

Best of
British

Cheeses

When it comes to creativity with milk curd, we knock our continental neighbours into the proverbial cocked hat. And who'd ever have imagined that?

BY LOLA BORG

Charles de Gaulle's famous quote about the French was that he couldn't govern a nation that had 246 cheeses. If only he could see Britain today!

Until about 20 years ago, there were basically nine regional cheeses: Cheddar, Cheshire, Caerphilly, Derby, Wensleydale, Gloucester, Leicester, Lancashire and Stilton, mostly factory-produced in massive blocks. But that's all changed—we now have over 900 British options, and that's if you count the big cheeses (excuse the pun) such as Cheddar or Stilton as just one variety! Specialist shops and local farmers' markets, in particular, have really boosted the smaller, artisan offerings.

So here's our selection of some rising stars—and a few classics, too. ►

BIM PHOTOGRAPHY



For the happy couple who want a wedding cake that's a bit different. OK, a *lot* different. From thecheeseshed.com

STINKING BISHOP



Named after a 19th-century farmer in Gloucestershire notorious for his drunken antics, Stinking Bishop is made with rind bathed in pear cider, which gives both a distinctive brown-pink colour and a ripened smell that's been compared to "a rugby-club changing room".

This cheese was languishing in obscurity until 2005, when it became a best-seller overnight. The reason? A critical role in *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*, where Gromit uses Stinking Bishop to revive Wallace. Made by old hippy (his words) Charles Martell since 1972—using milk from what was originally a handful of almost-extinct local Gloucestershire cows—it's more than just a snappy name: it's been cited by Juliet Harbutt, founder of the British Cheese Awards, as one of the classic modern British cheeses. Who would argue?

Made in Dymock, Gloucestershire
(stinkingbishop.co.uk)

TUNWORTH

The classic cheeseboard combo consists of a Stilton, a Cheddar and a Brie or Camembert. "But within that now is an enormous variety," says Sue Cloke of specialists Cheese at Leadenhall. "You can have a fantastic cheeseboard with British cheeses."

She's not kidding. In the UK, around 15 years ago, we started cheekily to make our own Brie and Camembert-style cheeses, and have rather smugly beaten the French at their own game. Take the award-winning Tunworth—it looks and tastes like a Camembert ("cabbagy"), but it comes from Hampshire. Made since 2005 by two mothers with five children between them who met at the school gates, Tunworth has had wine and food

writers throwing superlatives around—Raymond Blanc, for example, calls it "the finest Camembert in the world". Is it really that good? Oh yes! This runny and pungent offering is an impressive addition to any cheeseboard.

Made by Hampshire Cheeses
(hampshirecheeses.co.uk)



CORNISH YARG

Fresh, tangy, salty and slightly crumbly—Cornish Yarg tastes of seaside holidays, and is always good for those who don't want a strong cheese, says Sue Cloke. It was made to a 17th-century recipe found in a farmhouse attic (well, this is how the story goes) by a Cornish couple on the edge of Bodmin who reversed the letters of their surname—Gray—for their cheese.

A spraying of mould gives the unusual look and flavour, but what makes Yarg distinctive (and very handsome) is the deep-green wrapping of wild Cornish nettle leaves. It also comes in wild garlic leaves and, for romantics, a whole heart-shaped truckle.

Made by Lynher Dairies, Truro,
Cornwall (lynherdairies.co.uk) ▶



ALL CHEESE PHOTOGRAPHED BY FABFOODPIX.COM; BARRY BATCHELOR/PA ARCHIVE/PRESS ASSOCIATION IMAGES



CHEDDAR

It originated in the village of Cheddar, of course, and at one time had to be made within 30 miles of Wells Cathedral. But, as Cheddar is a generic name, any fool can make a poor approximation—although there are strict conditions for using the name “West Country Farmhouse Cheddar” (such as hand “cheddaring”, for example).

Like many of our great cheeses, it’s a story of survival against the odds. Or, in Cheddar’s case, the war, rationing and the dreaded Milk Marketing Board (who decreed all surplus milk went into making one uniformly bland cheddar). There are now a squillion varieties and a world of difference between an indifferent rubbery mass and one of our greats, such as Quicke’s or Montgomery’s. Or these ones—sweet Godminster organic truckles, in a distinctive burgundy wax, made with milk from their own herd.

Godminster Organic unpasteurised vintage Cheddar is made in Bruton, Somerset (godminster.com)



Sandy and Andy Rose show off their blue cheese

found continental versions too strong,” she says. Using milk from Guernsey cows, she made a sweet, mellow cheese that “is almost spreadable, like a blue butter”.

Within six months, Barkham Blue had scooped a Best New Cheese Award, and Sandy now has a sideboard groaning with awards, including Supreme

BARKHAM BLUE

For Sandy Rose, making cheese started out as a hobby a decade ago. A farmer’s daughter and ex-hairdresser, she had a smallholding of rare-breed cattle and goats. “I always liked blue cheese, but

Champion at the British Cheese Awards. The entire family works in the business, named Two Hoots Cheese after their rescued barn owls. “And we still can’t make enough of the stuff,” says Sandy.

