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Eric Laborieux at Somewhere Else in Cirencester

LOCAL FOOD HEROES

Picture: Paul Nicholls 108013_5



Stephen Wheeler and Diana Smart

Stephen Wheeler, commercial manager at speciality food company Mise en Place, now part of Cheltenham-based Creed Foodservice, shares some of the successes and challenges of local food producers

THERE'S an old saying in the countryside, that hares in the pasture are a sign of good cheese being made, and that's why Diana Smart's best cheese is called Haresfield. "We always see hares in springtime," said Diana, 83, at her family dairy farm in Churcham, near Gloucester. Her Haresfield cheese is made from the milk of 60 dairy cows, and then matured for up to two years before being sold to Gloucestershire delicatessens and restaurants. Diana also attends eight farmers' markets a month. "I have no intention of retiring," she said. "We bought the farm in 1963, but I didn't start making cheese till 25 years later. My husband saw all the second-hand equipment advertised in a local paper, and two ancient old ladies who had been making cheese all their lives, replied. "The cheese presses and the curd mill date back to Victorian times, but I wouldn't use anything else. "When we first started I knew absolutely nothing about cheese-making, but I had the old recipes and lots of determination," she added. Now Diana produces around 30 single and double Gloucester wheels

a week. The cheeses are made from unpasteurised milk, with the addition of a vegetarian rennet, a traditional annatto dye and salt, and then regularly hand-turned while they mature and form a rind to protect the deliciously strong cheese inside. "Single Gloucester cheese used to be called 'hay cheese'," Diana told me. "It was made in the spring from skimmed milk, so it was seen as slightly inferior to Double. It was matured till hay-making time on the farm, and brought out for the hay-makers' lunches in the field." Now Diana's Single Gloucester is prized as much as the Double – there are only four other producers in the world, making single Gloucester using the methods and recipes handed down over centuries. It won a gold at the British Cheese Awards. Smart's Gloucester cheese wheels are also famously rolled every year at the May Day Coopers Hill cheese-rolling. I asked Diana about her favourite recipe for Smart's Double Gloucester. "I'm not much of a cook," she smiled. "But I do like a nice piece of bread and cheese, with perhaps a bit of pickle."

