

This cheese stands alone



In a land already chock full of fine cheese, English expat Michael Jones set out on an ambitious business venture to introduce a few more. And while delivering British farmhouse cheese to the international community in Switzerland, he's not only restoring Britain's battered cheese reputation, but also converting the Swiss into British cheese enthusiasts.



Michael Jones, slicing up some British farmhouse cheese samples, at The Cheese Club's Fine Food Emporium.

By Cassandra Petrakis Zwahlen | “We started off targeting the English expat community [as a customer base],” says the 47-year-old. “But during the year ... we suddenly realised the Swiss absolutely *love* British cheese.”

The venture, dubbed The Cheese Club, was so successful in its first year as an online cheese counter, that Jones and his Swiss partner – who prefers to stay out of the spotlight – were able to open a physical location in Thalwil exactly one year later. Called The Cheese Club’s Fine Food Emporium, the storefront opened in the fall of 2008 and is branching out into other things British. In addition to cheese, customers can buy imported specialty teas, gourmet chutneys and even locally brewed traditional British ale.

The focus, however, remains on “British farmhouse cheese from small producers and small dairies,” he stresses. Indeed, Jones himself hand-selects most of the offerings, many of which are organic or unpasteurised.

Character assassination

Jones decided to import his passion for “real” cheese to Switzerland after meeting his now business partner, and Swiss girlfriend – even though his professional background was in graphics and photography and not remotely related to food.

So what, exactly, is his definition of “real” cheese?

“Cheese has to have a connection with the land,” he explains, likening it to wine. A Bordeaux isn’t a real Bordeaux if the grapes are grown in Australia and the wine is aged in Poland, and only bottled in Bordeaux, he illustrates.

British cheese ceased being real during World War II, when the government appropriated and consolidated the country’s cheese-making industry to maximise production and oversee rationing, he says. Overnight, 1,500 British cheese-makers were out of business.

“That killed British cheese,” says Jones.

The resulting mass-produced, tasteless matter – designed to resemble bland

cheddar – was fittingly referred to as The National Cheese. “That’s where we got this bad reputation,” he says.

Many mainstream British cheeses have only marginally improved since the end of the war. The big factories outfitted to serve the wartime government are still churning out much of the same, in bulk. Jones dismisses it, saying, “That’s not real cheese. It’s cheese [only] in the loosest sense.”

Cheese, like fine wine, should be made in the same neighbourhood the cows graze, he explains. Such cheese exists; it just isn’t well known or widely distributed. The Cheese Club is doing its best to change that.

Restoring reputations

And whereas the soil that produces grapes is largely responsible for the flavour of a wine, the quality of grass a cow eats is largely responsible for the flavour of cheese. For example, the cows on Scotland’s Isle of Mull that dine on barley as well as grass are responsible for



cheddar cheese that whispers of whiskey. And then there are the lush meadows in Ireland's County Cork, fragrant with thyme, marjoram and parsley.

"You close your eyes, and it's very sweet ... like toffee," he says, proffering a taste of the Coolea cheese produced there.

The creamy marvel melts on my tongue like sweet butter, infused with a hint of thyme.

The Cheese Club's selection is fluid. With nearly 500 different styles of cheese in the British Isles, there are 900 different cheeses to choose from. Naturally, Jones' favourite changes every couple of months. At the moment, he's keen on Harbourne Blue from Devon, a hard, dry blue goat's cheese he compares to fresh vanilla ice cream.

"It's probably the most exceptional cheese we've ever tried," he says, as I lament the fact that it's also currently sold out.

There are some shop staples, as well, however. They typically include: Cropwell Bishop Organic Blue Stilton (described as creamy, with a "farmy" taste), Shropshire Blue (similar to Stilton but with the addition of Annato spice to give colour), Quicke's Cheddar (a traditional English cheddar) and Appleby's Cheshire (subtle and clean with notes of savoury vegetables).

