

## **The history of Milleens and the Irish farmhouse cheese industry**

### **1 – Milleens begins**

I began to keep a cheese maker's diary on Tuesday the 6th June 1978. The first entry reads: 2 cheeses – one bumper, one good but grated.

Monday 12th June cheddar, larded and waxed, fell and wax broke!

Sunday 25th June cheddar, hand pulled, stolen by dog!

Wednesday 14th Port Salut

Tuesday 27th, gorgonzola.

Friday 30th remember to take out gorgonzola made 2 small emmenthal. Wow.



It wasn't until Friday the 11th August that there appears an entry, "1 extra large Milleens." I had abandoned the cheddar and gorgonzola and emmenthal and Port Salut and resigned myself to this apparition, this changeling that kept impeding my every attempt to defeat Switzerland and Italy and France on the road to world domination.

On the 24th August I made a Blue Wensleydale – shd be good, read the note. Thwarted yet again, from that day forward, until July 2003, when I abandoned my post and disappeared to comfort my dying mother and sister, the cheese diary read MILLEENS. Quinlan Steele, who was born on the 19th May 1980, picked up the Harp in the Summer of 2003 and continues to perfect the cheese.

31st August 1978, 2 flatty Milleens – 2 gals each. Ladled into unlined moulds. Both moulds capsized. Ladled slices of curd back in. Cld be interesting.

Word of my exploits, Ireland being a small country with not much happening, travelled fast. The entry for Saturday September 23rd reads, "London Journalists!"

By Monday the 2nd October, 1978, I had given my first master- class. To my friend Jeffa.

In November I was developing a second cheese, called Beara, and continued to make it for a number of years until the demand for Milleens, and the difficulties of up-scaling the manufacture of Beara, forced me to halt. It was a cooked curd cheese, made very slowly and carefully, so that it retained its cream. As I recall, *Clostridium Butyricum*, helped me to make the decision!

### **2 – The Industry Develops and Thrives**

As we all know any fool can make a "cheese". It takes genius to ripen it. You are dealing with an innocent looking blob of mainly protein and fat which is the

favourite food of almost every beast that roams the face of the earth. It must be protected from fliers, and crawlers, drivers and walkers. It must be protected from the very small, like *Listeria monocytogenes*, to the very large like the family dog, or an entire government!

As an Irish woman I had been taught that the citizens of the republic owned the country. All of its institutions had no other purpose than to serve me. The public servants were at my disposal. When my cheese began to give trouble, floating curds, or a greenish tinge, I swung my car through the gates of an institution which stood in the midst of lush grassland on the main road between Cork and Dublin. Moorepark.

The sign said Dairy Products Research Centre. Within seconds I was shaking hands and sitting opposite a giant bear called Tim Cogan. He was the chief microbiologist. I remember the list of chemicals and reagents as if it were yesterday. Phenolphthalein and N9. They were cheap and easy to buy in Cork. Titratable acidity! Control and measureability. Many years later, Doctor Cogan, as soon as cheap digital pH meters became available, trained the growing band of cheesemakers in their use. I had the honour of presenting him with our gift on his retirement a few years ago. Our association, Cáis, still holds many of its meetings at Moorepark as it is centrally located and we can meet the researchers.

On a return journey, exhausted, from delivering an advanced (!) cheese making course in Kilkenny, on our east coast, I called into University College Cork, where we have Europe's oldest faculty, established in 1926, of Dairy Science. When Doctor Charles Daly, (who later became Dean of the faculty) emerged from his office, I introduced myself, and suggested that the cheesemakers needed someone like himself and his colleague, Professor Pat Fox, the eminent Dairy Chemist, to lighten their lives and enlighten their cheese making. A series of short (two-day) courses ensued. They were wonderful. Cutting edge science and free lunch!

The Development agencies were delighted to have a new industry to help. Ruairi Quinn was Minister for Labour and Alan Dukes was Minister for Finance at the time, they helped to ensure a positive atmosphere for the incubation of the fledgling industry.

With the help of the National Dairy Council, we set up an association of cheese makers called Cáis. This is the Irish word for cheese. With the help of the University we began to test our cheeses and to monitor their microbiological quality against the readily available imported cheeses on sale in Ireland. We now had the infrastructure needed to foster a happy and healthy artisan industry.

In Cáis we have managed to avoid petty rules and thus have kept the organisation from becoming elitist.

### **3-Dark Days**

The 80's saw the emergence of new challenges for the world food industry. AIDS and the post-Chernobyl rise in cancer patients, meant massive numbers of immuno compromised but otherwise alive and happy consumers. We all had to adjust as heretofore harmless bacteria became threats to these precious lives. We built a new cheese plant and moved from wood to stainless steel. The cheese remained steadfastly Milleens but said goodbye to L.M.

