

## BRITISH CHEESE – A BRIEF HISTORY

B.V. Avarvarei, C.E. Nistor

University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine from Iași, Romania  
e-mail: bogdan\_avarvarei@yahoo.com

### Abstract

Britain is not only beer, fish and chips or the fabulous English breakfast but also England means cheese and are over 700 assortments of it. The regions of England have their own specialty cheeses, made by locals, with milk from local animals, reared on local pastures. The addition of beer, whisky, herbs, honey and other locally-sourced goodies helps to define regional cheeses. The goal of the current paper is to present to the potential Romanian consumer some facts, data, characteristics and history of some famous British cheeses. These include the six varieties of Cheddar (mild, medium, mature, vintage, Farmhouse and West Country), regional variations (Caerphilly, Cheshire, Derby, Double Gloucester, Lancashire, Red Leicester, Stilton and Wensleydale) and speciality cheeses (such as Cornish Yarg, Shropshire Blue, Somerset). Therefore our advice is “British cheese – yes please”!

**Key words:** British cheese, characteristics, history

The aim of the paper is to present some facts regarding British cheese and to tell to the future potential consumers some characteristics of them. The British Cheese Board states that there are over 700 named British cheeses produced in the UK. In figure 1 is presented the map of British cheese producers. The regions of England have their own specialty cheeses, made by locals, with milk from local animals, reared on local pastures. The addition of beer, whisky, herbs, honey and other locally-sourced goodies helps to define regional cheeses. So we will just pick up some British cheeses to be presented.

**Blue Stilton Cheese** “The King of English Cheeses” - can only be made in Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire from locally produced milk which is pasteurised before use. Most Stilton is made with non-animal rennet and is suitable for vegetarians. The cheese can only be made in a cylindrical shape, is never pressed and is allowed to form its own coat or crust. As with many other blue cheeses *penicillium roqueforti* blue mould is added to the milk which is activated once the cheese has been formed by piercing the cheese with stainless steel needles; this allows oxygen to enter the body of the cheese. The blue

veining develops in the tiny cracks and fissures in the cheese which having not been pressed has a slightly open texture. It is characterised by the delicate blue veining radiating from the centre of the cheese and its creamy mellow flavour.



Fig. 1 Map of British cheese (courtesy of BBC News)

The cheese is typically sold at between 9 and 12 weeks of age. A recipe for Stilton cheese was published in a newsletter by Richard Bradley in 1723 but no details were given on its size or shape or for how long it was matured. In 1724 Daniel Defoe commented in his "Tour through the villages of England & Wales" of Stilton being "famous for cheese" and referred to the cheese as being the "English Parmesan". A later article by John Lawrence in 1726 suggested that the perfect Stilton should be "about 7 inches in diameter, 8 inches in height and 18 lbs in weight." Thus, it seems that some of the cheese being produced in the area was cylindrical and of a comparable size to that being made today. With the development of the coaching trade, the town soon became a trading post between London and Edinburgh for many commodities and it is known that one of the innkeepers in the town, turned this to his advantage by first selling the local cheese, not only to passing travellers but also into London. No one person invented Stilton – it evolved over time from this pressed cream cheese, (some of which may have been blue), to the cheese we have today - an un-pressed semi hard blue veined cheese. Cooper Thornhill and Frances Pawlett were responsible for the successful commercialisation of Stilton Cheese and the further development of a recipe that is the forerunner of today's Stilton. Others have a claim to playing an important role, including Lady Beaumont who it is claimed made Stilton cheese for her own family use in the 17<sup>th</sup> century; Mrs Orton, (a farmer's wife from Little Dalby) is claimed to have made the first Stilton cheeses in Leicestershire in 1730; and it wasn't until 1759 that Shuckburgh Ashby, owner of Quenby Hall, set up a commercial agreement to produce Stilton cheese for sale.

