

The Quest For GREAT ENGLISH CHEDDAR



Discovering the seductive cheeses of Mary Quicke

STORY BY JESSE DART PHOTOS BY VALERIA NECCHIO

MARY QUICKE'S HOUSE RESTS AT THE END OF A NARROW LANE with room enough for only one car to pass. Turning onto the lane, you drive through a small stream shrouded in darkness due to the lack of streetlights, maneuver around curves and bends, and finally arrive at an ancient farmhouse deep in the green, earthy countryside of Devon.

The landscape in this part of England conquers your senses. It gives you the impression of what is about to come, which is clean air, animals in pastures, and food that tastes as it should. It is difficult to compare to another part of the world. With its intense green-ness, waves of hills,

ancient villages and vistas, it is unique.

We arrived at Mary's house, near to her farm where she and her team produce award-winning English Cheddar. We've been invited for dinner with her and her husband, and if dinner is half as good as her cheese, we have a lot to look forward to.

English Cheddar has suddenly been thrust into a spotlight. Perhaps not a bright one, but consumers are taking note. It is uniquely English, and Mary is the only female Cheddar producer in the United Kingdom. For her, this means that her cheese has a touch of femininity, with a subtle complexity. It isn't a bold, upfront cheese, but one that requires a bit of

thinking, contemplation and attention to understand.

She guides people down a path of pleasure in a seductive way, and it's obvious in the number of awards her products have won over the years in the United Kingdom and abroad. Mary's success is not just reliant on the cheese but also an entire philosophy of food, taste, farming, community and passion for what she does. Passion is a word that is thrown around a lot these days when talking about food. I don't use that word lightly here, but to its fullest meaning. Passion drives her business, and indeed the business of English Cheddar is full of passion-driven people.



Of all the cheeses produced in the world, Cheddar is perhaps the most consumed. Along with Mozzarella, it has found its way into every corner of the globe and is produced on several continents. The name Cheddar comes from the Old English word ceodor, meaning deep, dark cavity or pouch. It is a reference to the gorge and caves near the village of Cheddar in Somerset that were used to store cheese when production first began in the 12th century.

The constant temperature and humidity of the caves provide a perfect environment for maturing the wheels. The town also gave its name to a unique part of the production process known as Cheddaring, which is the method of turning the slabs of curd and piling them on top of each other in a controlled way to help drain the whey. It also stretches the curd. This process helps to create a harder cheese with firm body and is unique to Cheddar making.

In the 19th century the process for making Cheddar was improved, with credit given to Joseph Harding, the so-called "father of Cheddar cheese." Harding brought new technology into the cheesemaking process during the 1800s in Somerset and also is credited with creating the "definite formula" for Cheddar production, which he developed over many years of experience.

Back At The Farm

The following day we returned to Mary's farm to observe and participate in some cheese grading. We follow an older gentleman dressed in a white lab coat and hat carrying a cheese iron at his side into one of the storerooms, where we discover that his job demands patience, energy and, above all, a great sense of taste.

His name is Keith and he has been grading cheese for close to 50 years around the Devon and Somerset countryside. A sensible individual whose physical appearance does not give the impression that his job involves consuming a lot of cheese, Keith has a quiet demeanor and a bright, happy face.

As he opens the door to the storehouse the intense smell of ammonia pushes into the cold air outside, and the overwhelming aroma immediately assaults our nostrils. After acclimating ourselves to the



Keith Ploughman, cheese grader.

intenseness of the room, we begin to notice the finer points — the beautifully molded Cheddars stacked floor to ceiling on wooden shelves, their skin completely overtaken by molds of various kinds giving the cheese the prescribed flavor profiles to which we have become accustomed.

Cheese grading is akin to a taste test of sorts. To maintain quality, consistency and accuracy in cheese production, every cheese producer employs a grader who often is accompanied by the cheesemaker, production manager and possibly a few other individuals.

Mary's cows are grass fed and spend 10 to 11 months outside each year, which gives the milk a certain quality and taste profile that depends on the season. When we visited, there were a lot of pregnant cows so the production of milk was quite low.

English Cheddar, like all cheese, has many variables that can influence the taste and quality of the finished wheel. To produce consistently good cheese, you must have a more than basic understanding of cows, grass, soil, weather, sensory analysis, taste, biology, physiology and a host of other things that can't be taught but must be acquired over time. Those can only be learned by getting your hands dirty working with the cows and in the cheese house.

Cheese grading is a tedious exercise in self-control. Tasting more than 100 batches is, if you can believe it, difficult. After so many samples your palate deteriorates to the point of not being able to point out any significant difference in each piece. This is where the novice is separated from the professional. I can taste maybe 30 before I feel that I have lost my ability to differentiate, but the others keep going.

All 120 batches of cheese must be tasted and scored. Scores are given for flavor and aroma, body and texture, finish and color. These are recorded and tallied starting with the cheeses that are 3-months old to assess the initial qualities and identify any faults. The ones with the fewest amount of points will be ready for the market sooner as they don't exhibit the ability to mature and develop more complex flavors that can be as diverse as grass, herbs, pineapple, boiled potatoes, broccoli or caramel.

Entirely Different

Once you start noticing the nuances of English Cheddar made in this time-honored way, you realize that what you see in supermarkets is really different. Along the dairy aisle you find Cheddar in many different forms, colors, shapes and strengths. From industrial, plastic-wrapped blocks, to those covered in black or red wax, to cheese with added flavors, the variations seem to be endless. Traditional English Farm House Cheddar is an entirely different category.

