

Clive has fun...

saying cheese!



Dairy fiend Clive Agran fuels his habit with a one-day workshop

We are a cheese family. I never thought I would say such a thing, let alone write it, but it's the truth. Although he would never have described himself as such, my father was a cheeseaholic. Every couple of hours he would rise from his favourite armchair, stroll to the kitchen, open the fridge, take out a lump of camembert, gruyere or stilton, cut off a decent chunk, plop it on a plate, return to his favourite armchair and smile. He countered our concerns about the damage he might be doing to his health by claiming cheese kept him going. Since he lived into his 80s and enjoyed the stuff right to the last, who can say he was wrong?

Cheese, I suspect, is therefore in my blood; a concept which worried me a lot until a recent BUPA health check revealed my arteries aren't as choked with cheddar as I feared they might be.

Whether my fondness for cheese is genuinely genetic or a consequence of being brought up in a household where it was always readily available is something eugenicists and eutheicists might care to debate until the penicillium mould turns their faces blue.

What is rather gratifying is that the cheesy family tradition is being continued by my elder daughter and son-in-law, who have established a very successful business flogging cheese on the internet. My only regret about Pong (pongcheese.co.uk) is that my father isn't still around to boost its turnover.

Although as big a fan of cheese as I am, say, of Brighton and Hove Albion, I can't honestly claim to know a great deal about it other than I like its taste and texture. So partly to increase my understanding but mostly because I can sniff an opportunity to eat some more, I've come along to a cheese-making workshop in a beautiful converted barn at the end of a long track in Poling, near Arundel.



Six other wannabe cheese-makers are already sipping coffee as Mandy shows me through to the delightful kitchen and adjoining lounge. Thankfully I'm not the only bloke as Andrew is here with his daughter Stephanie. They're from Lewes. Michelle, her daughter Jessica and friend Rebecca are from just down the road in Littlehampton. And there's Catherine, who hands me a welcome cup of coffee and is here to wash up and be generally helpful.

Classic FM wafts over us all and presumably boosts the cultures from which we'll be making the cheese.

It was while she was in Australia that Mandy, formerly a fellow freelance journalist, discovered a passion for making cheese. No, it wasn't manufactured from kangaroos' milk; I know because I asked.

A successful appearance last year at the Arundel Food Festival generated a great deal of interest and Mandy has been kept very busy demonstrating how to make cheese to jolly little groups like ours ever since. Although not certain, she believes hers are the only one-day, cheese-making workshops this side of Cheddar Gorge.

There are two types of course. Not "smelly" and "very smelly" but "soft" and "hard". Today is a soft cheese day. But

before we get stuck in to our curds and whey there's the usual health and safety stuff, a bit about hygiene and a quick run through the equipment, of which there is surprisingly little.

Split into two groups, we learn that the cows' milk from which we're going to be making our cheese has to be un-homogenised. Although most supermarkets stock it, Mandy explains that getting hold of it can be the most difficult part of the whole business. I find this hugely encouraging because, although quite dull, finding stuff in supermarkets is a skill I feel I could master, whereas my culinary talent has always previously been found severely wanting. As well as un-homogenised milk, I could also usefully scour the shelves for non-iodised salt, which kills the bad bacteria and preserves the cheese, apparently.

The hope that, despite a remarkable absence of the relevant skill-set, I might yet be able to usefully contribute to today's exercise receives a further boost when cartons of organic and un-homogenised milk are given to us with the instruction they are to be shaken. Seizing both the opportunity to make a positive impact and one of the cartons, I shake it as fanatically



as if the success or otherwise of the whole endeavour hinges on how thoroughly this is done.

As if shaking the milk to within an inch of its long life hasn't demonstrated what a valuable team-player I am, I then take it upon myself to pour the milk into a big saucepan. Now feeling rather weary, I metaphorically sit back and let others stir as we wait for the temperature to rise to 32 degrees Celsius.

“Although quite dull, finding stuff in supermarkets is a skill I feel I could master”

Perhaps I should have mentioned we're making camembert. This is enormously thrilling because not only do I love camembert, but it's also a recognisable and respectable cheese. In my ignorance, I assumed we would be making a generic, non-specific sort of anonymous cheese. The milk has reached the required temperature and is being poured into a cheese vat, which is an oblong perspex

container. Although the next bit is absolutely critical and involves unleashing exotic micro-organisms such as *lactococcus lactis*, *penicillium candidum* and *biovar diacetylactis* to beat up the bacteria in the milk, I'm not going to attempt to describe it here because it would be altogether wiser and considerably safer to attend one of Mandy's classes rather than follow my instructions.

After a couple of minutes of stirring, the vat is lowered into a styrofoam box to keep it warm, and left for 90 minutes.

While the camembert quietly develops in the way that good camembert should, we begin shaking more milk cartons with a view to knocking out some feta cheese. The process – heat to 32 degrees, pour milk into vat, add secret stuff, etc. – is much the same as before. The big difference, which is welcome news to those of us sadly lacking patience, is that instead of waiting weeks for it to mature, feta cheese is ready to eat in a couple of days.

Even that, however, can seem like a lifetime for those feeling extremely peckish after a gruelling morning shaking, stirring, jiggling and the rest. Fortunately,

ricotta cheese is as close to instantaneous as cheese-making ever gets. After heating full cream milk to just below boiling point, some white vinegar is added and then, miracle of miracles, after 20 minutes the stuff is ready to be gobbled. There is a slower, more traditional method that takes between 12 and 24 hours, but why wait?

The ricotta is immediately pressed into service and mixed with various vegetables and other tasty things to create a number of superb salads that are served up as part of a quite magnificent lunch. Enjoyed in a beautiful beamed room that was formerly a lofty barn, every course contains one cheese or another. And there's a cheese course, of course, plus plenty of excellent wine.

Ever the consummate professional, I just about manage to rise from the table after lunch to attend to the camembert, progress the feta and whack out some quark (cream cheese) before heading home with a rich choice of cheeses. ■

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