**White Stilton** - like its Blue brother, can only be made in Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire from locally produced milk which must be pasteurised before use. It can only be produced in a cylindrical shape and is never pressed. It has a crumbly, open texture with a fresh, creamy background flavour and is best eaten when young at 3 or 4 weeks of age. Is widely used by blended cheese makers

as its crumbly texture and creamy flavour compliment both savoury and sweet additions.

**Caerphilly** - originally produced in the South Wales town of the same name, Caerphilly has a recipe similar to those for other crumbly cheeses – Cheshire, young Lancashire and Wensleydale. Being close to the great mining towns of South Wales the young cheese was a firm favourite amongst mining communities as its shallow height and tough coat made it easy to eat with dirty hands down the mines whilst its salty, moist curd helped to replace the minerals lost during the hours spent labouring under ground. Its more mature variant (often kept for up to a year) formed its own tough coat and gradually became harder in texture and stronger in taste with age. There are few traditionally shaped Caerphilly cheeses made today, and only one producer in South Wales. Most Caerphilly is made by the specialist crumbly cheese makers in Lancashire, Cheshire and Shropshire, generally in block form but sometimes in shallow wheels for supermarket pre-packs. This cheese tends to be young, fresh and clean tasting with a pleasant tang.

**Cheddar** - probably the most consumed cheese in the world, Cheddar originated from Somerset around the late 12<sup>th</sup> century and took its name from the Gorge or caves in the town of Cheddar that were used to store the cheese. The constant temperature and humidity of the caves provided a perfect environment for maturing the cheese. The town also gave its name to a unique part of the cheesemaking process (known as Cheddaring) which is the process 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. The process helps to create a harder cheese with firm body and is unique to Cheddar making.

Cheddar making in Somerset goes back more than 800 years with records from the King of England's accounts noting that in 1170 the King purchased 10,240 lbs (4.6 tonnes) of Cheddar cheese at a cost of a farthing a pound. The king at the time (Henry II) declared Cheddar cheese to be the best in Britain and his son Prince John (who reigned between 1199 and 1216) clearly thought the same as there are

records of him continuing to buy the cheese for the great Royal banquets. In the reign of Charles I (1625 to 1649) parliamentary records show that the cheese made in Cheddar was sold before it was even made and indeed was only available at the court. In 1724 Daniel Defoe devoted a chapter to Cheddar and its cheese in his book "A tour of the Islands of Great Britain". Cheddar uses unpasteurised milk which will tend to have rather more complex and stronger flavours, whilst others will use pasteurised milk. Cheese flavour will also vary depending on the time of year it was made and what the cows may have been eating at that time. Creamery made Cheddar is increasingly being sold at a longer age in response to changing consumer tastes for tastier cheese. These more mature (extra mature or vintage) Cheddars tend to have a characteristic sweet, nutty flavour with a very long finish. Mild Cheddar remains popular as an every day cheese and is characterised by a gentle, creamy flavour and has the added advantage of slicing easily. So whatever your preference there will be a Cheddar for you depending on its age, how it was made, where it was made and the time of year that it was made.

**Cheshire Cheese** - is sold at different ages and like all cheese, as it matures, its taste and texture will develop. Young Cheshire is naturally bright and white in colour. It is a firm bodied cheese with a crumbly texture that breaks down easily in the mouth. It has a mild, milky taste and aroma and is clean on the palate with a very slightly tangy finish. A red vegetable dye (annatto) is sometimes added to the milk to produce "coloured" Cheshire. Despite the difference in colour the taste and texture of the cheese is the same as its white cousin. As Cheshire matures so it becomes firmer in texture and slightly darker in colour. The flavours become more complex but the cheese remains clean tasting with no hint of bitterness. The crumbly texture remains but the cheese has a drier mouth feel. Blue Cheshire is also produced whereby an edible blue mould is added to the milk or the freshly made curd. The cheese is then sealed with cloth or other wrapping material and at about 5 weeks of age the cheese is pierced with stainless steel needles to allow air to enter the

