



MICHAEL SMALES LYBURN CHEESE

“Natural evolution”

With the Milk Marketing Board dissolved in 1994, and struggling to sell vegetables to both supermarkets and the wholesale market, it became clear that for smaller players like ourselves to survive we needed to be producing a niche product and it needed to be branded. As a result, we changed from growing conventional vegetables to growing organic and started to experiment with cheese made with our own cows milk.

So it was in 1952, Father was given three cows from Lord Carnarvon, Faith, Hope and Beatrix, and he started with 50 acres. In 1969 we rented Lyburn Farm, another 270 acres, in the

New Forest on the Hampshire/Wiltshire border and a dairy unit for 200 cows was constructed. The soil type was a medium sandy loam, so there was clearly an opportunity to grow other crops and, to cut a long story short, today we now have 170 cows, make 70 tons of cheese a year, grow about 80 acres of organic vegetables and 30 acres of pumpkins, and farm in the region of 500 acres with a full time staff of eight and lot of seasonal staff.

Hampshire Farmers Markets had just started in 1999. This gave us the confidence that we would at least have somewhere to sell the cheese, and without them we may never have survived. You look at the counter in any supermarket, any good farm shop or deli and the choice is bewildering, so we had

to decide what style of cheese we should make and we came up with three criteria.

1. We were not going to make Cheddar. The world makes Cheddar, so avoid it.
2. Don't be too niche. You do need a broad appeal; a really punchy blue cheese is not everyone's cup of tea.
3. Don't age the cheese for too long.

Cash is king, you need cash flow. That said we have now, to a degree, broken this rule, you never get everything right! So we played around for a while and started to settle with a Gouda recipe, not typically Gouda, but it was a starting point. The customers at Winchester Farmers Market seemed to like it, so that was good enough.

We needed a brand name, and it had to be Lyburn. This is actually a Scottish name and means borne by the river. As a combination of letters it is simple, not too long, unique, so will not get mixed up with any other name. So it had to be simple and easy, and when we came to naming Winchester, the nine month cheese, given we had started at Winchester FM that was easy

too – the old Capital of England had to be right. Then when we took it on to 18 months of age, it had to be Old Winchester. Stoney Cross was not so easy, for a while this cheese went unnamed. We had lists of names, bits of paper, sat around the table with cups of tea, all to no avail. But there it was, sat right on the doorstep two miles up the road, as I cross the old airfield of the Second World War to deliver cheese to the Royal Oak pub at Fritham.

Our cows are an integral part of the story. We have bred them to produce more fat and protein; at 5am the milk is in the cow, and by lunchtime it is cheese. In 2001 we built a new production facility, with the help of some grant money, and over the years we have slowly grown the business to the point where we make about a ton and a half a week and seven variations of the cheese, but Old Winchester has been the star of the show. Being 18 months old these 5kg wheels are full of flavour, very hard, and almost look like Parmesan. Being made with vegetarian rennet, it gives chefs the opportunity to use an English cheese instead of a hard Italian, and for them it ticks the vegetarian box as well.

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ROSE GRIMOND NETTLEBED CREAMERY

“Curiosity led us to kefir”

Someone once said that cheesemakers are farmers of microbes, and the more cheese we make at Nettlebed Creamery, the more curious about them we become.

We make three different types of cheese: a soft, a semi-soft and a semi-hard. Each has its own particular relationship with bacteria. Bix and Highmoor, our soft cheeses, are made with mesophilic bacteria. A mesophile is a lover of moderate temperatures, between around 25-37°C.

St Bartholomew, our semi-hard cheese, is made to a recipe where the curds are “scalded”. Mesophilic bacteria start the acidification and double in numbers every 30-40 minutes through the initial phases of the make before we heat the curds during the stirring

phase to a punchy 45°C. Once the temperature gets in to the forties the mesophiles will slow their growth and then release flavour creating enzymes as the thermophiles take up the strain. Thermophiles, as the name suggests, are lovers of higher temperatures.

That however is only the beginning of our quest to understand microbes. From day one at the Nettlebed Creamery, we were dedicated to the raw milk cause, but the march of bovine tuberculosis across England meant that we had to concede defeat to M. Louis Pasteur. Having been in a low-risk area in south Oxfordshire we had a positive test result for TB. Determined not to say goodbye to all the microflora that our organic farm so liberally gave us, we have started to retro-cultivate the lactic acid bacteria that we know are abundant in our raw milk. Only a very small proportion of the

organisms we find in our raw milk (that are likely strain-specific to our cows, our pasture, our soil and our fields) are even potential pathogens – the rest are flavour-generating friendly bacteria, yeast and moulds that are particular to our organic farm. After looking down the microscope at an ever-changing seasonal cycle of different microorganisms growing on agar plates in our lab our microbial milk quest inevitably led us to kefir.

Our head cheesemaker and microbe guru Patrick had been making kefir at home for years but getting it market ready was a new challenge. We wanted to offer an organic kefir which wasn't mass produced but was of the highest quality and so we set about propagating kefir grains with our own milk and testing, tasting, testing, tasting.

Kefir is one of the oldest forms of fermented milk you can find in Europe. It is believed to have originated in the Caucasus mountains millennia ago. The health benefits of kefir are not fully understood, however, what research has been done seems to indicate that a healthy population of microbes in the gut is associated with an optimally functioning immune system, reduced inflammation and allergies, reduced digestive problems,

improved mental health and a plethora of other somatic and psychological benefits. As a Polish friend recently told me, it is also a great tonic for a hangover. Of all the fermented foods, probiotics and microbial supplements tested, kefir appears to be one of the very few that can actually deliver beneficial microbes that survive the journey to the gut where they prosper. It is possible that the low pH of kefir means that the beneficial microflora have evolved to withstand the acidic environment in the digestive tract.

We have found that since launching our own kefir there are very stark differences between what we bottle and what can be bought in a supermarket. For starters, the viscosity is quite different. Ours is thick and leaves “legs” down the side of a glass. The supermarket varieties that we have tried are smooth and leave no trails. They remind us of Yop, a liquid yoghurt that used to be available in the 80s and 90s. But we are artisan cheesemakers and quite used to the differences between supermarket produce and what we do. Fortunately, we know that there are consumers out there who are discerning and also on a microbial quest.

Cheese Talk

New retail perspectives from industry experts