Shocking revelations

Jones initially focused on British, and to a lesser extent American, expat groups as his most likely customer base, relying heavily on online expat forums for promotion. Yet it was through English-speaking expat events, like St. Patrick's Day parties and the Highland Games held in Fehraltorf and St. Ursen last summer, that The Cheese Club also developed part of its Swiss following.

"At first they think it's a bit of a joke," laughs Jones, of the typical Swiss reaction to his offers to sample the goods. But after a taste, they invariably say one of three things: we had no idea you could make cheese in Britain; we had no idea you cared about cheese; thank you ... it's a revelation!

One Swiss family, he recalls, was so taken with the samples they tried at the Fehraltorf Highland Games that they shelled out SFr 350 for a selection of cheese to go.

Fan base and the future

Now, Swiss customers make up about 20 per cent of The Cheese Club's base. Jones' goal is to hike that figure up to 50 per cent, and he's confident it will happen in the short term. His customer list also now includes expats from Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and even France.

Though start-up and storefront expenses ate up any of The Cheese Club's potential profits, Jones says, "During 2009, we'll go into profit, I'm sure."

Thus far, the online shop's best sellers have been what Jones calls Tasting Packs. Including a selection of three or four different cheeses, plus bread, crackers or chutney, the packs are designed to highlight a range of cheeses from one country, or a certain category of cheese. One, called the Cheesemaster's Selection, includes whichever cheeses make Jones' list of favourites each month.

Considering he and his partner picked one of the shakiest financial periods to venture into a new business, Jones says they haven't experienced a downturn in buying behaviour. "People always need to eat ... and Swiss people are really into gourmet, bio and naturally produced food," he adds.

And, he says, any impact high soft commodity prices may have had on costs has been offset by the favourable exchange rate between the British pound and Swiss franc, thus fostering a friendly environment for exporting from the UK to Switzerland.

Prices run anywhere from SFr 3.50 to SFr 7.90 per 100 grams. Jones says The Cheese Club's prices are on average 10-20 per cent less than the British farmhouse cheeses offered by Globus and Coop, because he can order and sell them in bulk. During our talk, Jones says he's expecting a cheese delivery weighing in at close to a ton. It's near the end of November, and he anticipates the supply will be decimated by mid-January.

Accents and taste buds

Deciding which cheeses to sell isn't always easy. It involves research, collaboration with farmers and dairies through his membership in the British Specialist Cheesemakers Association, and of course, lots of sampling.

Jones also visits many of the farms and dairies himself. "I even meet the

cows," he grins. He tells me about one of his favourite farms to visit, Sparkenhoe Farm in Leicestershire where they make Red Leicester, a traditional British cheese full of nutty and citrus flavours that was first produced 300 years ago. And yes, the cows are happy, Jones assures me.

Another of Jones' short-term goals is to become a supplier to Swiss retailers, restaurants, hotels and delicatessens. Lest he get bored, Jones also wants to expand The Cheese Club's catering service to more company events and apéros.

Goat and sheep cheeses, gaining in popularity among expat customers, have faced a bit of Swiss resistance, he admits. Yet he's making progress, he says, relaying an exchange he had during a recent apéro, where The Cheese Club had been hired to cater the cheese.

Approaching a group of Swiss gentlemen with a tray and an offer to try some goat cheese, he was rebuffed.

"We have so many goats in Switzerland, *why* would I try English goat cheese?" one said, in dismissal.

"Because English goats have a different accent, sir," Jones, not easily deterred, shot back.

The gentleman not only sampled the cheese, but complimented it as well.

So bring your taste buds and your sense of adventure, because there is a cheese tasting event at The Cheese Club's Fine Food Emporium every Saturday during the shop's open hours.



Bits and bites

Sign up for The Cheese Club's newsletter to find out what's new, as well as receive educational, cheesy tidbits: www.cheeseclub.ch

You can also register for 'new cheese alerts', so that you can be among the first to sample new arrivals. All cheeses can be purchased online, as well as in person.

Visit The Fine Food Emporium at 11 Seestrasse, 8800 Thalwil, Canton Zurich. Check the website for current opening times and special events.