body of the cheeses. This activates the blue mould which then proceeds to break down the protein in the cheese and create the blue veins. Romans brought cheese making into what is now Cheshire via their stronghold at Chester - so named after the Latin for fort (castra) and the old English for town or city (ceaster). "Chestershire" later became abbreviated to Cheshire. Camden's *Britannia* - originally published in Latin in 1586 and subsequently enlarged and revised - was translated into English by P Holland in 1616 and recorded that "Cheshire Cheese is more agreeable and better relished than those of other parts of the kingdom". The 1637 edition refers to cheese making in Cheshire: "the grasse and fodder there is of that goodness and vertue that the cheeses bee made heere in great number of a most pleasing and delicate taste, such as all England againe affordeth not the like; no, though the best dairy women otherwise and skilfullest in cheesemaking be had from hence." Cheshire cheese was originally the generic name for cheese produced in the county and parts of surrounding counties as later in the century the cheese was shipped in large quantities into London from Chester. There were probably many different types of Cheshire Cheese but until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cheeses would have been aged and hard. In 1823 Cheshire cheese production was estimated at 10,000 tonnes a year.

**Cornish Yarg** - is alleged to be the new name for the recipe of cheese produced many years ago by a Cornish dairy farmer by the name of Gray. The Horrells who discovered this recipe decided a new Cornish sounding name was required and decided on Yarg - a reversal of the letters of the name of the former owner. Yarg is a unique cheese for although it follows a Wensleydale style recipe it differs in a number of ways. It is a smaller size than a traditional Wensleydale, it has nettle leaves wrapped around it after it has come out of the cheese press, and finally it is given a light spraying of *penicillium candidum* white mould to help give the cheese its unique appearance and flavour. Both the leaves and the white mould add an interesting dimension to the cheese. Yarg is defined as a semi-hard cheese is deliciously creamy under the rind

and slightly crumbly in the core. It has a young, fresh, slightly tangy taste.

**Derby** - is produced exclusively on farms and is typically sold at a younger age than its more famous cousins Cheddar and Cheshire. Its claim to fame is that the first creamery in the UK was set up by a group of farmers in the village of Longford in Derbyshire – the farmers having agreed to pool their milk and have the cheese made on a larger scale. In many respects Derby is similar to Cheddar but has softer body (it doesn't go through the Cheddaring process) and slightly higher moisture content. When young it is springy and mild but as it matures subtle sweet flavours develop and the texture becomes firmer. Fowlers Forest Dairy in Warwickshire are one of the few producers of a traditional drum shaped cheese and they claim to be the oldest cheese making family in the UK being able to trace their roots back to family members who were making cheese in Derbyshire in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

**Gloucester** - there are two types of Gloucester cheese (Double and Single). Various stories exist as to how the two cheeses differ. Was it due to the double skimming required of milk from Gloucester cows (cream rose slowly therefore had to be done twice)? Was it related to the size of the cheese? Was it the fact that Double had cream added taken from the morning' milk and added to the evening milk for making? Was it because Single Gloucester was half the size of a Double Gloucester? Single Gloucester used to be made from the partially skimmed milk remaining and as such was made smaller than the standard 20 inch wide and 5 inches high Double Gloucester. Singles were typically the same diameter but about half the height. Maybe it is a combination of these factors and clearly demonstrated the difference between the two (by size and flavour). Whereas the Double Gloucester was a prized cheese comparable in quality to the best Cheddar or Cheshire, and was exported out of the County, Single Gloucester tended to be consumed within the County. The cheese is still made in the traditional shape using the traditional method and skills. After the addition of starter culture and rennet to the milk, the curds are

