

LOCAL FOOD



STEPHEN WHEELER commercial manager at speciality food company Mise en Place, now part of Cheltenham-based Creed Foodservice, is responsible for sourcing the best food ingredients for top chefs across the country

STRAWBERRIES are the only fruit with the seeds on the outside – 200 on average, which technically doesn't make them a berry, and no-one quite knows where the 'straw' bit comes from, but the start of the English crop is a sure sign that summer's on its way.

At Mise en Place we'll be buying over 2,000 punnets a week of English strawberries, a good proportion from local growers, to supply to chefs all over the Cotswolds. During the Wimbledon tennis fortnight however a staggering 25,000 punnets a week will be consumed, along with 3,500 of cream.

At the peak of harvesting in June and July, Britain grows 85 per cent of total domestic demand, but pick-your-own as a national pastime has dwindled over the years, even though 'table-top' picking has replaced the back-breaking crops grown at ground level. Now we prefer to buy them from the supermarkets or farm shops – but that's probably got a lot to do with falling prices as production techniques improve, and ever-higher yielding varieties are developed.

Chefs in the region are increasingly asking for wild strawberries. The berries are small, up to 1cm long, dark red and don't have to be hulled.

The flavour and aroma of wild strawberries surpasses those of cultivated ones, but their beauty is short-lived. Once picked, they have to be eaten within 48 hours – and try to pick your own. I've just about found a punnet full in Cotswold hedgerows in the midsummer.

To buy a tray of 12 x 100g punnets of French wild strawberries would cost a chef around £100 at today's market prices.

As an ingredient and flavouring, there aren't many food products that can compete with a strawberry. Drinks, confectionery, yogurts, ice-cream, desserts and bakery are all offered with the strawberry optional extra. A straw (berry) poll around my kitchen table included strawberry and marshmallow kebabs dipped in a chocolate fountain. Or sprinkled with sugar and served with a generous dollop of clotted cream. And my personal favourite; homemade strawberry jam on a thick slice of bread and butter. They seem to fit perfectly into the bottom of a Champagne glass too.

Mise en Place
THE SPECIALITY FOOD COMPANY

Cheese, the Smart way

FARMER'S wife Diana Smart started making cheese as a retirement pastime when she reached 60.

Little did she realise that her wheels of Double Gloucester would go on to play a starring role in the madcap cheeserolling event which usually takes place each May Bank holiday at Cooper's Hill, near Brockworth.

Neither would she have had any idea that her award-winning product would end up being stocked by some of London's most exclusive grocery stores or, ultimately, become a key factor in the survival of her family farm Old Ley Court in Birdwood.

Now 83, Diana is still actively involved in making the Double and Single Gloucester Cheeses for which she is so well known, although nowadays much of the heavy work is carried out by her son, Rod.

"Making cheese was something I had always wanted to do but never had the chance before I was 60," explained Diana, who has been farming at Old Ley Court since 1963.

"I never thought that my cheese would be this popular – I thought it would be a nice, quiet little pastime for me in my retirement.

"It was six months before it took me over.

"Rod has taken over from me largely now.

"The methods he uses are the same though – he has been a good pupil."

Diana started making cheese in 1987 after spotting an advert placed by somebody who was selling a cheese business. Part of the package was that the purchaser would be given recipes used over many years by two sisters from Stone, near Berkeley

"When he told me he made Double Gloucester I said that 'I didn't want to make that rubbish' – I had only tried it in the supermarkets before," Diana laughed.

"But he let me try a bit of his and I haven't looked back."

Organisers of the cheeserolling event started using Smart's Double Gloucester the following year.

"I have been very proud to produce cheeses for them all these years," said Diana.

"If people want to run down Cooper's Hill for them it's up to them, isn't it."

Along with Double Gloucester, Diana is one of the few producers of Single Gloucester.

The cheese has Protected Designation of Origin status from the European Community which means it can only be made in its native county and must contain milk from Gloucester Cattle.

In bygone years the cheese was nicknamed the hay cheese because it was made from the rich spring milk and enjoyed by farm workers cutting

Monday's Bank Holiday usually sees scores of people tumbling down Cooper's Hill in pursuit of a handmade wheel of Double Gloucester. Not this year: health and safety fears have stopped the races. But there's one woman who won't be beaten.

SUE BRADLEY meets Diana Smart, who has been producing cheese for the event for more than two decades

the grass later in the year.

Diana follows the time-honoured method of using a mixture of skimmed and whole unpasteurised milk for her Single Gloucester, which takes at least three weeks to mature.