The early 90's saw staph. Aureus counting. A refined way, that still continues, to torture the raw milk cheese maker. Staph is the most common cause of mastitis, and the most resistant to antibiotic treatment of the lot.

Everything was going as well as you can imagine until 1996 when it was decided to abandon pre-movement testing of animals for TB and Brucellosis. This may or may not have influenced the emergence of diseases that our vets hadn't seen on our peninsula for 30 years. Perhaps Badger numbers had reached the critical mass and overcrowding conditions that lead to a TB outbreak when culling is forbidden?

In a new interpretation of 92/46, raw-milk cheesemakers, should a cow be found to be a reactor, were forced to recall and destroy all of their cheese made since the last clear test. There was no compensation because up until this new interpretation, you simply stopped using the milk from an infected herd, as and from the discovery of the infection, and switched to another/disease free milk supplier. We decided to pasteurise following a brucellosis reaction. This was something that a cheesemaker couldn't control or predict. My heart was broken, but I got over it and life continued. The cheese, as usual, didn't seem to mind. Terroir? Our sales were severely hit as we tumbled from our plinth, in our raw milk niche.

From a practical viewpoint the switch was achieved overnight and with no disruption. One simply heated the tank of cold milk to 63 instead of 30, held it at 63 for 30 minutes and then cooled it down to 30 ready for starters and rennet. We still use this system. The day became longer.

Almost all of our cheese for the home market is sold through distributors. There is one family, the Sheridan brothers, who have a shop in Galway and 2 in Dublin. About 50% of our cheese is exported, mainly to the UK where we have loyal customers.

Our sales show steady growth despite the switch to pasteurisation, and many knock-backs. Sisyphus suffered less than most small artisan food producers, but still we roll our rocks, as we have done and will continue to do, for thousands of years.

by Veronica Steele 2012

## An earlier revision of our history page:

"When Veronica first started making this cheese in 1976 it is sure she did not realize that twenty five years later it would be known as the cheese where the story of modern Irish farmhouse cheese making begins. Milleens is an artisan food, a washed rind cheese with a soft paste. It has a mottled peach and sometimes fiery orange washed rind and within is a paste that goes from semi-firm to spilling cream. The flavor is a complex mix of delicate herbs along with a spicy tang. Available in 1.5kg and 200g rounds, the smaller known as 'dotes'."

- Bord Bia, *Sourcing Irish Farmhouse cheese.*

The origin of the initial concept is fading in the mists of time. Hunger and shame. There was nothing to eat: nothing interesting. The old shop in Castletownbere with its saucepans and shovels and Goulding's Manures clock wagging away the time, and smoked hams hanging from hooks in the ceiling and huge truckles of cheddar on the wooden counter with their mouldy bandages the crumbs of the cheese strewn around, scrumptious, tempting, melt-in-the-mouth crumbs which you could nibble at as you queued to be served, with your message list.

And then she would cut a fine big chunk, golden or white and what I missed the most is the way it crumbled. So they closed it and gutted it and extended it and re-opened it. Enter the trolley. Spotless, sterile, pre-packed portions sweating in their plastic. Tidy piles. Electronic scales. Keep moving. Don't block the aisles. No idle chatter. Big brother is watching you. Don't ask for credit. Oh Boy!

And then one day in a different shop that jolly French pair of geriatrics asking for the local cheese and being given Calvita.



And then we bought a farm and a cow. Her name was Brisket and she only had one horn. She lost the other one gadding down a hill. tail-waving, full of the joys of Spring. Her brakes must have failed. We had to put Stockholm tar on the hole right through the hot Summer. And all the milk she had. At least three gallons a day. Wonder of wonders and what to do with it all. And then remembering those marvelous cheddars. So for two years I made cheddars. They were never as good as the ones in Castletownbere had been but they were infinitely better than the sweaty vac-packed bits.

Very little control at first but each failed batch spurred me on to achieve, I was hooked. Once I had four little cheddars on a sunny windowsill outside, airing themselves and Prince, the dog, stole them and buried them in the garden. They were nasty and sour and over salted anyway. Those were the days.

So one day Norman said, 'Why don;t you try making a soft cheese for a change'. So I did. It was a quare hawk alright. Wild, weird, and wonderful. Never to be repeated. You can never step twice into the same stream. Now while this was all going on we had a mighty vegetable garden full of fresh spinach and courgette's and french beans, and little peas, and all the sorts of things you couldn't buy in a shop for love or money. And we would sell the superfluity to a friend who was a chef in a restaurant and took great pains with her ingredients. She would badger the fishermen for the pick of their catch and come on a Monday morning with her sacks to root through our treasure house of a garden for the freshest and the bestest. Now I was no mean cook myself and would have ready each Monday for her batches of yogurt, plain and choc-nut, quiches, game pies (Made with hare and cream - beautiful), pork pies, all adorned with pastry leaves and rosettes as light and delicious as you can imagine, and fish pies, and, my specialty, gateau St Honore - those were the days.

