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Say cheese - and pick wisely

In a world where speed and convenience are often valued above everything else, it is easy to overlook how much time and effort can go into making things that cost comparatively little. Behind their modest price tag may be weeks, months or even years of careful work. The true value of these things lies in the skill and patience required to create them.

A loaf of artisan bread, for example, may contain inexpensive ingredients such as flour, water, salt and yeast. However, making high-quality bread can involve preparing a starter, mixing the dough, allowing it to ferment, shaping it and carefully baking it. Some of the most time-consuming parts require waiting rather than constant work, a contrast to the sped-up mechanisation of the Chorleywood process that produces most supermarket loaves.

The same applies to cheese. I am astonished by its comparatively low cost given the time and effort that goes into its creation, and by its portion-to-flavour ratio. You do not need to add a lot of cheese to bring deeply savoury notes to a meal; hell, even a wedge of supermarket Cheddar tastes good and I am no snob, being a huge fan of the super-intense Waitrose Cornish Quartz Cheddar. And just as the best bacon sandwiches are made with white sliced, there's a lot to be said for bog standard cheese on toast made late at night using otherwise unremarkable, unpedigreed Cheddar, a case of 'you have to be there' and, usually, a few drinks in, too.

But if you stick to supermarket cheese you're missing out on a world of flavour, particularly as artisanal cheese is one of the best value foods around.

Earlier this week, I received a review copy of *The Cheese Lovers Guide: A Flavour-Focused Approach to the World of Cheese* by Jenny Linford, about a food she rightly calls "one of humanity's greatest culinary creations" and a foodstuff whose existence was first documented in Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilisation, in what is now modern-day Iraq, some eight thousand years ago.

Linford has long championed the British cheese industry. When the pandemic and subsequent lockdown hit British cheesemakers hard, with the mass cancellation of wholesale orders from hospitality businesses and disruption to supply chains, Linford responded via social media, launching a grassroots campaign to highlight their plight and encourage people to buy directly from cheesemakers. It became possible to buy large 'catering' sizes at a discount, which could then be divided up between friends and family. We did just that, buying large wheels of Baron Bigod from local Fen Farm Dairy, originally destined for



restaurants, and huge chunks of Cheddar, Double Gloucester and Caerphilly from cheesemakers around the UK.

We feasted on some of the UK's best cheeses at home for months, because one of the other glorious things about the cheesemaking process is its ability to take a highly perishable product, milk, and transform it into a nutritious food that, in the case of hard cheese, can keep for weeks or even months when stored correctly. And many types of cheese freeze beautifully.

Linford's book is a fantastically useful guide for cheese lovers, particularly those looking to expand their knowledge. Divided into sections covering cheese's history

and the cheesemaking process, its enjoyment — including flavour wheels, a diagrammatic guide to food and drink pairings, the physiology of taste, a cheesemonger's vocabulary, storage, equipment and a pictorial guide to building a cheeseboard — it ends with a comprehensive guide to the different categories of cheese, offering pictorial guides to the most famous examples of each kind.

From fresh cheeses (such as Queso Fresco and Paneer); soft cheeses (Baron Bigod and St Jude); semi-soft and semi-hard cheeses like Halloumi and Caciocavallo; and washed-rind cheeses (Gubbeen, Rollright and Vacherin); to blue cheeses such as Stilton, Stichelton and Beenleigh

Blue, and hard cheeses like Cheddar, Caerphilly and Cornish Yarg, you'll come away with a vastly expanded knowledge.

In Bury St Edmunds, we are lucky to have several outlets selling fantastic, perfectly kept cheese. Woosters Bakery on Langton Place stocks Baron Bigod and offers seasonal pastries and breads flavoured with Binham Blue or Cheddar (two recent examples). The biweekly market has a well-stocked cheese stall, while on Hatter Street, The Cheesehole cheesemonger offers award-winning cheeses from the UK and beyond sold by a hugely knowledgeable and friendly staff who will let you taste before you buy, and is conveniently just around the

corner from Woosters (good cheese deserves good bread). They carry several East Anglian varieties, including Raedwold, another Fen Farm Dairy product, available during the winter months only and if you are in the market for British versions of continental cheeses they can advise on this. Next door you'll find the independent wine merchant Vino Gusto, the logical place to visit for expert, non-intimidating advice on wine and cheese pairing.

My suggestion? Shop local and take Linford's guide with you. It'll help you swerve indecision at the counter when choice threatens to overwhelm and, in conjunction with guidance from the cheesemonger, will enhance your edible life no end.