Double Gloucester, which gets its colouring from annatto dye, is a harder cheese that is usually matured for more than six months.

Diana and Rod also make a hard, Parmesan-like cheese called Harefield, which is matured for more than 18 months.

Over the years Smart's cheeses have been stocked by the likes of Fortnum & Mason and Neal's Yard and won a clutch of awards. In 2006 Diana was a finalist in the food producer of the year category in BBC Radio 4's Food and Farming Awards, which led to a memorable exchange with top chef Gordon Ramsay after he fluffed his lines.

Nowadays cheesemaking takes place on Tuesdays and Thursdays, with Diana and Rod still relying on much of the Victorian equipment that she purchased 23 years ago.



Diana Smart with her Double Gloucester wheels. Right, madcap competitors chase Diana's cheese at last year's Cheeserolling

Sue's traditional Welsh rarebit recipe

CHEESE-lovers who find themselves with one of Diana Smart's seven-and-a-half pound cheese wheels might be in need of a little inspiration once they have enjoyed their first few slices.

Here's a recipe for Welsh Rarebit – a traditional way of enjoying cheese for hundreds of years.

The dish was originally called Welsh Rabbit, a name thought to have grown from the derogatory use of the adjective 'Welsh' to describe things that were of inferior quality.

Nowadays, the dish is regarded as a classic and appears on the menus of fine restaurants.

Ingredients

- 12oz/375g Double Gloucester cheese
- 1oz/25g butter
- 4 fl oz/100ml Harvest Ale from the Freeminer Brewery
- 1/2 tsp mustard
- Salt and pepper

Slices of lightly toasted bread

Method

Melt the butter in a pan and add grated cheese. Stir over a low heat until melted. Pour in the ale, add the mustard and season with salt and pepper. Bring the mixture to near boiling point. Remove from heat and pour over slices of lightly toasted bread. Place toasted bread under hot grill to brown before serving.

A wooden hay rake is used to carefully stir the curds and whey for an hour early on in the process, with any liquid waste fed to the farm's Gloucestershire Old Spot pigs.

Later on the curds are cut, piled together and then fed through a hand-driven mill and salted before being placed into moulds and squeezed in cast iron presses.

"A lot of our equipment has undergone a few repairs over the years but it is still doing a good job," explained Diana.

"We did look at getting an electric cheese mill once but it failed to get the curds fine enough," Rod said he had his mother to thank for the

survival of Old Ley Court as a dairy farm.

"We make between five and six tonnes of cheese every year," he said. "It's nice to carry on a family tradition and it's important too.

"Old Ley Court is only a small farm and I don't think we would be viable without our cheese, milk prices being so abysmal.

"It is amazing what mum has achieved. She has never been one to put her feet up."

Members of the public can watch Diana and Rod making cheese at Old Ley Court. Visit www.smartsgloucestercheese.co.uk or call 01452 750225.



JUNE FARMERS' MARKETS

Friday, June 4
Gloucester, The Cross, 9am to 3pm

Saturday, June 5:
Stroud, Cornhill, 9am to 2pm;
Wotton-under-Edge, town hall, 9am to 1pm

Thursday, June 10:
Stow-on-the-Wold, Market Square, 9am to 2pm

Friday, June 11:
Gloucester, The Cross, 9am to 3pm;
Cheltenham, The Promenade, 9am to 3pm;
Fabulous Food Friday, Leonard Stanley Village Hall, 5.30pm to 7pm

Saturday, June 12:
Stroud, Cornhill, 9am to 2pm; Dursley, Town Hall, 9am to 1pm; Cirencester, Market Place, 9am to 1pm

Friday, June 18:

Gloucester, The Cross, 9am to 3pm

Saturday, June 19:
Stroud, Cornhill, 9am to 2pm; Winchcombe, town centre, 9am to 1pm

Friday, June 25:
Gloucester, The Cross, 9am to 3pm;
Cheltenham, The Promenade, 9am to 3pm;
Fabulous Food Friday, Leonard Stanley Village Hall, 5.30pm to 7pm

Saturday, June 26:
Stroud, Cornhill, 9am to 2pm; Cirencester, Market Place, 9am to 1pm; Nailsworth, Mortimer Gardens, 9am to 1pm

Sunday, June 27:
Bourton-on-the-Water, Countrywide Stores, 9.30am to 1pm

Wednesday, June 30:
Lydney, outside Co-op, 9am to 2pm