

Take 9,700 pints of milk, add bacteria and wait

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Will Cohu dons a hairnet and apron for a lesson in the ancient art of cheese-making - and finds that the secret's in the bugs used

I like cheese, but I never thought there was that much to the business of making it, probably because I did my fair share of cheese-making as a student. You know the form; buy a pint of milk, stick it on the window ledge, forget about it, and a couple of weeks later, voila, fromage étudiant.



Cheese: none of the student variety

For two years I've been friends with Simon Jones, a farmer and the maker of Lincolnshire Poacher cheese, but I have always declined offers to witness proceedings in his shed - due partly to my aforementioned preconceptions and partly to the starting time. Cheese-making kicks off shortly after 6am, which is when our children have generally gone to sleep for a couple of hours.

Lately, they've been sleeping better, and with no excuse, I find myself one morning, not quite perky as a dairy-maid, helping to stir a pan containing 9,700 pints of sweet, warm milk, piped straight from the Holsteins in the milking parlour, from which we are going to make half a ton of cheese.

Simon is an equally incongruous sight, a sturdy chap in hairnet and pinny. With his sleeves rolled up, he looks as if he's preparing for a showdown in the dairy. Aren't we just going to watch milk going off? "You'll be surprised," he warns. Cheese-making proves to be a process involving both physical effort and scientific precision, part wrestling match, part managed decay.

Bacteria do the initial work. Unpasteurised milk is rich in lactobacilli, which will give cheese its flavour. To grow, these require the acid environment created by lactococcus, which is introduced as a starter culture and encouraged with gentle steam heat. Like many British cheese-makers, Simon uses a French-sourced starter culture. He also adds rennet as a coagulant.

At about eight o'clock, the vat of milk quivers into solidity as curd is formed. Goodness, it's alive! There's a white cheese-creature in the pan!

After the curd is cut, there is a kind of mating dance between the cheese-maker and the cheese-creature. Simon wants the cheese to cook slowly so that the curds are "hard and squeak between your teeth". (Hard curds exclude moisture; a hard Cheddar-style cheese like Poacher needs to be fairly dry because it's going to spend 18 months maturing, and too much moisture accelerates ripening.)

The bacilli agree to form curds, but they intend to get on with it faster than the humans, and for the next hour or so we're kept busy clearing the curd-cutters, fishing lumps of curd off the sides and bottom of the tank and breaking them up so that it's all thoroughly cooked.

When the curds are floating freely in the thin green whey, the tank is drained and the curds settle into a thick white layer. These are cut into fleshy slabs and stacked to drain. By late morning, the curds are dry enough to be milled and pressed. With four of us on the job, half a ton of living curd is pushed, squeaking,

through the mill, shredded, salted and tossed, then shovelled into 40lb aluminium pans and placed in a press.

After pressing, the cheeses are turned out and taken to the shed, where 90 tons of them sit in hypnotically repetitive rows, silently gathering mould in velvety blues and soft greens.

The smell is sharply acidic and busy with microscopic life. You can almost hear the microbes chatting to each other. "Cheese is the most brilliant way for storing a food product," enthuses Simon. Some of these techniques may be 6,000 years old. Despite stupidly contradictory health information about dairy products, which leads parents to believe that it's better to give their children a bucket of aspartame than a glass of milk, there's a thriving market for local cheeses.

After 10 years in the business, this farm produces half a ton of cheese, five days a week, and sells it all. Poacher has reached the West Coast of America, but you can still find Simon and his wife, Jeanette, on the stalls at farmers' markets up and down the country.

I put it to Simon that he should run open weekends where the public can learn to make cheese. His eyes go misty. "That's an idea," he says. "They could muck out and do the 5am milking and wash down the yard. What do you think I should charge?"

He admits that he doesn't yet have the facilities to open to the public, and refers me to Chris Ashby, a cheese expert who runs two-day courses. I ask her where a cheese like Poacher gets its strong, sweet nutty flavour. Is it bugs, or diet? At this time of the year, the cows are munching sweet clover silage from the farm.

Chris tells me that "taste is less a matter of diet than of manipulating bacilli". But she cheers me up by adding that milk from different regions has different bugs. At least my mouthful of Poacher has the tastiest bacteria.

- Lincolnshire Poacher is available at farmers' markets and good delicatessens. For more information, call 01507 466987. For information about cheese-making courses, call Chris Ashby on 01949 842867.