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Travel

The Big Cheese (Tour)

A writer spends eight days exploring the world of British farmhouse cheeses from London to the West Country, where a good Cheddar rules the day.



JEREMIE SOUTEYRAT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A member of the herd at Manor Farm in North Cadbury, England, where cheesemaker Jamie Montgomery makes his Cheddar.

By ALEXANDER LOBRANO

On a sunny October afternoon in the London neighborhood of Bermondsey, a cool breeze surprised me with the winy smell of apples. It brought on a sudden sharp craving for a nice chunk of Cheddar, the fruit and the cheese together being a favorite snack when I was growing up in Connecticut. This was an appropriate prompt, too, since I was on my way to a very privileged lesson in British farmhouse cheeses at the beginning of an eight-day cheese-themed trip to London and Somerset run by the specialty tour company Cheese Journeys.

My destination was the empyrean address for anyone who really loves best-quality British cheeses: the aging cellars of the Neal's Yard Dairy. Not normally open to the public, they occupy a set of neatly vaulted spaces created from four arches of a red brick Victorian railway viaduct. Here, along with the rest of my group of 18, I'd be getting a tutorial in both British cheeses and the cheese-mongering company that saved many of them from extinction. This trip was also a sort of homage to my paternal grandmother, since she'd been the one who'd first pricked my curiosity about cheese with her love of crumbly black-waxed extra-sharp New York Cheddar.

On this trip, I'd learn how these cheeses, especially Cheddar, are made and aged from the cheesemakers who produce mighty rounds on their farms in Somerset, in the West Country.



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Neal's Yard Dairy is renowned among cheese lovers for its selection of artisanal cheeses. Above, its store near Borough Market.

The hosts were also steeped in cheese: Anna Juhl, the founder of Cheese Journeys, and Laura Downey and Chris Palumbo from Fairfield & Greenwich Cheese Company, a pair of cheese shops in those Connecticut towns. They were great company and a deep source of information about everything cheese during our days together.

The journey had started earlier that day with a tour of Borough Market, one of the largest and oldest food halls in London, by the American-in-London guide and cookbook writer Cecilia Brooks. That had been followed by a superb picnic lunch of gigantic sausage roll sandwiches from the Ginger Pig, a stall in the market that specializes in free-range British meat and poultry and is well known for its delicious sausages.

Neal's Yard Dairy was founded by Randolph Hodgson in a ramshackle corner of Covent Garden in London in 1979, and it set off the renaissance in British farmhouse cheeses not only by creating a retail showcase for them, but also by building an efficient international distribution network, aging cellars and partnerships that have helped many British cheesemakers stay in business and thrive.

Donning protective plastic hats, shoe caps and jackets, we began our tour of the aging cellars with Yvonne Yeoh, a charming Singaporean woman who lives between New York and London and is the sales director for Neal's Yard. The regular rumbling of trains overhead didn't distract us because what she had to say was so interesting.

"The human diet as we know it today began with fermented foods, notably cheese, bread, wine and beer. Fermented foods were the beginning of the gastronomic complexity we now rather feebly describe as 'delicious,'" Ms. Yeoh said. "Does anyone know how milk was preserved as a food before there was refrigeration?" She scanned the crowd of shaking heads and blank faces. "You made cheese!" she said.

We entered the first of the four aging cold rooms, and Ms. Yeoh explained that

each had a different microbiome to favor the ripening of different types of cheese. "Aging cheese is an art that involves both instinct and science," she said. "So many factors come into play when you're aiming for optimum age, and this is why there are regular tastings."

The last area of the tour was a towering larder of spruce shelves, where imposing wheels of cheese were being flooded by a draft of cold air from a giant hood to help them achieve perfect flavor.

At the end of the tour we sat down for a tasting of seven Neal's Yard cheeses, including a couple of surprisingly complex soft cheeses — Wigmore, a washed-curd ewe's-milk cheese made in Berkshire, and Elrick Log, a raw-goat's-milk cheese from Lanarkshire in Scotland. It was the long, thin, sunny triangle of Montgomery's Cheddar that stopped me in my tracks, though.

