

move the cheese

THE BIG CHEESE

STORY BY ROBERTA MUIR • PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANZ SCHEURER

Many of us grew up with tasteless slices of cheese called cheddar but they were a far cry from the real thing.

For me, cloth-wrapped cheddar is the epitome of handcrafted cheese even if it does have one of the most abused names in the world of dairy products. After all, despite being one of the most famous and popular cheeses available, cheddar does not have protected designation of origin.

A hard, cow's milk cheese, at its best cheddar tastes rich and nutty, has an open, moist texture with an earthy aroma and becomes slightly crumbly if aged properly. At its worst, it comes in squeeze-tubes, plastic-wrapped sausage shapes and vacuum packs designed for maximum shelf life. Needless to say, it's the handcrafted version we're looking at here.

This style of cheese originated centuries ago in south-western England in the rolling green hills of the counties of Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Cornwall, where it is still traditionally made. The name comes from the Somerset village of Cheddar, more famous for its gorge and caves than its cheese. Still the village name came to apply to the process by which this style of cheese is made – cheddaring – and to the cheeses produced by the process in the surrounding area. The process was standardised commercially in the 1800s, although it may date as far back as Roman times.

Cheddaring

Cheddar starts in the way most cheeses do: Milk is combined with a starter culture and heated, then rennet is added to curdle the milk and separate the curds and whey. In cheddar making, once the whey is drained off, the curd is transferred to shallow cooling trays, then hand-cut into slabs, which are stacked and turned over for a couple of hours to



BARBER'S
1833

Made by Anthony Barber and family at Maryland Farm, Somerset using pasteurised milk and their own traditional cheese cultures to give you this exquisite 24 month

press more whey out of the individual curd particles. This stacking and turning is called cheddaring.

The curd is then finely chopped (in a curd mill), salted, put into large cheesecloth-lined hoops and pressed for a further 24 hours. Then it is removed, wrapped in fresh cheesecloth, put in a hot water bath, rewrapped, repressed, smeared with lard and matured on the farms for nine to 24 months (the best are aged for at least 12 months) at eight to nine degrees Celsius and a relative humidity of around 86 per cent.

The cheeses are hand-turned every few weeks so they ripen evenly, with care taken not to crack or dent the outside, so that unwelcome mould can't penetrate.

The cloth wrapping is also frequently brushed with brine to minimise cheese mites. Cheddar is traditionally matured in large wheels of around 25 kilogrammes (typically about 40 centimetres high), which allow them to mature over a long period without losing too much moisture, giving time for flavour to develop.

By the end of World War II, traditional farmhouse cheddar was close to extinction but it is now enjoying a resurgence. Although the name cheddar does not have any official meaning, under European Union guidelines, West Country Farmhouse Cheddar now has protected designation of origin (PDO). There are currently 15 English cheesemakers accredited to use the PDO: Brue Valley Farms, Green's of Glastonbury,



CHRIS BARBER

Keen's, Westcombe Dairy, Coombe Farm, EFJ Gould & Co, Kingston Farms, WH Longman & Sons, Montgomery's, Tower Farms, Alvis Bros and Barbers (all in Somerset); Denhay Farms and Ashley Chase Estate (in Dorset); and Parkham Farms in Devon. Montgomery, Keen's, Green's and Westcombe use raw (unpasteurised) milk.

Other Cheddars

Truckles are smaller cheeses traditionally made from leftover curds, after the large wheels of cheddar have been removed. Designed to be eaten young, they will dry out if aged as long as the larger wheels. Many dairies producing traditional cheddar also make truckles and the best still have a nutty flavour and a firm creamy texture.

Colby Cheese is often referred to as cheddar, although it is made by a slightly different process. The curd is toughened by being stirred in the vat of warm whey, rather than being stacked (as with cheddaring). It is then drained, pressed and matured in a similar way to cheddar. It has a similar, though slightly sweeter flavour, and is moister with a more open texture, and a shorter shelf life.

Club Cheddar is reconstituted cheese. After being matured in vacuum-sealed bags, a number of different cheeses are minced finely and blended together, often flavoured with various herbs and spices, then pressed into shape. They usually have quite a grainy, pasty texture.

Buying & Storing

Handcrafted cheeses will vary in taste seasonally, as well as from farm to farm and at different stages of maturation. Cloth wrapping protects the cheese and allows the rind to breathe and release moisture.

Look for a natural rind rather than a wax coating. The cheese will most likely be cloth-wrapped and should have a fresh smell and a crumbly texture. The cloth may be marked or have some mould growth; don't worry about this, it has done its job of protecting the cheese while it aged.

Good cheddar can sometimes contain tiny lactate crystals that crunch when you bite on them; this is normal and shouldn't be considered a fault.



WELSH RAREBIT

Traditional cheddar, and certainly those with the West Country Farmhouse PDO, is cream to golden in colour (never orange as this is an indication that the cheese has been coloured, usually with annatto). Whenever possible buy cheddar cut freshly from a large wheel rather than pre-cut.

Ideally, store cut cheddar in a dampened calico cloth or in waxed paper, so that the cheese doesn't dry out, but also doesn't sweat. Failing this, cover the cut surface with aluminium foil or plastic wrap and store in a sealed container in the fridge. Don't cover the rind, as it won't dry out and should be allowed to breathe.

Usage

Cheddar is a great melting cheese; the older it is, the sharper the taste, which is a question of personal preference. It is also great served with cider (another speciality of the west country of England), a buttery New World chardonnay or full-bodied white Burgundy, with a few slices of crisp pear or some tart quince paste. ■

Welsh Rarebit

It has been suggested that the alternative name, Welsh Rabbit, was in fact the original term for this tasty British snack of cheese on toast, and that the rarebit title was only given later to try and make sense of a nonsensical sounding dish. Etymology aside, this is the classic cheddar dish and at least the Welsh appellation suggests an origin close to cheddar's traditional home.

- 250g cheddar, grated or broken into small pieces
- 25g butter
- 60ml beer
- 1 tbsp English mustard
- dash Worcestershire sauce
- salt flakes and freshly ground white pepper, to taste
- 4 thick slices white sourdough bread

1. Combine the cheese, butter, beer, mustard, Worcestershire sauce, salt and pepper in a saucepan and heat until melted. Stir well to form a smooth molten mass.
2. Meanwhile, toast the bread and place in the centre of a heatproof platter. Pour melted cheese over the toast.
3. Grill (broil) until bubbling and brown. Serve with a cold beer or glass of cider.

Culina and Pikzen have been appointed as distributors of West Country Farmhouse Cheddar in Singapore and Malaysia respectively.