

# cheese wire

## cheeses of the month

### Smoked cheese

It was a smoked cheese that first introduced me to a lifelong passion. On each school day, my mother packed a small sausage-shaped Austrian smoked cheese in my lunch box. It was love at first sight. So much so, I would often steal the one from my brother's lunch too.

Smoked cheese, like kippers, you either love or loathe: there's no middle ground. Personally, I've rarely come across a top-notch cheese that is the better for a touch of smoke although a clever bit of smoking often saves a moribund wedge from total disaster. For a sausage-shaped, dull, processed Emmental from Austria, smoking is the road to Damascus.

Which may account for hundreds of factory cheddars that resort to fumes of burning whisky barrels or apple or oak chips to enhance doubtful credentials. A little harsh, maybe, but the insults I am thrown each year when World Cheese Awards judges are given the task of tasting a dozen smoked varieties suggests these cheeses are best taken in small doses.

I own a small library of cheese books, some dating back more than a century. None mentions smoking cheese, which might suggest it's a recent development – possibly dating from the early 1960s. Not so, because in Spain, Italy or even the colder climes of Eastern Europe, they've had a crack at smoking most foods, including cheese, for centuries.

Traditionally, smoking was a preservative – a means of keeping fish or meat long periods in days before refrigerators. For cheese, mostly it wasn't necessary because cheese is itself a means of preserving protein for times of the year when milk yields fall away.

These days, in Britain at least, we smoke cheese to add depth of flavour – which gives rise to the belief that makers might be guilty of disguising poor quality products. "Not true," they cry and who would accuse the Appleby family of such a crime? Their farmhouse Cheshire, made using unpasteurised milk from their own dairy herd, is pedigree stuff: delicate, lemony notes, a hint of salt and great complexity. Why disguise it in smoke?

Smoking adds a fresh dimension that introduces a cheese to a wider audience. It metamorphoses into an entirely different cheese, although getting the level of smoke right is no simple task. Unlike fish, cheese is dense, and achieving an even smoke through the solid paste without drying it out is a slow, skilled process. The first smoked Real



Appleby's selects a milder Cheshire for its smoked version. It removes the calico from the cheese and smokes over oak wood chips for 3-7 days, dependent on weather conditions

Yorkshire Wensleydale I tasted a few years back delivered an intensive smoky flavour on the outside but revealed a dry, cracked interior devoid of any real taste. Many artisan cheese-makers realise smoking is a task best performed by a specialist and will effectively sub-contract the process. Mr. Moyden's handmade Newport cheese is smoked 'up the road' by Alan Ball, who uses oak chips to slowly smoke a product that retains its melting butter taste.

That's the secret: cheese must be cold smoked, a long, gentle process that takes anything from six hours to four or five days. A Wensleydale is smoked whole over oak and hardwood chips for up to 24 hours but a traditional Cheshire is sliced into four wheels, each approximately 7-8cm tall, before smoking over oak bark chippings.

The cheese rind darkens in the smoke, generally turning a rich golden, occasionally chestnut brown and if the smokers know their craft, the paste remains moist, slowly developing a richer, more

pronounced flavour. A whole traditional cheddar will often be cut into as many as 16 wedges of equal size for six hours of smoking over oak or apple wood chips, whereas the rindless Olde Sussex is first matured for three months then slowly smoked for four days before a further two months' maturation deepens flavour.

Some argue the cheeses that lend themselves best to smoking are the milder types, those more typical of our regional territorials. A gentle unsmoked Caerphilly from Caws Cenarth is a treasure but its eating qualities intensify after smoking,

and Kirkhams Lancashire, handmade in the centuries-old manner, assumes a quite different character after a spell over burning wood.

I've noticed an increasing number of extra mature and even vintage cheddars from smaller, artisan smokers such as The Weald Smokery, Brown & Forrest and Suffolk Smokehouse & Deli. Mary Quickes' 12-15 month farmhouse cheddar truckles already have good depth of flavour before they are cut into 1.5kg wedges and naturally smoked for 3-4 hours over oak shavings and sawdust.

Some might argue it's a waste of a cracking good West Country Cheddar. Others, those perhaps who shy away from the rich creamy acidity of Britain's favourite wedge, might disagree. A properly smoked cheddar is something more to their liking and whilst I'll never get my head, or taste buds around a smoked Stilton, smoking is generally good for cheese and for cheese sales.

● FFD publisher Bob Farrand is chairman of the UK Cheese Guild

### Bob's pick of smoked cheeses

#### Smoked cheddar:

Montgomery  
Quickes  
Cornish Cuisine  
Tower Farms (North Downs Dairy Co)  
**Newport 1665**

**Smoked Appleby**  
Kirkhams Smoked Lancashire  
Cornish Cuisine – Tesyn  
Ardrahan Smoked  
Carrigaline  
Smoked Tanatside – Shropshire  
Cheese Co



Quickes smoked cheddar

**Cornish Cuisine** – Cornish Old  
Smokey

**Bournes Oak Smoked Cheshire**

**Teifi Oak Smoked** – Teifi Farmhouse  
**Smoked Swaledale**

**Dorset Red** – Ashley Chase  
**Smoked Real Wensleydale**

– Wensleydale Dairy

**Winterdale Oak Smoked**  
– Winterdale Cheese