



FOOD

Cheese: a golden age

Is it possible to pinpoint the world's best cheese? **CHRISTOPHER HIRST** consults the experts and holds a week-long tasting

Sweeping the board Montgomery cheddar (above) earned top marks from the author and his one-woman tasting panel

FROM OOZY BRIE DE MIEUX to craggy chunks of parmesan, from the knee-weakening pong of limburg-er to the sweet sumptuousness of mascarpone, cheese has an almost limitless variety. Cheese shops and supermarkets offer a range of lactic treats that boggle the eye and bludgeon the nose. More types are within our grasp than ever before, battered wallets permitting. But which demands a place in the shopping basket?

In a wholly unscientific attempt to pinpoint the best cheese in the world, I collected samples of 30-odd nominations from chefs, food writers and cheese experts. The fragrant archipelago on our dining table made a convincing case that we are living in a golden age of handmade cheese, but a word of warning — these edible masterpieces don't come cheap. My wife returned from Neal's Yard Dairy in London with an initial haul of 21 British cheeses and a bill for £141.54. Once I'd recovered from the shock, I roped her in as tasting panel for a gruelling week of nibbling and ranking to find the top wedge.

For a classic rendition of stilton we went for Colston Bassett. I thought it was blue heaven — the sharp, clean flavour is softened by a slight mushroomy tinge — but the Tasting Panel was less taken: "It's an imposing cheese. You have to be on your best behaviour" (18 marks out of 20). Stichelton is a new stilton-type cheese but made with raw milk, not pasteurised. The

result has great finesse and deep flavour, though hardcore stilton lovers may miss some sharpness. "A variant that anyone would like," insisted the TP. "Would it put people off if I said it was a girlie stilton?" (18).

A good-looking gorgonzola piccante from Gorgonzola in Lombardy was rich and satisfying within its knobbly rind (15) but the town's dolce was so buttery and bland as to be pointless (5). These impressions were reversed by gorgonzola from neighbouring Piedmont. The dolce was sweet and zingy, delivering addictive layers of flavour (16), but the piccante was hot, aggressive and soapy (4).

Two ewe's milk cheeses represented polar extremes. Swallet from Cumbria combines a wrinkled rind, camembert-style runniness and semi-solid core. Made only from spring to autumn, it tasted sweet, light and grassy. "I loved it," said the TP. "A real sense of summer milk." (19). Berkswell from Warwickshire is a hefty, hard cheese. Within its medieval rind, the flavour is resonant and complex with, oddly enough, a hint of coconut (18).

Try before you buy is a good rule with cheese, but this is a bit tricky with époisses, the semi-soft, marc-washed cheese from Burgundy, since it comes in a circular wooden box. Though it bore a gold medal, an époisses from leading maker Berthaut had been badly stored and for too long. "An evil-looking cheese," said the TP. "A glowing, red-orange — the colour of certain fungi." Worse still, it smelled of ammonia and tasted of cabbage (3). A second époisses, made by Gaugry, was spot-on: flowing, saline, deep-flavoured (17).

A trio of relatively new blue cheeses drew great applause. Made in Lincolnshire from unpasteurised cow's milk, Cote Hill Blue is a buttery, camembert-style cheese threaded with little blue veins. The rich

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flavour steadily grows on the palate and leaves a long aftertaste (16). Beenleigh Blue from Devon is a rarity in Britain: a blue ewe's milk cheese. Within a pink-apricot rind the cheese looks like an under-ripe roquefort, but the texture is drier and the flavour less salty. "Yum," said the TP, bestowing her highest term of praise. "Let's have another slice" (17). The granddaddy of the new blues is Cashel Blue (established 1984). Voted best Irish cheese at the 2009 World Cheese Awards, it is made on a farm in Tipperary. A clean, tempting smell precedes a range of rich sensations on the palate: woody, creamy, crumbly, salty. "Less in-your-face than stilton," declared my adviser. "An Irish charmer" (18).

With its orange rind and dense texture, Saint Giles from the High Weald Dairy in West Sussex won best British cheese at the 2009 awards. "It looks like St Paulin but it is miles better," cheered the TP. "A lovely buttery taste with hints of fruit" (19). This score was matched by a cheese from slightly farther afield. Pleasant Ridge Reserve made in Dodgeville, Wisconsin, exemplifies America's growing taste for characterful cheese. Its grainy texture delivers a fusillade of satisfyingly potent flavours. "A completely happy experience from first bite to aftertaste" (19).

Farm-made English hard cheeses were the group stars of the tasting. Kirkham's Lancashire was sharp and crumbly with a delicious lemon aftertaste (18). Keen's Cheddar, a mouth-filling, earthy classic (17), was outgunned by the full richness, complexity and prodigious aftertaste of Montgomery (19). Bearing comparison to these two classics was Lincolnshire Poacher. "Really whizzes round your head," said the TP (18). Wensleydale from the Hawes Creamery was appealing and moreish – a good nibbling cheese (16), but it was edged out by a farm-made wensleydale called Richard III. This Yorkshire monarch was drier, more matured and slightly sharper on the palate (17).

Though made in County Cork, St Gall delivered Gruyère-style texture allied to impressive flavours (19). Hints of hazelnuts and fruit kept us cutting slice after slice. Mimolette from French Flanders is a monster containing a marvel. Within an amazing orange rind pocked with craters like the surface of the moon, it delivered deep, concentrated flavours that rolled round the palate and left behind the longest of all aftertastes (18).

With five cheeses scoring 19 – St Gall, St Giles, Swallet, Pleasant Ridge, Montgomery – did any merit the extra mark? A final tasting of finalists confirmed they were all sensational. But on the grounds of irresistible raid-the-fridge allure, the laurels went to Montgomery: 20 out of 20. Congratulations. ■

A SELECT SELECTION

We asked 15 chefs, writers and specialists to pick their favourite cheeses. These are some of their thoughts

Giorgio Alessio
Chef at Lanterna, Scarborough

Gorgonzola from Piedmont is extremely soft, as a true gorgonzola should be. I use it for a sauce with beef fillet, or for pasta.

Neil Forbes
Chef at Atrium, Edinburgh

It doesn't get better than a hunk of Lanark Blue – a local sheep's cheese made in spring – with honey and crusty bread or oatcakes.

Paul Gayler
Chef at the Lanesborough Hotel, London

I love an époisses, the sort that likes to get out of the fridge on its own.

Rob Kaufelt
Murray's Cheese, New York
Burrata, a hollow ball of fresh mozzarella filled with creamy uncooked curds, is unsurpassed for voluptuousness.

Rowley Leigh
Chef at Le Café Anglais, London

I adore Kirkham's Lancashire acid bite and crumbly texture. There's no need to gild the lily, either – we serve it just with apple jelly and Carr's water biscuits

Tom Parker Bowles
Presenter of "Market Kitchen"
Montgomery's cheddar – it's a magnificent creation.

Patricia Wells
Author of "The Paris Cookbook"

Trois Cornes de Vendée: a fresh, firm raw goat's milk cheese from the Poitou. With a clean, lactic tang, it is smooth and unctuous.