Industrial cheeses are sealed in plastic to retain moisture, but normally lack the depth of flavor that traditional farmhouse or hand-made Cheddars have. The loss of moisture through aging the cheese normally bound in cloth or muslin allows the flavors to mature and concentrate. As some have said, age makes poor cheese worse, so many of the industrial cheeses are sold quite young with high moisture content.

Farmhouse Somerset Cheddar has a rich, moldy, brownish-grey rind and an intensely hay-yellow curd. It is crumbly as opposed to industrial Cheddar that must be cut with a knife. The texture is firm yet buttery, and the curd can have flavors of caramelized milk, hazelnut and bitter herbs. For some, traditional Cheddar has a stronger, earthier and

perhaps more intense flavor that is a result of the earth, the soil, the water, the grass and the cows themselves. When combined, they produce a plethora of flavor profiles.

Great English Cheddar can stand up to even the best wheels of French, Italian or American cheeses, and it is an excellent addition to a cheese course or board. But what to drink with it? When pairing cheese and wine, you must be careful that the depth of flavor in the wine doesn't wash out the flavor of the cheese. Some prefer white wine with cheese because of the low tannins. You could even pair one that has a hint of sweetness to it, perhaps a lightly sweet Riesling.

The combination of sparkling wine and cheese is one that never gets old, and pairing a bottle of not overly dry Champagne, excellent crisp Prosecco or Franciacorta would be a lovely addition. If your tendency is more toward the red, finding a Cabernet Sauvignon on the less forceful side would be nice, perhaps one that isn't overly oaked. If in doubt do as the British do, and pour yourself a real ale.



We left Mary's farm early the next morning for the long drive back to London. Along the route we passed Stonehenge, the ancient circle of stones, and pulled into the visitor center overlooking the site. We ate an impromptu lunch of fresh bread, a thick slice of English Cheddar from Mary and a crisp apple. With the windows down, the cold air blew through the car, smelling of earth and dampness. A few small robins

bobbed around outside, looking for seeds and crumbs. As we sat and ate, tasting the flavor of the cheese, the crunch of the bread, the sweetness of the apple, we realized that the taste of the cheese not only matched the land and the atmosphere, but also allowed us a glimpse into the past, at the ways in which gastronomes of long ago must have enjoyed such a flavorful and rare delicacy. CC

PT REYES

Two recipes, two takes on the classics. First, Gnocchi alla Romana, a dish from Rome that is baked in the oven covered in cheese. It is hearty, wholesome and comforting, and a dish your guests might not recognize as having such traditional Italian roots. Second, apple pie with Cheddar baked into the crust. It gives it a great saltiness, with a good Cheddar flavor that goes so well with the apples.



GNOCHI ALLA ROMANA

Serves 3-4

2 eggs, lightly beaten
 Scant 1 cup semolina flour
 2 cups milk
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup good English Cheddar, cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ inch pieces
 Salt and pepper, to taste
 4 Tbsp unsalted butter
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup grated English Cheddar, for topping
 Fresh chives, minced (optional)

- Before you begin, dampen or spray a baking tray with some water and set aside until ready to use.
- In a deep saucepan over medium heat, whisk the eggs with the flour until well combined. Slowly add the milk and the cheese, and allow to melt. Add salt and pepper to taste. Keep stirring the mixture for about 15 minutes or until it becomes very dense — it should be thicker than your average mashed potatoes. Turn the mixture out onto the damp tray, and pat it down using a spatula to a thickness of about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch. Allow to cool completely.
- Meanwhile, preheat your oven to 350° F. Prepare an ovenproof pan with cubes of a third of the butter. Once the mixture is cool, cut out the gnocchi using a round cookie cutter or a glass, and arrange in layers in the buttered pan. Tuck a few more cubes of butter between the gnocchi and top with the rest of the butter and the grated Cheddar cheese. Bake for about 15 to 20 minutes or until golden. Garnish with fresh chives (optional). Serve hot.

CHEDDAR CRUST APPLE PIE

For the Crust:

2 cups all-purpose flour
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp salt
 2 cups coarsely grated English Cheddar
 Scant 2/3 cup unsalted butter, chilled
 6 to 7 Tbsp cold water
 2 Tbsp milk, for brushing
 Butter to grease pie pan

For the Filling:

5 or 6 good baking apples
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup cane sugar
 1 Tbsp lemon juice
 3 Tbsp all purpose flour
 1 tsp cinnamon
 Pinch of salt

- In a food processor, add the flour, salt and grated cheese, and blend until combined. Add the chilled butter cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ inch cubes and pulse until incorporated — the mixture will now look like coarse crumbs. At this point add the water, one tablespoon at a time, while still pulsing between each addition. Blend until the dough comes together into a ball. Divide the dough into two parts, and then flatten each portion into a disk 6 inches in diameter. Wrap both in plastic and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes.

- In the meantime, prepare the filling. Peel the apples, cut into quarters, remove the core and cut into thin slices. Place in a large bowl with the sugar, lemon juice, flour, cinnamon and salt, and give a good stir so the apple slices are evenly seasoned. Set aside to rest until ready to use.

- Remove the dough from the refrigerator. On a floured surface, roll out the first disk to a thickness of 3 millimeters or 3/32 inch. Transfer it on to a buttered pie pan and pat it down to allow the dough to adhere to the pan. Fill with the sliced apple mixture, and then roll out the second disk and place it over the apples. Trim the excess dough, and then press the edges so they stick together.

- Preheat the oven to 375° F. Using a sharp blade, make three small cuts in the top layer. Brush the top with milk and bake for about 30 minutes. If the top of your pie browns too quickly, place a layer of foil over it.

- Remove from the oven and allow to cool till room temperature before serving.