

This year's British Cheese Awards saw entries from more than 179 British and Irish cheesemakers, and a total of 867 washed, brushed, pressed or polished cheeses made with Ayrshire, Jersey, Old Gloucester, goat's, ewe's and even water buffalo's milk. The handful of 'cheese virgins' invited to join the judging panel were blown away by the diversity, flavour and quality. There were 50 entries in the Blue category alone, excluding Stilton and Shropshire Blue, and another six in the new Blue class.

Yet with so many to choose from, most British restaurants are still serving French, Spanish or Italian cheeses. Delicious as these may be, consumers are

increasingly knowledgeable and concerned about food miles and sustainability, and now aspire to locally produced foods. To meet demand and stay one step ahead of competitors, restaurants need to feature artisanal, preferably local, cheese on their boards. There are many advantages to including more British cheese and many ways to make the most of the wide range on offer.

For a start, menus could include mouthwatering descriptions of cheeses on offer. All too often desserts appear in irresistible detail, while a flat statement at the bottom says 'Cheeseboard £9.95'. Waiting staff may be able to name the cheeses but are rarely able to describe them. Don't they deserve the same loving terms as a wine list?

All this needs is a little TLC and basic knowledge. Tell your customers what the cheese tastes like and who makes it. Is it strong and spicy? Or soft and subtle? Offer value for money. There is no need to add the same margin to cheese as the rest of the menu because you don't have to marinate, chop or blanch it. The less you do with it the better.

Tortured tomatoes and carved carrots went out with the ark, along with serving cheese on a mirror! Grapes and celery are OK, but crisp apples, dried fruit, quince cheese and chutney bring out the best in the cheese, with some – not a ton – of breads and crackers. There is a whole new world of biscuits for cheeses out there, or go for the simplicity of oatcakes.

Go British and make sure your cheeseboard reflects the rest of the menu. If you serve Steak Diane, go for Edam, Brie and Stilton. If you focus on local food, do local cheese. If you offer an eclectic mix of dishes, choose more unusual cheeses, such as Stinking Bishop washed in Perry, Barkham Blue made from ewe's milk, Innes

Button – a tiny mousse-like goat's cheese, or a lip-puckering, traditional three-day curd Lancashire. In the city you have access to hundreds of extraordinary cheeses. In the country you can offer a range of handmade local cheese with little effort. Customers will love it, the producer will support you and you will provide an insight into the area's rich culinary history.

Now in its 10th year, the Best British Cheeseboard Award, sponsored by *Restaurant* magazine, is the longest-running and most prestigious honour in the hospitality industry. It was set up by the British Cheese Awards to reward those with a genuine passion and knowledge of

British cheeses, an understanding of how to bring out their best and the best presented. The overall winner is chosen from three categories: Best Caterer, Best Restaurant and Best Pub Cheeseboard.

Kevin John Broome, Chef at The Torridon Hotel in Achnasheen, won this year with his all-Scottish cheeseboard. His unfailing commitment to local produce demonstrates that no matter where you are in Britain you can be profitable and outstanding when your focus is on local food. Lunch includes a Ploughman's of local ham, chutney and cheese for just £11.50 and the set dinner menu includes a cheeseboard or dessert for £40. The cheeses feature heavily on the vegetarian and other menus, which include descriptions and a brief history of Scottish cheese. So virtually everyone has the cheese and the staff love talking about it – if Kevin doesn't leap out of the kitchen to get in first.

In his love of local fauna and flora, Kevin is more Scottish than the Scottish and has taken his team across the Highlands and islands to see cheeses being made, meet the makers, taste whisky and roam into the heather-clad mountains

to forage for mushrooms and the odd missing guest.

"We've built up a good rapport with the Scottish cheesemakers by seeing how they work," says Kevin. "This means that the staff get an insight into what is involved and can communicate this back to our guests."

Kevin drove 12 hours from Torridon to Oxford to accept his prize (after oversleeping and missing his flight), and brought his supplier Gary Saunders from Lymekilns Cheese Company to share his moment of glory! **Juliet Harbutt is founder of the British Cheese Awards, consultant to the hospitality industry and author of several books, including The World Encyclopedia of Cheese**

PACKING A PERFECT PUNCH

New cheeses arrive on the market all the time so it is worth trying some to show you are ahead of the game. The latest, Little Wallop designed by Blur's Alex James and myself, and made by award-winning cheesemaker Peter Humphries of White Lake Cheese, is a small goat's cheese washed in Somerset Cider brandy, wrapped in vine leaves and ready to eat at about two weeks when splotches of white mould start to bloom.

At first it has a lemony fresh tang, with a hint of apples and the subtle aromatic flavour typical of fine goat's cheeses, but as the leaf dries out, other moulds appear, the texture becomes firmer yet silky and there is a hint of almonds, with a whiff of cider brandy. By six to seven weeks, it has reached its peak and becomes almost runny around the edges.

For details on availability of Little Wallop, email cheese@thecheeseweb.com



Get Fresh

Gill Mullins

Plentiful nuts for party season

December is gifting us with some great seasonal produce.

Nuts abound, including US and Italian walnuts, pecans, almonds and Italian and French chestnuts. On the home front, Fresh Source's Rob Davies recommends English roots, leeks and brassicas – particularly curly kale, purple sprouting broccoli, Brussels sprouts, calva nero and savoy cabbage – while English Conference and Comice pears are "excellent". Pomegranates, Medjool dates and quinces are good, but Spanish citrus is in short supply and inconsistent; leafy Italian oranges and lemons are worth a punt instead.

Fresh Source, 020 7720 5449

ALSO LOOK OUT FOR:

❖ Wild line-caught sea bass

High tides mean large landings and bargains (£9.50/kg medium, £12.50/kg large). John Dory £7.50-9.50/kg, sole is dearer (lemon £9.50-10/kg, Dover £15.50/kg). Jeff Steadman at Chamberlain and Thelwell, 020 7987 2639

❖ **Hen pheasants** Fattened up by cold weather to make two decent portions (£8/brace). Partridges are diminishing (£7/brace) and mallard are short (£12/brace). Top condition wild fallow and roe yield large carcasses. David Hammerson, Everleigh Farm Shop, 01264 850344, everleighfarmshop.co.uk

❖ **Rump** Great buy, £5.70-80/kg for Scotch (£5.50/kg English), compared to topside up at £4.50-70/kg. Warning: bone-in cuts get dearer at Christmas. Doug Eland at Peter Tocher, 020 7236 9561

❖ **Chine of lamb** Great value, 80p-£1.10/lb. Shoulder £1/lb, leg and best end £1.50/lb (as we go to press), but on the up as Christmas approaches, as will pork. Make the most of bargains like leg at 60p/lb. David Andrade Ltd, 020 7236 1173

❖ **South African ceps** Best value wild mushrooms £18/kg large and £28/kg small. Girolles and pied de mouton £20/kg, few French winter chanterelles £20+/kg and the last black trompettes £18/kg. Tony Booth, L Booth Ltd, 020 7378 8666