cut and scalded at a temperature of 32-35°C with the whey for 20-30 minutes. The whey is then drained away leaving the curd which is milled and salted. The cheese is then moulded and mechanically pressed for up to 5 days and is ready for consumption at around 2 months. Single Gloucester was sometimes known as the haymaker's cheese; as it was matured for a short time it was ready for eating by farm labourers during the haymaking season. Double Gloucester cheese is made in many parts of the UK both on farms and in large dairies. It has a characteristic light orange hue given by the addition of annatto to the milk. This has been a traditional characteristic of the cheese since the 16<sup>th</sup> century when producers of inferior cheese used a colouring agent to replicate the orange hue achieved by the best cheesemakers who were probably making the cheese from the evening's milking to which was added the separated cream of the morning's milking. During the summer months the high levels of carotene in the grass would have given the milk an orangey colour which was carried through into the cheese. This orange hue was regarded as an indicator of the best cheese. Double Gloucester is made in traditional wheels with a natural rind on some farms whilst in larger dairies it would be made in 20 kg blocks which make the cheese ideal for pre-packing. Flavour levels depend on the age of the cheese. As it matures Double Gloucester becomes very hard and this may be one of the reasons why it is associated with the annual cheese rolling event at Cooper's Hill in Gloucester. Most Double Gloucester is sold at about 4 months of age and has a firm close texture and a clean mellow, creamy or buttery flavour. Older cheeses will develop more complex and nutty flavours.

**Lancashire** - at one time everyone in Lancashire ate Lancashire Cheese and almost all farms in the county made it in one form or another. Evidence suggests that cheese was being made in Lancashire from the 13<sup>th</sup> century; however the style, texture and taste is unlikely to be what we recognise as Lancashire cheese today. Each farmer's wife would use the surplus milk from their farm to produce cheese that would sustain their family and supplement their household income. Historical records show

Lancashire cheese was being transported by boat to London from Liverpool in the 1600's. Then in approximately 1890 a Lancashire County Council employee named Joseph Gornall began visiting all the farms in Lancashire, observing the cheese making activity and giving practical advice on production and method. His aim was to standardise Lancashire Cheese production across the county and create a formal recipe and method - one that is still used to this day. Back in the 1890's Lancashire farms tended to be small holdings and farmers often did not have enough surplus milk to make a whole cheese. So without refrigeration the best way of keeping surplus milk was to turn it into curd and store it overnight at room temperature. This curd was then mixed with the curd from the following day and in some cases blended again with the day after. This traditional method is unique to Lancashire Cheese and is still adhered to by Lancashire cheese makers today. It is also the reason why Traditional Lancashire Cheese, which is known and Creamy and Tasty Lancashire, has such a rich buttery flavour and when melted gives a smooth and even consistency. Creamy Lancashire cheese is matured for between 4 and 12 weeks. Anything that is matured for longer is classified as Tasty Lancashire. Tasty Lancashire can be aged for up to 24 months. Crumbly Lancashire is a more recent creation and is the style of Lancashire Cheese that is better known outside of the region. **Leicestershire cheese** - has evolved over many years with similar characteristics to those of hard cheeses made in other parts of England. It is sometimes described as a cross between Cheshire and Cheddar – and certainly as the County sits between the Northern and Southern Counties it is not surprising that Leicestershire's county cheese bore some resemblance to the two main cheese types produced in England. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century annatto was being routinely used as a colouring agent. The cheese factors, who bought some of the Leicestershire cheese directly from the farms, were often the suppliers of the annatto so ensuring an even, and consistently, coloured cheese.

