in its short life. First the 2019 civil protests, then it was damaged in the blast of 2020 and almost closed in 2021 after a fuel shortage made it impossible to keep the lights on. Not to mention Covid-19.

And yet this shop in the arty Gemmayzeh district has remained, against all odds, a lively cultural hub: hosting book clubs, jazz nights and wine fairs. And, soon, a Lebanese wine bar. Its proprietors are Niamh Fleming-Farrell, a bookseller and journalist from Ireland, and William Dobson, an English teacher – adventure-seekers who came to the city more than 10 years ago and “basically never left”.

“When I arrived in Lebanon only a few local producers such as Ksara and Chateau Musar were visible,” says Fleming-Farrell. “People weren't championing indigenous grapes. But since then the number of wineries has gone from around 10 to more than 40.”



THE BAR AT AALIYA'S BOOKS

“It's partly because it's become so hard to get stuff in from abroad, it's forced people to look internally,” adds Dobson. “But there's also a feeling: now's the time to believe in Lebanon or leave. And wine is a great hope.”

The 20-seat wine bar and cave, which adjoins the bookshop, hopes to list more than 25 Lebanese wineries, with emphasis on up-and-coming producers. One of those is Mersel, a natural winemaker in the mountains just outside Tripoli that makes amphora-aged skin-contact wines, pét-nats and even a piquette. Highlights from the range I tasted included Mersel Lebnani Abyad (above right), a hazy orange wine made from the Lebanese grape Merwah, and a crunchy red-apple Cinsault called Red Velvet. Both of these will make their debut in the UK with natural wine merchant Les Caves de Pyrene (lescaves.co.uk) later this year.

The bar will also stock Sept (left, available at cavaspiliadis.uk from £39), from Lebanon's first biodynamic vineyard, and organic growers Batroun Mountain Winery (below right) and Les Trois Collines. The house fizz will be from Latourba – thought to be the only winery in the country doing champagne-method sparkling wine. The award-winning Domaine Wardy (from £20, lebanesefinewine.com) will figure with wines from Couvent Rouge, a co-op that incentivises farmers in the Beqaa Valley – where hashish cultivation is rife – to switch from cannabis to grapes.

Aaliya's monthly wine fairs will continue, fleshed out by tastings and supper clubs, says Dobson. “We'll be working with local chefs to showcase Lebanese produce.” The Lebanese anise spirit arak will also be “front and centre”. “We want it to be an extension of what we're doing in the shop, which is creating a space where people's stories can be told,” says Dobson. ■HTSI aaliyasbooks.com @alicelascelles



A CHEESE TOASTIE AT DEENEY'S IN LEYTON



EATING

Keep it toastie

What's the secret to a great grilled-cheese sandwich? *Ajesh Patalay* goes in search of the perfect melt

Cheese toasties are a magnificent thing,” says Rose Grimond, owner of Nettlebed Creamery near Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire. “Underestimate them at your peril.” It was only recently that Grimond came to appreciate the extent of their capabilities herself. Faced with a problem of wastage at Nettlebed – an award-winning farmhouse producer of artisan cheese, milk, kefir and ice cream – Grimond had the idea of using their offcuts of cheese between slices of bread and selling them as toasties.

A shipping container was installed in one of the barns and christened “The Cheese Shed”, while head cheesemaker Patrick Heathcoat-Amory got to work on his prehistoric Rima maker, perfecting the Nettlebed formula. Using a combination of their sliced washed-rind highmore and grated hay-aged witheridge, he played around with ratios until the toastie exhibited “the right amount of ooze and umami”, says Grimond. “One of the nice things about cheese, which you often see at tastings, is when everyone stops and instinctively goes for one variety. All of your body says ‘this is good’. The same happens when you bite into the perfect toastie.”

The day before The Cheese Shed opened in March 2021, Grimond posted about it on social media, not expecting much. “Maybe that shows my naivety,” she says. “We opened at nine on a Friday morning. By 12.30pm we had sold out.” The following day, after Grimond had driven to every supermarket within an eight-mile radius to buy up white sliced bread, they sold out again. “And to ram home exactly how much people love a toastie, Tom Hanks, who happened to be filming nearby, popped along for one too.”

While the initial success probably had something to do with opening during a lockdown, the demand for cheese toasties has never abated. “We've been bowled over,” says Grimond. “The Creamery took six years to reach a certain size in terms of turnover and employees. The Cheese Shed took six weeks to match it.” Among a fanbase that includes “pre-schoolers and octogenarians alike”, the Cheese Shed

also has a celebrity following with endorsements from the likes of Jeremy Irons, Mary Berry and Helena Bonham Carter (who is admittedly Grimond's cousin, but still).

Cheese toasties are a comfort food that stirs longings and satisfies cravings in a way that, dare I say, even pizza cannot match. Delicious, for sure. But is the appeal also nostalgic? That's the view of Bill Oglethorpe of Kappacasein Dairy, whose toasties are a fixture at London's Borough Market. Made using mixed grated cheese (primarily Montgomery's cheddar with comté, ogleshield, London raclette and Bermondsey Hard Pressed) with red onion, white onion, spring onions and leeks in Poilane sourdough, they're often touted as the best in town. Though there are plenty of rivals for that title. The elegant ham and cheese toastie at Cora Pearl, for instance, is filled with cheese ganache and jellied ham hock and served with a quenelle of pickle. The seasonal white truffle cheese toastie at 45 Jermyn St starts with raclette on sliced white bread, which is brushed with English butter (“better than French”) inside and out. As for the toastie at The Wigmore, it

“FILMING NEARBY, TOM HANKS POPPED ALONG FOR A TOASTIE TOO”

brings together a trinity of cheeses (Montgomery, ogleshield, raclette), lots of mustard, cornichons and red onion in caramelised onion sourdough and is gigantic. Billed as “XXL”, the torpedo-shaped colossus comes with the hefty iron press used to cook it on top. It's conceived as a sharing dish, but I'm not surprised to hear customers are ordering it for one with a side salad and farmhouse ale. I mean, who wouldn't relish that challenge?

Elsewhere, why not try the signature Mac N Cheese at the Cheesy Toast Shack in St Andrews, where the specials feature local produce such as Arbroath smoked haddock and lobster? There's also the “Macbeth” haggis cheese (haggis, cheddar, caramelised onion, rocket and mustard on granary bread) at Deeney's in Leyton, which now claims a branch in Tokyo. As haggis can't be imported, the team in Japan make their own, which apparently goes down a storm.

The good thing about toasties, though, is they don't need to be fancy to inspire devotion. The toasted sandwiches at Long Valley Bar in Cork may not look like much. But paired with a pint of Beamish, you can see why they've become part of city lore. “A spiritual experience” is how one writer describes them. That may sound like hyperbole. But never underestimate a toastie. ■HTSI

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