



HANDMADE BY THE YARD

It seemed touch and go at the time but, since 1980, Neal's Yard dairy has become a big cheese

Today it represents the gold standard as monger and producer of handmade British and Irish cheeses but, struggling through that first winter in 1980 in its Covent Garden courtyard, the infant Neal's Yard Dairy was still pretty obscure, when a packet arrived in the post.

Among the tiny handful of original staff was Randolph Hodgson (above), nowadays the owner of Neal's Yard Dairy and seen as one of the saviours of British cheese. In those days he was newly graduated from London University with a degree in food sciences and chemistry but already leery of the food industry — and a friend had drawn him in to help start the dairy, a spinoff from the wholefood warehouse recently opened in the semi-derelict Neal's Yard.

The dairy was making yoghurt and ice cream and some cheese. Beyond the confines of the courtyard, there were other stirrings in Britain's cheese world, where for most of the 20th century the taste and texture had been leached out of great native varieties thanks to oblivious milk authorities and factory producers who put cheapness first.

By contrast, their counterparts in France and Italy had kept more pride in their cheeses and found other systems of production that showed volume and taste could coexist.

Neal's Yard was contemplating taking up the torch. "Then, in the post, we got this piece of cheese from a cheesemaker in Devon," says Hodgson. It was sweating in tight film-wrap, but I was very excited about it so I drove down in my car to see her. I just wanted to talk to her about her cheesemaking. I brought some cheese back in a box in the car, and we started to sell it."

That cheesemaker put him in touch with others in her area, and Neal's Yard started buying cheddar direct: "If you walk into a room full of cheese you can notice all these variations and nuances. You can come back and say to a customer, 'I found these on the bottom shelf, I think they're wonderful what do you think?' 'Well, I disagree I think they're horrible,' or, 'I agree with you they're great.'"

Hodgson had started off making cheese, but says it was visiting other cheesemakers and working the retail side that fired him up, using the cheese counter as a combination of pulpit and arena of dialogue with consumers he sees as intelligent and interested — and often amazed that the Cheshire he's urged them to sample tastes nothing like the factory version. "They'd never had the real thing. So it was a reconversion process. In the 80s that was what it was about, quite hard work in the early days."

But it was not plain sailing. Food scares and new EC regulations threatened to kill off the revival. The crisis over salmonella in eggs, and lysteria led to advice not to eat unpasteurised cheese. "It was at that point we formed the specialist cheese makers' association, as a direct response to misinformation about lysteria in cheese. There was an issue with soft cheese, but it was the same whether it was pasteurised or unpasteurised."

The association now numbers between 120 and 140 members. Of those, about a quarter are traditional makers and the rest new wavers, many of whom started cheesemaking in the 1980s.

"I feel that my primary job is to ensure the protection and continued enjoyment of those traditional British varieties that still exist. It needs to be made clear to people that a farmhouse cheddar and a factory cheddar are two entirely different beasts." **Leslie Plummer**