**Leicestershire Blue Cheese** - this cheese was made almost by chance in the same

farmhouses that were making the standard Leicestershire Cheese. The crusts of these cheeses would crack and allow environmental moulds to enter the body of the cheese. As the cheese stores were generally old barns or stables and might well have been storing Stilton – which was often made on the same farm - with plenty of leather harnesses and saddles about, there tended to be naturally occurring *penicillium roqueforti* blue moulds in the atmosphere; it was these that give the cheese its blue veins. Air is allowed to enter the body of the cheese by piercing it with stainless steel needles at around 6 weeks of age rather than relying on naturally occurring cracks in the coat of the cheese process. Leicestershire Blue cheese being shipped to the London market in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Red Leicester** - what we call “Red Leicester” cheese today was formerly known as “Leicestershire Cheese” – named like so many of traditional cheeses after the County from which it originated. The cheese can be traced back to 17<sup>th</sup> century and the style of cheese was much influenced by cheesemaking practices in other parts of England – notably the South West and the North West. Farmers recognised the need to make their cheeses look and if possible taste different from cheese made in other parts of the country and the convention of colouring cheese with annatto, a vegetable dye derived from the husk of the fruit of the annatto tree found in South America and the Caribbean – spread from Gloucester and Cheshire to Leicestershire.

**Shropshire Blue** - has never been made in Shropshire but started out as a Scottish attempt to replicate Stilton cheese but with a subtle twist of adding annatto to the milk. The result is a soft textured, mellow, blue cheese with a glorious contrast of colours between the orange hue of the curd and the delicate blue veins. Now is made exclusively in the East Midlands.

**Wensleydale** - has been made in Wensleydale since 1150, when the Cistercian monks first settled in the dale, and established a monastery at Fors. Some years later the monks moved, because of hostile natives and inclement weather, to Jervaulx in

Lower Wensleydale. These French Cistercian monks brought with them their special recipe for the making of cheese, which continued to be produced at Jervaulx until the dissolution of the Monasteries in 1540. The cheese was made originally from sheep's milk but over time cows' milk was also used. The art of making fine cheese, which the monks had developed, was passed from the Monks to local farmers' wives who, for more than three hundred years, produced the cheese in their own farmhouses. Often the cheese came out as a blue cheese. In 1897 Mr Edward Chapman, a corn and provisions merchant of Hawes, began to purchase milk from surrounding farms to use for the manufacture of Wensleydale cheese on a larger scale.

**Blue Wensleydale** - is also produced as well as traditional Wensleydale cheese made from sheep's milk.

**Beacon Blue** - is a blue goats' milk cheese.

**Blacksticks Blue** - has a distinctive orange colour derived from the addition of annatto to the milk and is reminiscent in texture and flavour of a number of continental blues.

**Blue Vinney and Dorset Blue** - made only in Dorset and is a close relative of Dorset Blue Vinney. Both are reduced fat blue cheeses made from partially skimmed milk so that they tend to be harder than other blue cheeses. They are similar in size to Stilton but have a very different flavour (being sharper), less creamy and as they age become very hard indeed - like most lower fat semi hard cheeses.

**Buxton Blue** - is a cousin of Blue Stilton. It is lightly veined and has a wonderful deep russet colouring that hints at the very special tang of its flavour. This cheese can only be made in the environs of Buxton from milk produced in Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Staffordshire. Has a similar appearance and taste as Shropshire Blue.

**Chevington** - is made from locally produced Jersey milk. It is made in shallow wheels weighing around 5lbs and is matured for between 10 and 12 weeks. The Jersey milk adds a deep yellow colour to the curd and the cheese has a mild creamy flavour inside a hard, knobbly coat.

**Cheviot** - is a hard pressed, wheel shaped cheese that is matured for up to 9 months and yields smooth, moist buttery cheese.

**Coquetdale** - is a wheel shaped cheese with a semi soft texture and a rich, complex, almost fruity flavour reminiscent of the mould ripened monastery cheeses of mainland Europe.

**Cornish Blue** - is a flat wheel shaped cheese which is pierced from the top and bottom to help the blue mould do its work. When ripe it has a gentle, creamy flavour and a soft texture reminiscent of a number of Continental blues.

**Dovedale** - is a sumptuous, creamy soft, mild blue cheese. Most British cheeses are dry salted, however Dovedale is brine dipped to add the salt giving it a distinctive continental appearance and flavour.

