



United by Cheese

Where is Europe's cheese capital and has it moved during recent years? **Louise Miles** asks retailers why origin is so important and how they capitalise on it

European Cheeses

The subject of European cheese brings together an abundance of ideas, recipes and indeed cultures. It seems the traditional ties with France, Holland and Italy are still very much prevalent, but now there are a few more competitors on the horizon including Britain, Spain and Eastern Europe. It appears the home of cheese has led to a mass debate and the destination of choice depends very much on the individual.

Throughout history there have been some very strong arguments to suggest Somerset is the European capital of cheese. Especially since King Henry II declared Cheddar to be his favourite cheese and in one year bought over 10,000 pounds! Even in the 21st century, producers such as Wyke Farms based in Somerset are still competing for the 'big cheese' title. After successfully securing sales of £70 million during 2009, it has proved Cheddar's worth by selling its award winning Cheddar to France, and across the globe to Australia, Morocco, Dubai, United States.

Backing Britain?

David Greenman, manager of Arch House Deli in Bristol believes British is still the best and is keen to promote it as much as he can. "In our shop, our main focus is on British cheeses because there are so many available now. There was a time when there was barely any, but now there is so much choice. We predominately stock local cheeses and are keen supporters of cheeses such as Rachel's and Wickmore from

Berkshire. I also stock Welsh cheeses such as Ponga Blue, Irish varieties such as smoked Ardrahan and Blue Monday which is produced in Scotland. I would say Britain is the new 'capital' because we now have so much variety, I could easily fill my fridge ten times over with British cheese! However, when I rotate my range I often try and bring in three new types every month to suit the season."

Steven Charles of Madame Fromage in Cardiff thinks Britain has to develop a bit further before it can be named the 'land' of cheese. "In Britain, there are a lot of top quality producers, but we still sell a lot of processed cheese, and we could do better soft cheeses. Other countries have the advantage of better weather and makers must find it harder to compete. I would say Scotland and Ireland are producing some very good cheeses, but outside of these countries, I think it is harder to compete on an international level. I think the same problem occurs in terms of British wine production too," he says.

Whilst the promotion of British cheeses and local produce is extremely important in this industry, alternative varieties can really enhance your range and hopefully pull in more custom. Educating customers about the different varieties is essential to steer sales away from 'supermarket Cheddar' and entice cheese lovers into your shop.

Mr Charles prefers promoting the often understated Spanish

European cheeses

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cheeses to his customers. “I think in terms of production, the home of cheese is still France. But in terms of personal opinion, I like Spanish exports because they make quite a few tasty cheeses including Manchego, Laberca which is coated in Rosemary, the Spanish goat’s cheese - Murcia al Vino and also Can Pujol which is a creamier and tangy goat’s cheese. I am also keen on the blues including Cabrales Blue.”

To increase awareness of Spanish cheeses in-store, host a Spanish-themed cheese week and encourage customers to step out of their comfort zone and try something different. Offer an array of samples but try to stick to the more subtle flavours initially. The flavour of Manchego for example varies quite significantly depending on age. From mild to tangy, there is a taste to suit most palates, however mild is a safer call to begin. When discussing cheeses such as Manchego bring to light its many uses; since it can be used in salads, rice dishes and melted into soups.

Go nuts for Nordic

Most retailers have heard of Jarlesberg, but not many have considered stocking Grevé, Präst or Svecia? These are some of the oldest Nordic cheeses available on the market and some even hold Protected Designation of Origin status. Although Nordic cheeses aren’t that well-known in the UK, the region has an extensive cheese-making tradition. Svecia, for example is Sweden’s oldest cheese, first developed in the 12th Century, it has a rustic, salty and quite unique taste. Most people enjoy Svecia on its own, or with a thin crispbread and a glass of full-bodied red.

Another Nordic favourite, Präst meaning priest was first developed in the 15th century and is powerful, yet creamy. It is delicious paired with rye bread, but also grated over seafood pasta or in a gratin. G revé, developed in the 1960s has similarities with Emmental but with more character, as well as a harmonic, lingering after taste. Sweet and nutty, most love it on the cheese board, melted in potato mash or on toast, topped with a slice of cucumber.

“ These cheeses have great stories, but it will take time for them to establish themselves fully in the UK. Cheese is very like wine, the more customers try, more educated they become. But with the arrival of TV programmes and books like Jamie Does... Stockholm, customers will hopefully start incorporating

these cheeses into their recipes and realise there is more to Sweden than flat-packed furniture! Offer people the chance to try the flavour first by having lots of samples in-store. This will help spread the word,” says Erika Eklundh, partner of Malmo Nordic Dining.

Karen Rippon, partner of Rippon Cheese Shop also reveals how stocking Nordic cheeses can boost your profits. “The nice thing about these cheeses is customers buy a kilo at a time rather than 250 grams. People from Holland, Sweden and Denmark eat cheese in bigger quantities than we do and tend to have it for breakfast, lunch and dinner. As a result we get a combination of customers who have lived or worked there and want the same products in the UK,” she says.

East is east

Originally sourced for home-sick customers, the growth of Polish cheeses in the UK has been phenomenal, and with the development of the European Union, ranges will only expand. Broniek Korwin-Kamienski of Broniek’s Delicatessen in Ealing explains the different varieties retailers can stock. “Mostly the indigenous cheeses are of a Dutch style because there are a lot of white and cream cheeses which are mainly local and rural.

“ There is a very popular cheese called Oscypek, which is sourced from the Tarta Polish mountains, it is a smoked cheese and is made in a mould. It normally features elaborate decorations and is often served as a hot starter with cranberry sauce or sweet jam. There is also a cheese that is very similar to Cheddar which is elaborately decorated,” he says.

The focus on Polish cheese seems to be on the fancy designs and patterns so a clean, well-lit display case is essential to highlight these products.

Most customers will expect to sample wine and cheese together, however when selling Czech cheese, there needs to be a good supply of beer. The Pivní sýr is known as ‘beer cheese’ because you should add a splash of beer to the cheese, and then mash it all together, and serve it on traditional Czech bread.

Other Czech classics include the Pivní sýr — a soft cheese, with a strong, Cheddar-like flavour. Nakládany Hermelin, another popular variety — is a pickled, Brie-like cheese which is often marinated with garlic and chilli. To help sell these products, allow customers to have a taster of these unknown varieties. Offering a thimble of beer



alongside will help people customers fully appreciate the flavours and embrace the traditions. Maybe strike a deal with a local brewery to promote their beer on the same day as the tasters?

In terms of origin awareness, Mr Charles puts forward a strong argument for a need to educate

customers about European cheese.

“ There needs to be a better understanding as some people are so fickle and don’t realise cheeses are different in terms of maturity. They often generalise cheese. I’ve had people come in and say they recently bought Somerset a Cheddar

from a supermarket, but they do not realise there are lots of different types. Cheese is comparable to wine because there are so many varieties and so much knowledge surrounding this subject,” he concludes.

THE FACTS

- The Romans enjoyed the process of cheese-making so much they created a book entitled De re rustica (circa 65 CE) which was devoted to the art of pressing, salting and ageing.
- Shockingly, between January and June last year the UK imported 62,003 tons of Cheddar compared with 48,633 in the same period the year before*
- British cheeses such as Stilton, Single Gloucester, Dovedale and Swaledale cheeses all have Protected Origin of Status (PDO) stamps.
- Cheese is purchased by more than 98% of British households
- The average person eats about 30 grams of cheese per day