

## **A note from the manager of Apple Tree Farm Shop, Yeovil, Somerset**

As you may have already read, our farm shop is dedicated to local sourcing, so much so in fact, we have won awards for it.

I would like to tell you why we are so passionate about it and give you a close up view of some of our small local food producers.

Meet Jamie Montgomery. Jamie makes cheddar by hand, the way his Grandfather used to, deep in the Somerset countryside in North Cadbury. Because Jamie makes it the good old fashioned way, he has won (amongst many other awards) the World Cheese Award.

When I visited Jamie's farm he showed me the cow milking shed, and in particular the pipes that lead up from the milking shed and across the ceiling, then straight down into the next room, directly into the big steel vat that he makes the cheese in.

So, a carbon footprint of zero, but more importantly the cows are his cows, he knows what he feeds them, what quality stock they are, how healthy they are, and so on.

Then here comes the clever bit: when the cows' milk gets sucked up through these pipes, across the ceiling and down into the big steel vat it is still at body temperature. At this point the milk is mixed with Jamie's own unique 'starter culture' (a kind of bacteria recipe or blueprint for his cheese) and because it's at body temperature, the bacteria begin dancing immediately to the tune of the blueprint.

The milk is then hand-churned (all 26kg of it) until it becomes curds and whey. The skilful team of three then cut and salt the curd until they have the exact right 'feel' of the cheese to take it to the next stage. The cheese is then rind-washed in brine and muslin wrapped, and left to mature for two long years. If they've got it wrong at that stage, it's a long wait until they find out.

Jamie showed me the vast barn of temperature-controlled cheeses and how the team turn the truckles regularly to keep the cheeses maturing properly and the bacteria under control.

Some time later on a sunny afternoon in Somerset one of my team in the farm shop (a new member of the team) came up to me and anxiously asked if the wedge of Monty's cheddar she was holding was 'ok' to sell to a customer. She was worried because there seemed to be a blue line of mould, here and there, through the cheese. I replied that this was in fact the sign of a hand-churned cheddar, blue lines can form where the odd little pocket of air has been caught in the hand-churning process, and it was therefore *proof* of how lovingly handmade the cheese was! So, yes, this (and a little thing called a *world* cheese award), means that it's more than OK to sell to a customer. I encouraged her to pass the story on to the customer, pointing out that the customer may well be

pleased to hear why. She went away smiling knowing that, with relief, the product she was holding was special rather than faulty and she could be proud to sell it.

I shouted after her,

“Be sure to give the customer a taste won’t you?”

“OK will do” she shouted back and disappeared back into the shop with a keenness to impress the customer. Not so easy to do with a triangle of Dairyalea.

I thought back to when I visited Jamie Montgomery's and I found myself taking a moment to value all of our 'Jamies' out there and the stark contrast of their food compared to the ever-devaluing food offering we are swamped with by our supermarkets. There are practically zillions of products available to us on every corner of our towns in our vast supermarkets and their ‘quick stop’ mini counterparts. It is a wonderful thing that we have such variety available to us, but very few of those products can claim the low carbon footprint, the skill in their making, the history, the natural nutritional value or the lack of additives and preservatives, compared to some of the local treasures on the farm shop's shelves.

Unfortunately in my job I am exposed to all sorts of horror stories from the food industry and so I know all too well the corners that some large manufacturers cut, often to the detriment of our health, and I try not to get on my soapbox too often.

It's now widely accepted that many mass-produced products are made 'up against the clock', often cutting corners to save on costs, and trundling along factory lines while robotic arms fill/fry/finish them. The result is often a taste that hasn't been nurtured, has no depth of flavour and doesn't deserve your love, using cheap tricks like sweeteners and flavourings to give your taste buds a cheap thrill. Then there's the questionable nutritional value of these products that your liver has to sift through to find something of use.

But that's not the worst of it. One of the most unnerving downsides to our mass-produced larders today is the lack of trust we feel (cue horse-burger-gate!).

While the soapbox is out..... honey, for example, is traditionally called ‘nature’s medicine’ owing to its pure and endless nutritional properties that have been clinically proven. You may be disheartened to hear then that some of the main names in honey actually heat-treat their honey to death to keep it *looking* runny and golden, until very little nutritional value is left.

