

Bless the Brevy

The Age Epicure

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Some will grow faint, others will relish the prospect, writes Richard Cornish.

OUR laundry smelled of fungus, farmyard and ammonia. On the bench were laid out washed-rind cheeses from south-east Australia. As the coldest room in our funny old house, around 15 degrees, it was the perfect temperature to keep our collection in preparation for a cheesy Saturday afternoon.

Autumn is a good season for washed-rind cheeses. Autumn rain on the still-warm earth gives the pastures a flush of new grass. The cows respond by producing more milk of better quality compared with summer, and the green in the grass gives their milk more colour and flavour.

"It's been a good autumn for us here in west Gippsland," says Laurie Jensen of Tarago River Cheese Company and maker of his eponymous Jensen's Red, a 1.5kilogram disc of almost orange cheese. "The cows are now on 60per cent grass and 40per cent grain and dry fodder."

The other reason autumn is a good time for local washed-rind cheese is that *Brevibacterium linens* (or Brevy for short), the bacteria that gives the cheese its pinkish, apricot blush and distinctive aromas, loves cold, damp weather. Brevy lives on the rind and over a period of weeks or months, depending on the size of the cheese, breaks down the rind and helps produce the array of aromas and flavours.

The cheeses, some of which start life looking similar to bries, are washed with salty liquid to help create a thick skin-like rind on the outside and stop the Brevy from developing too fast before the protein in the cheese inside has had a chance to break down into a silky, viscous pate.

This is the enigma of washed-rind cheeses: the rind can stink to high heaven while the pate beneath is the most luxurious and elegant creation on God's earth. Which would be quite reasonable given that washed-rind cheeses developed in European monasteries in medieval times were considered to be meat substitutes on fast days. Their meaty quality can also be attributed to the rich fungal flavours from moulds in the cheese and the fact that as the protein breaks down, amino acids and glutamates form - the chemicals associated with the mouth-filling sensation of umami.

Another interesting point about washed-rind cheeses is that as they mature they go from being quite acidic to slightly alkaline, allowing for a sensation of sweetness.

Bill Tzimas, of Bill's Dairy at the Queen Victoria Market, sells different Australian washed-rind cheeses at various stages of development. One has no aroma, the bacteria on the top has not developed the orange blush and the cheese inside is quite rubbery.

"This is how a lot of the cheesemakers will sell their washed cheeses," says Tzimas. "This allows for transportation and shelf life, but they need to be aged for them to develop."

Tzimas advocates affinage, the process of correctly storing and ageing cheeses to a point when they have reached their potential and are ready for eating.

Tzimas opens another cheese and the air is rank with strong ammonia. "The rind is quite far gone with this one," he says. It has become chalky and bitter and there is a strong chemical taste, aldehyde, created as the cheese breaks down too far.

"But some people like that (the unripe cheese) and some people might like this one. It is a matter of taste," he says before opening a Milawa Gold, a bread-plate-sized disc with a dull apricot blush and slightly moist rind. "This is how I think a good washed rind should be," he says. Tzimas has played the balancing act well, keeping the cheese long enough for it to develop and now selling it at its peak. It smells of a damp forest floor, mushroomy.

Back home, we took the cheeses from our laundry to the table. We bought a Tasmanian washed rind called Red Square from a suburban deli. Despite a day at 15 degrees it remained a lump of salty, fatty cheese. A piece of Milawa Gold, perfect the day before, had become a little funkier. Our guests worked their way around some of the more far gone cheeses by removing the rind and only eating the pate within.

When the cheese was gone one cheese lover smiled and said he would now look forward to the northern hemisphere autumn. "That's when the benchmark European cheeses ours are based on come into their own and we can do this all over again," he said.

TRY THESE

Milawa Gold A taleggio-style cheese from north-eastern Victoria, about 800grams, its rind is not as brightly orange as others but, if properly matured, it is good eating this year, with fungal flavours.

About \$50 a kilogram

Jensen's Red A 1.5-kilogram Port Salut-style cheese with a bright orange rind, it is salty and creamy, with delicate fungal flavour that develops into more funky flavours, such as brassica.

About \$50 a kilogram

Barossa Valley Cheese Company Washington The size of a camembert with a delicate blush, this little washed rind can become full-bodied quite quickly. Good with quince paste when very mature.

About 200 grams, \$8.50-\$12

Barossa Valley Cheese Company Le Petit Prince A small brick, with a white mould and brev rind, it can be sharp, with a goatly tang and very white, almost liquid, pate.

180-200 grams, \$8.50-\$15

This story was found at:

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