Made in Barkham, Wokingham, Berkshire (twohootscheese.co.uk)

LANCASHIRE BOMB

Maybe it wouldn’t be quite as big a hit if it didn’t have such an appealing name. Andrew Shorrocks was born into a family of cheese makers, and he made the first bomb as a leaving present for a pub landlady in the village of Goosnargh. Twenty years later, he doesn’t know how many he shifts a year, despite never advertising.

A rich, creamy cheese wrapped in black wax, Andrew puts its appeal down to the fact it’s different (you slice off the top and scoop out to eat). In a rich Lancaster accent, he says, “Most cheeses are a bland lump of rubbish when you get in there, but this isn’t.” Quite. It can be stored for up to two years, which makes it good present material—it flies out of the shops at Christmas. And it now comes in several varieties (the Red Onion Bomb is very tasty with a ploughman’s lunch, according to British Fine Foods), but the original—matured for two years and very tangy—is the best-seller.

Made in Goosnargh, Lancashire (lancashirebombs.co.uk) ▶



GORWYDD CAERPHILLY



Maugan Trethowan (right, with wife Kim) runs the dairy with his brother Todd

A cheese with a Welsh name that can be made outside of Wales (confusingly), Caerphilly has a recipe similar to other crumbly cheeses—Cheshire, Lancashire and Wensleydale. The story goes that its salty texture was just the thing for miners to replace all the salt lost sweating on the coalface. Caerphilly production died

out totally during the war (it was banned by the Ministry of Food), as did that of most British cheeses, bar a few mass-produced varieties.

There were traditionally two different ways of making it: some was eaten young and fresh (and used as a cheap alternative to Cheddar); others ripened into a harder version. This one, from Trethowan's Dairy, "a little farmhouse in Wales", is the latter type, made the way cheese-maker Todd Trethowan's grandmother used to do it, and is a true artisan Caerphilly—in other words, nothing like umpteen tasteless versions. Gorwydd has two textures: a ripening under the grey, molten-looking rind; and the traditional salty, lemony centre.

Made by Trethowan Dairy Gorwydd Farm, Tregaron, Ceredigio (trethowansdairy.wordpress.com)

INNES BUTTONS



For those who don't like goat's cheese to be too "goaty", this is a mousse-like fresh cheese that really is as cute as its name. Best eaten as fresh as you can find it, an Innes Button (roughly the same size as a milk-bottle top) is made by Stella Bennett and her son Joe with milk from their 350 goats on a farm in rural Staffordshire.

The secret to the clean taste, she says, is that the cheese is made first thing in the morning with milk that's still warm. Yum! It's available as natural, or prettily coated with rosemary, pink pepper or ash.

Made by Highfields Farm Dairy in Tamworth, Staffordshire (innescheese.co.uk)

CRIFFEL

A Camembert-like cheese, pungent when ripe and with a sticky rind, Criffel is named after the hill that can be seen from the dairy where it's made, in beautiful countryside seven miles west of Dumfries. But what makes Criffel different is the way it's produced.

The Loch Arthur Creamery is part of a community whose purpose is to find "meaningful work" for those with learning disabilities and special needs. The dairy (where Michael, with Down's Syndrome, has worked since 1985) originated as a job for a wheelchair-bound person who could still churn butter. They now make several cheeses and also have a shop, a new cafe and two farms. They've won awards for their cheese, and last year, after scooping a coveted BBC Radio 4 Food and Farming Award, they actually ran out of supplies! This has now been rectified.

Made by the Loch Arthur Creamery in Beeswing, Dumfries (locharthur.org.uk)



With thanks to: Juliet Harbutt, founder of The British Cheese Awards; Nigel White of the British Cheese Board; Sue Cloke from Cheese at Leadenhall; Pam Dyer at British Fine Foods; and food writer and blogger Debora Robertson (lickedspoon.blogspot.com)

If you have a cheesy delight that's escaped our attention, why not let us know? Send us an email—with a picture if possible—to theeditor

BOILIE GOAT'S CHEESE

It has to have the worst name ever, though the nice people at the creamery where it's made (a co-operative of 65 farms in rainy Fermanagh) tell us it's pronounced "bow-lee", which means "the milking place" in Gaelic.

This award-winning goat's cheese is made from a 1920s local-farm recipe. Traditionally, cheese making was the job of the farmer's wife (to use surplus milk), which is why many cheeses are a size that fits comfortably into a female palm. Boilie is hand-rolled into tiny balls and put into jars of (not terribly Irish) garlic-infused sunflower oil. Eat on crackers, or put straight onto pasta or in salads along with the flavoured oil.

Made in Fivemiletown, Tyrone, County Fermanagh (fivemiletown.com/shop) ■



NEXT MONTH: FILM LOCATIONS