Chris Harries, our local bee man who has run Sedgemoor Honey since he began with two humble hives in the back garden in the 1970s, grimaces at the thought of it and gets quite upset at the sacrilege of ruining all that good honey! He filters his precious honey under a gentle heat only and

then leaves it how nature intended, runny or set, and yes, dear supermarkets, you can taste the difference – and it's not in your favour!

Another classic everyday example of nutritional robbery is when you stop to consider a wonderful thing called bread. The stuff of hundreds of years, keeping man fed and ready for the day's work ahead, it is a little known fact that white bread was introduced to the poor because the bosses of factories in the late nineteenth century discovered that if they introduced white bread to their workers, they were likely to take less 'comfort' breaks and were therefore more productive!

On a more modern note, our bakers Steve and Pete of Evershot Bakery are still making their granary loaves the way they did back in 'them there days', just with some quality milled flour, water, and a little white salt. If you get Steve onto the subject of mass produced bread he starts to look like a man standing too near his oven.

His frustration is justified because his opinion is informed. Steve and Pete get up at 3am to make their wonderful bread, and then see people buy bread in the dozens from supermarket shelves, bread that hasn't had 'rest periods' or been nurtured. Bread that has been rushed. When it comes to bread, time isn't an indulgence, it plays a very important function. There are three 'rest' periods for example when the boys make their granary cobber. These rest periods are half an hour each. That's an extra hour and a half in bed to me and you. The rest periods allow the enzymes time to do their thing. Without them, the bread wouldn't have the structure or the flavour of that of bread that has been given the proper times to rest. If you cut these rest times, but still wish to make bread for the masses that tastes and slices well, you will need to add artificial structure and flavour, losing the goodness all together. Rest periods take time, time is money. Some of the bigger brands are making bread in a hurry, so your nutritional value and taste quality may become a thing of the past.

Even more shocking can be the ingredients listings in some major brand loaves, usually adding sugar in the form of slightly more digestible words like treacle, and thus adding to our already sugar-overloaded diets (and covering up the lack of flavour without it). IBS is on the rise, as is coeliacs disease; pharmaceutical companies are having a ball; Steve's bread is nothing more than a delicious healthy old school secret on the edge of Dorset, work that one out!

I could go on, naming and explaining all the products in the shop, because it's a crime not to mention Ham Hill's cider; Mere fish farm's trout pate, Dorset Blue Vinny cheese, etc etc. (call me, and I will happily go on!....) but I'm getting to my point:

Jamie's Grandfather's technique for making his cheese has made it through two world wars and a revolution in supermarkets' mass-produced food. Chris is a traditional beekeeper, he gets stung at least ten times a day but he still loves his bees and he understands them intrinsically – their cycle,

their needs, their honey. Steve is as *artisan* as a baker can get but he's been doing it long before they invented that word to jump on the bandwagon (and he winces when I mention it). You and I couldn't learn what they know - there's no academic course or enough books to read that would give us their experience. Their skills are from generations of expertise.

The question is, how much longer will their techniques be protected? How many people care about asking the right questions about their food? That appreciate the nutritional values? The carbon footprint? The 'trustable' aspect of these foods? How many people value these products above the perhaps cheaper / glizzier-packaged / easier to pick up products in their supermarket trolley?

Ah, now that's where I come in. My team and I (courtesy of our farm shop owners, Mike & Louise) and all the other farm shops and independent local delis in the land – we are passionate about keeping these stories alive, keeping these products firmly in the present and spreading the word so that people can continue to enjoy these treasures. If other farm shop managers feel the way I do, then I know we are striving to keep these boys in business, doing what they do best, and keeping their products on our shelves.

There is not enough government initiative supporting these small businesses or focusing on traditional skills for apprenticeships and qualifications. If we don't shout about how incredible these products are they are likely to slip away and we'll be left with the oligopoly deciding what we eat, how much it should be, and where the ingredients are sourced from. Do you trust them with that? Because I don't.

We have some of the finest food in the world being made right here on our doorstep. Join me on my soapbox to protect it, keeping our food nutritious, local, and lovingly-made - delicious! Our local economies can be strengthened against the big chains if we continue to put independent businesses above them. Looking after our local food producers means that our village high streets will keep their butchers and bakers.

After all, the little town of Sherborne fought the 'say no to Tesco' campaign, taking on one of the biggest beasts in the market, and won. Lets protect what's important, and delicious!

Cath Collins

The Apple Tree Farm Shop