



A TASTE OF THE COUNTY

Join EVA ADORISIO as she gorges on Cheddar's very own cave-aged cheddar cheese

I massage the squidgy straw-coloured ball between my palm and my fingers as Nick has instructed. 'You want cheese to relax, let the fats relax and let it come up to room temperature before you eat it. It releases more flavour that way.'

I take a bite of the now 'relaxed' chunk, a meaty flavour coating my taste buds as if doused in a beefy broth. A fan whirs above, wafting dairy aromas around the maturing store. The creaminess of the cheese lines the inside of my cheeks, its claggy texture making me click my tongue to the roof of my mouth. This 12-month aged cheddar is just one amongst rows and rows of maturing cheeses – the only cheddar cheese actually made in Cheddar.

At the foot of the Mendip Hills, a 300-million-year-old gorge snakes its way through the land. Enchanting cliffs stand proud; bushy trees cling to the rocky precipices, defying gravity suspended high in the air.

Nestled quietly within this majestic valley lies the Cheddar Gorge Cheese Company, the last remaining cheddar-makers in the birthplace of cheddar.

Preserving the town's age-old traditions that have been used since the 12th century, they mature their dairy wheels deep within the caves of the gorge – a method so ingrained in the cheese's history that the name cheddar actually comes from the old Anglo-Saxon word 'coedor', meaning hidden place.

above: You'll find the cheddar stores at the top of 'Heartbreak Hill' – a name given by the cheesemakers who have to push four truckles at a time – weighing 100 kilos – up the incline. Photo: Cheddar Gorge Cheese Company

Nick Rose, cheese enthusiast and tour guide, works at the Cheddar Gorge Cheese Company sharing the untold story of the much-loved dairy product. Today, he is taking me, a Dutch couple, and four Americans who travelled from New York just to visit the West Country, behind the scenes to uncover the past and present of arguably the world's most famous cheese. 'I love cheese. I think it's great and I think it brings people together which is >

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why you guys are all here today,’ Nick tells us as we take our seats around a circular table for the cheese-tasting, a wooden board and cheese knife placed neatly in front of each of us. Six uniformly cut wedges wait patiently on the counter, each one gleaming a different shade of yellow.

Nick cuts up the cave-matured slice, a pale-coloured triangle with a white and brown splodged rind, and shares around the pieces. While still holding the subtlety of a cheddar, this cheese oozes cave minerals in every bite with its sharp nutty flavour, fruitiness and smooth velvety texture.

Cheddar Gorge Cheese Company only uses milk from grass-fed Somerset cows. Nick tells us: ‘Somerset and the Mendips are synonymous with dairy farming.’ The River Yeo flows through the county, irrigating the land for the cattle. ‘All the lovely lush pasture, the green grass, the buttercups and the clover that the cows are feasting on creates amazing flavoured milk.’ On top of this, they use only raw milk which retains the natural minerals and healthy bacteria, allowing the cheese to develop a more complex flavour.

This is a major difference compared to mass-produced cheddars found in most shops, which use pasteurised milk from many different farms. ‘When you pasteurise

milk, you are heating the milk up to about 65 degrees. You are obliterating the flavours,’ says Nick. He adds that these supermarket cheeses are ‘not matured for very long and they don’t have the same flavour that a traditional-recipe cloth-bound cheddar has.’

After a palette-cleanser of grapes and apricot, Nick passes round the two-year matured slice. Stabbing my cheese knife into the unassuming dark-yellow wedge, I ponder its long journey to get to my plate.

The patience required to nurture a cheese for 24 months shows just how dedicated Cheddar’s cheesemakers are to conserving authentic methods and creating great-tasting cheese. This vintage cheddar holds a rich, developed flavour that packs a powerful punch; its crumbly texture showing its age.

Unlike many other cheeses, cheddar does not have a Protected Designation of Origin, meaning it doesn’t have to be made in a specific location to be called cheddar. The name actually refers to a unique step in the cheddar-making process.

First, local milk is mixed with a starter culture and left to ‘ripen’ before a vegetarian rennet is added, turning it into a blancmange consistency. Once set, the solid is hand cut which releases the whey and becomes a mass of scrambled-egg-like curds. Not until the cheese-maker feels the curds are ready does the next vital step begin; the cheddaring stage whereby the curds are cut, turned and stacked. After, the curds are pressed in a large metal press for three days to form the iconic barrel shape of aged cheese, known as a truckle.

‘They don’t need to go to the gym,’ Nick jokes as we gather around a window looking into the factory. We watch as Will, an expert cheese-maker wearing a white lab coat and blue hair net, heaves a 35 kilogramme metal cylinder filled with pressed curds onto the table. He effortlessly flips the vessel upside down and a freshly formed truckle plops out. Covering the cheese with a cotton cloth, he runs his hand along its surface smoothing down any creases. This is just the beginning of the cheddar’s life – from here it will be transferred to the caves, or their above-ground maturing stores, for up to 24 months before being ready to eat.

I head into Gough’s Cave to get a glimpse of the maturing truckles where, legend says, a milkmaid forgot her pail of milk in the cave

right: The Cheddar Gorge Cheese Company only uses milk from grass-fed Somerset cows.

below left: Inside Gough’s Cave

whilst being distracted with a man, later returning to find the cave had turned the milk into a golden, creamy wheel of cheddar.

Whether you believe this tale or not, it’s clear to see why these caves have been maturing cheese for almost a millennium. With the River Yeo running underneath the gorge, a consistent temperature cools the caves all year round. The damp air feels fresh; the wet walls glisten in the light and stalagmites hang like icicles suspended from the ceiling. A colossal calcium deposit spans high into the cave ceiling, streaks of pink and white melt down the wall, frozen in time.

I walk towards the cheddar stores up Heartbreak Hill, a name given by the cheesemakers who have to push four truckles at a time – weighing 100 kilos – up the incline. Tucked away in their own crevice lie shelves and shelves of hundreds of mould-spotted wheels. White lights showcase the modest drums as if they were expensive jewels on display. Protected by metal cages, these cheeses feel valuable, as if they were holding the secrets of the gorge’s past.

As I leave the cave, readjusting my eyes to the light, I focus back on the staggering gorge above us.

Witnessing people visit from around the world to discover the roots of this humble dairy product is proof that cheddar is more than just a cheese. From high up on the green pastures where cows graze, to deep down in the dark caves where rinds develop, cheddar has been sculpted by the land it came from. And while the cheese now comes in many flavours, shapes and sizes all over the world, nothing can truly compare to the taste of history in every bite of a Cheddar Gorge cheddar. ●

TASTE IT FOR YOURSELF

The Cheddar Gorge Cheese Company would like to offer all readers of *Somerset Life* a 10 per cent discount on all online orders placed before September 30.

Visit cheddargorgecheese.com and enter the promo code: **cheddar10sl25**

HOW TO EXPERIENCE CHEDDAR

VIP Tour - £30 per person. Small group tour and cheese-tasting. Recommended for 10 years and above.
Self-guided tour - £3.50 per person.
Perfect for children.