**Garstang Blue** - follows the traditional Lancashire cheese making process but the curd is sprayed with *penicillium roqueforti* blue mould before being salted and placed into hoops for light pressing. At around 6 weeks of age the cheese is pierced with stainless steel needles to allow air to enter the body of the cheese and so help to create the blue mould. Mild, smooth and incredibly creamy this is a wonderful addition to the range of British Blue cheeses now being made.

**Gevrik** - is a baby cheese, having a white bloomy mould and is a close relation of Camembert. Made from goats' milk it is brilliant white in colour and when fully mature has a rich flavour and runny texture.

**Hereford Hop** - are produced several versions - one made from raw milk and one from pasteurised milk. The cheese is coated in lightly toasted hops which with their slightly bitter taste contrast sharply with the creaminess and slight sweetness of the cheese. Not made in Hereford but in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire.

**Kidderton Ash** - created by Katy Hollinshead at Raven's Oak Dairy in Cheshire, the soft curds from their goat's milk are ladled by hand into individual moulds and gently drained. Then dusts these with food ash and leaved them to slowly ripen, as a silky white mould coat blooms through the ash. An outstanding coat's cheese with a delicate yet distinctive creamy flavour.

**Northumberland** - it has a springy texture and when sold young has a mild creamy taste. As it ages so the texture becomes firmer and the flavour more complex.

**Parlick Fell** - named after a local landmark in the heart of the Singleton's Dairy cheese making territory, this very popular ewe's milk cheese has a semi-soft, crumbly texture and tangy flavour with a nice touch of salt and a lingering finish. It has a characteristic brilliant white colour.

**Redesdale** - is a sweet, subtle tasting sheep's cheese. It has a rich, velvety texture, clean characteristic taste and refreshing tang.

**Sage Derby** – is made to the same recipe as Derby, and it is one of England's oldest and most famous cheeses but one that is increasingly difficult to find. The traditional way of making Sage Derby – still exploited by Fowlers Forest Dairy - was to part fill the cheese mould with freshly milled and salted Derby curd, then add a sprinkling of fresh sage and finally add another layer of milled, salted curd. The cheese is then pressed and allowed to mature for up to 6 months. In some cases the outer coat is also dusted with sage.

**Swaledale Cheese and Swanledale Ewes Cheese** - has been produced in the Dales for 500 years or more and in texture and taste not unsurprisingly is similar to Wensleydale which is produced in the neighbouring dale. Swaledale and Swanledale Ewes Cheese are both Protected Designations of Origin – the difference being that Swaledale is made from local cows' milk and the Ewes' version from locally produced sheep milk.

**Village Greeb** - is a cheddar style cheese made from goat's milk. Its name reflects the green wax coating applied to every cheese. Sold at various ages between 3 months and 18 months, it has a brilliant white colour and sweet nutty flavour that becomes more pronounced as it ages. If you thought you didn't like goat's cheese then this is the one that might change your mind!

**West Country Goats Cheese** - made to a similar recipe to Village Green, this tends to be a younger cheese and is devoid of the green wax coat seen on Village Green.

**Whitehaven** - made from locally produced goat's milk, is a white mould soft cheese, brine-salted and then sprayed with *penicillium candidum* white mould. The curd - as with most goats' cheese - is brilliant white which softens as it ripens from the outside in. It has a mild flavour in which only those with very sensitive taste buds could claim to detect the flavour associated with goat's milk.

## CONCLUSIONS

Cheese is the oldest and most natural way of preserving milk, with evidence suggesting that cheese making was first introduced in the UK over 2000 years ago. The skills were passed down through the farming community and today cheese is still made on the farm or in large factories known as creameries.

There are over 700 varieties of British cheese currently available in the UK. These include the six varieties of Cheddar (mild, medium, mature, vintage, Farmhouse and West Country), regional variations (Caerphilly, Cheshire, Derby, Double Gloucester, Lancashire, Red Leicester, Stilton and Wensleydale) and speciality cheeses (such as Cornish Yarg, Shropshire Blue, Somerset).

Therefore our advice is “British cheese – yes please”.

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