So there was this soft cheese beginning to run. We wrapped up about twelve ounces of it and away it went with the vegetables and the pies and all the other good things to Sneem and the Blue Bull restaurant where it made its debut. Not just any old debut, because, as luck would have it, guess who was having dinner there that very same night? Attracted no doubt by Annie's growing reputation and being a pal of the manager's, Declan Ryan of the Arbutus Lodge Hotel in Cork had ventured forth to sample the delights of Sneem and the greatest delight of them all just happened to be our humble cheese . The first, the one and only, Irish Farmhouse Cheese. At last, the real thing after so long. Rumor has it that there was a full eclipse of the Sun and earth tremors when the first Milleens was presented on an Irish cheese board.

The product had now been tested and launched. Its performance, post launch left nothing to be desired. The very next night Ms Myrtle Allen, accompanied no doubt by other family members, of Ballymaloe House, similarly engaged in testing the waters of Sneem, polished off the last sliver of the wonderful new cheese and was

impressed by its greatness. And then began the second phase of research and development. Improvement.

For eight years, this was written in 1986, now we have devoted our energies to the continued improvement and development of Milleens cheese, and show no intention of stopping. The changes in the product have been gradual and subtle and in line with increases in production which are always kept in line with the growth in demand.

As the product developed so too has the packaging which is both simple and highly sophisticated. As Milleens must travel by both post and refrigerated transport a package had to be strong enough for the rigors of the postal system yet with sufficient ventilation to avail of the benefits of refrigeration where available. Our strong wooden boxes met these requirements. It was also thought necessary that the box serve as an attractive display for the cheese ensuring that the name Milleens was displayed prominently, and differentiating it from other products. It has been most successful in this area too and customers invariably display the cheese in the box. Very clever altogether. The boxes are made and stenciled here in our workshop by ourselves and members of the staff. Apart from growing and felling the timber all the phases of their manufacture take place at Milleens. They compare most favorably in price with any box on the market.

When Milleens was first made we knew enough about cheese making to write a slim volume, vast quantities of knowledge have since been ingested from all available sources from Scientific American to the Journals of Dairy Science and pamphlets from New Zealand on Bacteriophage. Grist to the mill. Making Milleens is no longer a slap-happy matter but has become a carefully controlled scientific process. thermometers have replaced elbows. Acidometers play their part now. But most of all milk quality is carefully monitored. Starters have long been recognized to have a most important influence on cheese flavor and quality, and are as well looked after as the crown jewels and to better effect.

Our hopes and ambition have grown too. This winter saw us making cheese for the first time ever. We now appreciate the benefits of an all-year round milk supply. We are in the process of obtaining a licence from the Department of Agriculture to purchase milk for cheese making and envisage growth in the future in order to meet the demands of the home market and that overseas. We have established a firm home base for Milleens which expands weekly. Like a healthily growing child we have no sooner completed one phase of expansion before it is time to begin another. Most exhilarating. Who would have ever thought it.

Milleens is no longer lonely as a cloud but forms a nucleus for the whole new industry in both farmhouse and, dare I say it, factory. A generation of new cheeses has developed in its wake. A dream is being realized. On first meeting with Declan Ryan. some eight years ago, we discussed the future and I confided in him a dream

or ambition that in twenty years time Ireland would have a genuine regional cheese industry to be proud of. That local cheese would help stimulate a vast and prosperous parallel factory industry. Something is definitely happening. Something good and exiting and invigorating.

A day presumably will come when a plateau in terms of sales and production of Milleens will be reached, far way in the mists of time.

A serious market research study might well have contra-indicated embarking on making a cheese like Milleens for the Irish market. Which just goes to show, test marketing might well have had negative results. In those early days we were quite accustomed to hearing 'It'll never sell'.

The National Dairy Council's awards to the hotels and restaurants for cheese boards was undoubtedly a factor in our initial success. The fact that we still supply Milleens to our first and original customers, Annie Goulding, Declan Ryan, Myrtle Allen (Together with many more of course) points to the quality of the cheese. Anyone will try a product once out of simple curiosity but to keep buying it for he next eight years tells you something about the product. Milleens is no longer a curiosity. It is a necessary luxury.



We have supplied the Dorchester Hotel in London with two cheeses a week for over five years without fail. their cheese board is considered to be one of the greatest in the world. They have never once returned a cheese or made any complaint. Quite the contrary. We are proud of Milleens in terms of quality, consistent and orderly improvement, and perhaps above all the way in which it has contributed to the opening up of delicatessen counters in every corner of Ireland where heretofore it had been considered impossible.

Veronica Steele, 1986

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