Its pleasantly earthy barnyard flavor, with notes of mushrooms and broth and a long lingering finish, was the ringing apotheosis of Cheddar cheese, and its taste immediately became one I'd not only never forget but also crave forever.

A Country Manor

The next morning, we left London by bus to go to North Cadbury, in Somerset, where the cheesemaker Jamie Montgomery makes his spectacular and very rare cheese with milk from his herd of some 200 mostly Friesian cows at Manor Farm.

On the way out of London, Ms. Juhl, an



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Borough Market is one of the largest and oldest food halls in London, where stalls provide the makings of a picnic lunch.



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In the Neal's Yard aging cellars in the Bermondsey neighborhood, an employee washes rounds of Riseley cheese.

Iowa native, explained the genesis of her travel business. She'd originally trained to be a nurse but discovered her love of cheese after hiring a Swiss au pair in 1994. "Katja introduced us to the wonders of

fondue, raclette and other Swiss dishes, which changed our lives forever," Ms. Juhl said. When her husband, a bank auditor, was transferred to Salt Lake City in 1997, Ms. Juhl bought a cheese and specialty

foods shop there.

After moving to New York City in 2007, she missed having a hands-on relationship with cheese, so in 2013, she and her husband teamed up with Mr. George, Neal's Yard's veteran cheesemonger, and established Cheese Journeys. Today, they run cheese-themed trips to Belgium, England, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland, with six trips planned for 2024.

If a sudden and thrilling glimpse of Stonehenge first roused many of the drowsy travelers on our bus an hour and a half west of London, the crowd cooed in unison 30 minutes later when we arrived at North Cadbury Court, the country house that's been the seat of the Montgomery family for more than a century and which would be our home for the next six days.

The sweeping front lawn had been mowed in a pattern of green stripes, which flattered its orange lichen-speckled Elizabethan facade. Parts of the house date to the 1300s; the south side has an elegant Georgian facade and sweeping views of rolling countryside. Mr. Montgomery, who no longer lives in the house, has converted it into a rental property with 21 bedrooms, an indoor pool and Jacuzzi, a gym, a snooker room and other amenities.



In the aging cellars, an employee takes a sample of Sparkenhoe Red Leicester cheese for the tasting.



An employee holds a tray of cheese in one of the four air-controlled rooms at the Neal's Yard aging cellars, where different types of cheese ripen.



The Oak bedroom at Tom Calver makes cheese at Westcombe Dairy with his father, where the writer stayed. Cheese Journeys books the entire house for its trips.

My room came with a four-poster bed, a soaking tub in a windowed alcove and original Tudor moldings on the ceiling, but my favorite room was the library, with its original edition of “Puck of Pook’s Hill” by Rudyard Kipling, volumes of poetry by Keats and Shelley and a shelf full of Anthony Trollope.

“Owning the castle, which is what I call staying at a house like this one, creates an easygoing house-party experience guests enjoy,” Ms. Juhl said that night while we were having drinks before dinner in the baronial oak-paneled North Hall. The arrangement also allowed Ms. Juhl to put her preferred private chef, the exceptionally talented Frenchman Sylvain Jamois, in the estate’s kitchen. These meals were a highlight of our trip, too, since Mr. Jamois has a mastery of British country-house cooking, food you rarely find in restaurants, such as handmade pies, potted prawns and gorgeous roasts, including a whole roasted suckling pig.

IF YOU GO

Cheese Journeys has six trips scheduled for 2024, including a British Cheese Odyssey: London, Somerset and Bath, which runs Oct. 6-13, 2024. Double occupancy is \$5,700 per person. Single occupancy is \$6,400 per person. Ground transportation, hotel accommodations, tours and all meals are included, except for dinner in London and lunch in Bath.

A voluntary gratuity is suggested for the staff at North Cadbury Court. Guests are responsible for their own airfare to London. Booking is done on cheesejourneys.com.



The Manor Farm herd headed back to the barn from the field in the afternoon.

Biology, Chemistry, Craft

When he came to fetch half of us for a tour of his farm and dairy the next morning, Mr. Montgomery had straw on his sweater that established his credentials as a farmer, and his easy smile and slightly bashful manner immediately put us at ease. As we walked by his farm, he gestured at his cow-dotted pastures and said, “Our job is to try and get the taste of all of this into our cheese.”

