

Serve a festive cheeseboard



Ben Axford, a finalist in *MasterChef* 2007, runs a cheese shop in Cheltenham. Here, he recommends British buys and suggests new ways to serve cheese

PHOTOGRAPHS **MYLES NEW**



Indulgent finale

BEN'S BEST OF BRITISH CHEESEBOARD



1 Double Worcester

You've heard of Double Gloucester; well, Double Worcester is its more mature cousin. Traditionally cloth-bound and aged for six months, it's a hard cheese, but has a creamy note on the palate reminiscent of crème fraîche, with earthy elements coming through later. Good with fruity chutneys. £9.95/350g.

2 Oxford Blue

Developed in 1993 as a creamier alternative to Stilton, this medium-strength blue has a bluey-grey exterior and cream-coloured, marbled texture. Buttery in flavour with herbal hints, its slightly bitter cocoa note integrates well with the other flavours. From £6.50/350g.

3 St Eadburgha

This moreish, award-winning white, bloomy-rinded soft cheese, with a rich, unctuous texture, is often compared to Camembert in appearance, but has an altogether different flavour. The rind has a appley acidity, while the inside develops sweet hawthorn flavours as it matures. From £3.95/150g.

4 Dorstone

The Saracens were the first people to apply ash to the outside of a goat's cheese, which neutralises the cheese's acidity as it matures. Dorstone, produced by Charlie Westhead, has a light white, almost fluffy texture with a citrusy tang. From £5.99/150g.

By the end of MasterChef, I'd served up more than 550 portions of food and felt all cooked out. After taking three months off, I launched a private dining service and cooked live at shows, as well as running my shop. Cheese is such a varied subject – you never stop learning

BEN AXFORD

PERFECT PARTNERS

Celtic Promise & Kingston Black

In 2005, Celtic Promise reigned supreme at the British Cheese Awards, scooping the top prize. A collaboration between a Welsh farmer and his Dutch cheese-making wife helped to create a mature, herby Gouda that they then washed in cider. The result is a full-on cheese with countryside aromas, a strong spicy tang and a hint of sweetness from the cider.

A perfect foil to the strength of the cheese is Kingston Black, a blend of Somerset cider brandy and the juice from a vintage cider apple of the same name. The drink can be served with a variety of cheeses, from rich bloomy-rinded cheese to hard tangy cheddars, but also works superbly as an aperitif or dessert wine. Celtic Promise £12.50/500g; Kingston Black £11.50/50cl.

Swaledale Ewe & red cherry jam

I am not sure why sheep's cheese and cherries work so well together. Perhaps it's the decadent, sinful deep red of the cherries against the pure ivory of the cheese – or, more likely, it is the way the slightly sour, rich cherry conserve cut through the inherent sweetness and nuttiness of the cheese.

Either way, it's a match you should try. I've chosen Swaledale, a Yorkshire producer that recently achieved Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status for its cow's milk cheese. It also produces excellent goat and ewe versions. The Swaledale ewe's cheese has a gentle, woody peatiness that works a treat against the sweetness of cherry conserve. Swaledale ewe's cheese £4.40/220g; 01748 824932, swaledalecheese.co.uk



Cerney Pyramid & lavender biscuits

Lavender and goat's cheese may not be an obvious flavour combination, but it works!

Many young goat's cheeses already have floral notes in their flavour profile, but Cerney Pyramid goes one step further with hints of lavender that are accentuated by the biscuits. If you dislike goat's cheese, this may be the one to change your mind. I often use it to convert the doubters, with its gentle creaminess and mousse-like consistency. Cerney Pyramid £6.95/250g. Lavender biscuits, £1.50/250g by Shropshire Fine Herbs (01939 220318, shropshirefineherbs.co.uk).

A NEW WAY TO SERVE CHEESE

Instant fondue

By using whole cheeses, you can serve up this great dinner party dish with minimal effort. Any soft, whole cheese will work, and allow 150g of cheese per person.

Remove any wax paper or cling film covering the cheese, wrap in foil and place in either the wooden box it came in or a ceramic dish. Bake at 150C/fan 130C/gas 2 for 10-15 mins, depending on the size of the cheese. Once done, serve with plenty of crusty bread and tuck in!

STORING CHEESE

- Cheese is traditionally kept in a damp cellar or larder. Today you can buy cheese 'larders', which allow you to keep cheese protected, but most importantly aerated.
- If storing cheese outside the fridge, use wax paper or a slightly moist tea towel. If storing in the fridge, wrap tightly in cling film to stop it from drying out.
- Before serving, unwrap your cheeses and bring to room temperature slowly, covered in a damp tea towel. They will sweat too much if heated up too fast.

WHERE TO BUY

- *The CheeseWorks*, 5 Regent Street, Cheltenham GL50 1HE; 01242 255022, thecheeseworks.co.uk
- *Oxford Cheese Company*, 17 Covered Market, Market Street, Oxford OX1 3DU, 01865 721420
- *The International Cheese Centre*, 3B West Mall, Liverpool Street Station, London EC2M 7PY; 020 7628 6637, cheesecentres.co.uk