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# Food hero: meet cheesemaker George Keen

George Keen uses raw milk and traditional techniques to craft one of the world's finest cheddars. Clare Hargreaves went to meet him.

Somerset farmer and cheesemaker George Keen is to cheddar cheese what Dom Pérignon is to champagne - you'll struggle to find better. George's award-winning cheddar is the crème de la crème, and the lovely thing about it is that the crème - or creamy milk, to be precise - comes from his Friesian cows, which graze in the fields outside the dairy.

Like champagne production, cheddar-making is rooted in centuries-old tradition. The Keen family has been crafting cheddar since 1899, when George's great-grandfather moved into Moorhayes Farm, near the village of Shepton Montague in Somerset, and his daughter Jane pressed her first truckle. One of George's earliest memories is of dipping his fingers into the curds and whey as a four-year-old, when Zena, the family's resident cheesemaker - who doubled up as his nursemaid - made the day's cheddar. "At that time cheesemaking was women's work. They tended to do it before getting married," says George, who now runs the business with his brother Stephen and their sons James and Nick.

Cheddar cheese, of course, has a far longer history and has been produced in and around Somerset's Cheddar Gorge since the 12th century thanks to the area's rich grazing and cool caves, which were ideal for storing cheese. King Henry II was an aficionado and in 1170 he is said to have bought 10,420lb (4,726kg) at a farthing a pound.

In recent decades, though, the number of people around the Keens' 16th-century farm that make cheddar in the traditional way has dwindled, thanks to rising costs, increased regulation and competition from cheap, industrially made, imported cheddars. "When I was a boy, there were around 50 farms making cheddar in the West Country. Now there are just 12," says George. The 12, who call themselves West Country Farmhouse Cheesemakers, all boast Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status - while anyone can make 'cheddar', only certain cheesemakers are allowed to label their West Country Farmhouse Cheddar.

But of those 12, only 3 - Montgomery Cheddar, Westcombe Dairy and Keens - use raw, or unpasteurised, milk. The three believe raw milk is the key to making a world-class cheddar, with complex, long-lasting flavours. "With pasteurised milk, you don't get the complexity of flavours. Raw milk allows the unique flavours of the milk to

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express themselves. You get a far more interesting cheese," says George with almost evangelical fervour.

Passionate about upholding the purity of local tradition, the raw-milk Somerset cheddar-makers have formed a sort of Gang of Three, known as a Slow Food presidium, making what they term Artisan Somerset Cheddar. Their zealously held tenets include using raw milk from their own cows, the use of starters and natural rennet, 'cheddaring' (the turning of the curd) by hand, and maturing for at least 10 months.

It's a long and painstaking process, as I saw when I visited the Keens' farm. The milk, 4,500l (7,918pts) of it, came in at 8am from the farm's 250 Friesian cows, which had been milked by George's nephew, Nick. It was blended with a starter (bacteria that convert the milk's lactose into lactic acid), heated, then had calf rennet (containing enzymes that trigger curdling) added. At this stage it's called junket and, after cutting, has clearly separated into curds and whey. Dressed in white hat, apron and wellies, George's son James scoops up curds that look like mounds of popcorn and packs them into large cream-coloured blocks. This appears to be as much fun as building sandcastles - although I can see from James's strained face and biceps that it's much harder work than it looks.

Then comes the stage that makes this 'artisan' cheddar unique - cheddaring - whereby the curd blocks are slashed, like clods of turf, then turned to allow the whey to drain out. They are finally fed into a milling machine to emerge as chip-shaped chunks that are mixed with salt before being packed into cylindrical metal moulds. It's clear that this is a ritual that has been honed over the years. "You have to be steady, reliable and hardworking," says George. "Managing milk is a job that doesn't suit all temperaments."

#### Developing the flavour

Tomorrow the cheeses will be wrapped in layers of cloth, which allow the cheese to breathe and will eventually create a rind. I venture into the crypt-like maturing room, its air thick with the smell of must, where today's 27kg (59lb) truckles will be reverentially laid to rest, the last in a queue of cheeses that slowly ripen for between 10 and 18 months. "The cheeses develop a mould after a fortnight, and this slowly thickens," says George. "It protects the cheese and keeps it moist."

The process of transformation from bland rubbery curd to one of the world's finest cheeses seems like magic. The magician, of course, is Mother Nature - or rather, the

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enzymes within the cheese, which break it down and give it its amazing flavour - sweet and rich, at once creamy and tangy. Because of this, George is never entirely sure how a cheese will turn out; each is slightly different, according to what the cows ate, the weather when they were milked, and so on. "The cheese is the boss, not us," says George. "Cheeses are cunning beasts. They are a living environment so there's always an element of chance."

He admits that it is widely assumed that raw milk and cheese are dangerous, thought to carry bacteria such as salmonella and tuberculosis (TB). But George points to recent research suggesting that pasteurised cheese may actually contain more pathogens than unpasteurised cheese, not fewer. A major setback at present, he says, is TB among cattle. "Until TB is controlled, cheesemakers will be reluctant to use raw milk. If the government wants our dairy industry to survive, it needs to take action on TB."

But George and his family are adamant about continuing a tradition that has flourished in these vales for generations. "This is our heritage," says George. "I want a sustainable business that I can pass on to my children and that keeps the countryside alive." He's encouraged by the growing numbers of consumers willing to pay the extra pennies for hand-crafted raw-milk cheeses like his. "People want flavours that excite their palates."

Keen's are one of three Somerset cheddar makers still using unpasteurised milk:

George and Stephen Keen

Moorhayes farm, Wincanton, Somerset

Keen's cheeses are on sale at Waitrose, Sainsbury's, Marks & Spencer, as well as independent delis, cheese shops and farm shops.

Tom Calver

Westcombe Dairy, Lower Westcombe Farm, Evercreech, Somerset

Tom Calver, Westcombe's owner, only uses milk from his herds grazed on pastures within a mile of the dairy. Having once gone down a more commercial route, using pasteurised milk, the dairy returned to raw milk in the 1990s, and now makes about 100 truckles a week.

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James Montgomery

Manor Farm, North Cadbury, Somerset

James Montgomery makes about 60 truckles of unpasteurised farmhouse cheddar each week using milk produced by his 140 Friesian cows.

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