He added, “The French call it terroir, the whole idea that something can only come

from one place, but I call it common sense and respecting nature.”

While we donned protective gear — hairnets, shoe caps and white-fabric jackets — in his messy office, Mr. Montgomery told us the history of his family’s 112-year-old dairy. Then he showed us how Cheddar is made.

Standing around the oblong stainless-steel-lined vat, where pale yellow milk was being stirred by two mechanical arms to begin forming curds, was like some sort of communion. Next, the



One of the sitting rooms at North Cadbury Court, which has been owned by the Montgomery family for more than a century.



The library at North Cadbury has an original edition of “Puck of Pook’s Hill” by Rudyard Kipling, volumes of poetry by Keats and Shelley and shelf full of Anthony Trollope.



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At Westcombe Dairy, the curds are separated from the whey, one of the early steps in making cheese.



Mr. Montgomery holds an Oglesfield cheese, which is made with raw milk from Jersey cows.



Samples of the cheeses produced at Westcombe Dairy: From left, Cheddar, Caerphilly, Red Cheddar and Lamyatt, and Alpine-style cheese.

curds were separated from the whey and churned by hand by the cheesemakers, before being cheddared, or allowed to coagulate. The curds were then cut into rectangular sheets that were shredded, salted and fitted into Cheddar molds to be pressed overnight. The new cheeses were then wrapped in cotton muslin, which is why they're called clothbound, and smeared with lard (to encourage the growth of healthy mold and help the cheese to retain moisture) before being taken to aging cellars.

After a morning of following the cheesemaking process, a triptych of biology, chemistry and craft, we returned to the manor house in silence, humbled by the beauty of such vital and physically exhausting work.

In addition to hands-on visits with cheesemakers, the trip included a session on painting still lifes, with Mike Geno, an artist whose main subject is cheese; a food-themed tour of the nearby city of Bath; classes in savory-pie-making and cheeseboard building; a guided whiskey

tasting; a cheese-and-cider pairing session; and a gala dinner, including cheese tasting, with some of the most famous artisanal cheesemakers in Britain. (Who knew that the best blue cheese in the country is called Stichelton and is made by an American named Joe Schneider?)

Ultimately, I liked the farm visits best, because it was so interesting to see how every farmer and cheesemaker had his or her own style. At Westcombe Dairy, the father-and-son team Richard and Tom Calver have converted their farm



The cheesemaker Jamie Montgomery stands with some of his cheeses in the aging cellars at his farm.



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Tom Calver makes cheese at Westcombe Dairy with his father, Richard.



A wedge of the Cheddar cheese from Westcombe Dairy is weighed and packed for sale.

to regenerative agriculture, a term that describes farming and grazing practices which are meant to actually improve the land.

The Calvers also favor leaving nature pretty much to its own devices in their pastures, “because the more diverse the plants the cows graze on, the richer the flavor palate of the cheese,” explained Tom Calver, who trained as a chef and worked in London before becoming a cheesemaker.

“But we’re not against innovation either,” he said with a grin as he led us

into the dairy’s maturing cellars, where a robot, nicknamed Tina the Turner, has taken over the backbreaking work of turning and shifting the heavy rounds of cheese as they age.

We tasted the cheese over a picnic lunch of salads and charcuterie with deliciously hoppy suds from a local craft beer brewer called the Wild Beer Company. “Alec, how would you describe the Westcombe Cheddar?” one of the cheesemongers from Connecticut asked me. I replied that it had a somewhat less formal flavor than Montgomery Cheddar, with an occa-

sional whiff of herbaceousness and notes of hazelnut, caramel and citrus.

“Nice!” she replied. A memory of my paternal grandmother moved in my head, of the day her elaborate description of the taste of a piece of Cheddar from upstate New York sent my brother and me into a gale of giggles. “Someday after you’ve learned how to express taste, you’ll find there are few subjects more worthy than a good piece of Cheddar,” she said with a raised eyebrow.

Fifty years later, I learned that she was right.