

Jersey milk an udder delight



REMEMBER when milk came in a bottle with a luscious layer of cream on top? Of course you don't. You would have to go back decades when the dainty, doe-eyed Jersey cow was Australia's most popular milker. These days the much larger black-and-white Holstein Friesian is the cow du jour due to her almost indecent output of about 45 litres of milk a day.

The Jersey produces less than half that yet, according to South Australia's Fleurieu Peninsula-based cheesemaker Dan McCaul, there is no comparison. The Jersey milk has a much higher protein and butterfat content, producing the kind of thick, velvety cream our grandparents remember, but in these days of bulk milk production we have sadly been denied.

Third-generation cheesemaker McCaul, who learned the craft from his father, leads a family team, wife Krystyna (keeper of the family records; she names every cow to keep track of genetic lines) and daughter Rebekah, budding cheesemaker and enthusiastic company ambassador, at this hilltop dairy near Mt Jagged, located near the coast and one of the coldest and wettest parts of South Australia.

Most days the 95-strong herd is to be found grazing near the cheesery, batting movie-starlet eyelashes at locals who've popped in to grab a couple of litres of milk or tourists who have more time to enjoy a cheese tasting followed by coffee and a slice of home-baked ricotta cheesecake served with lashings of Jersey cream.

The cows are fed on a mixture of fresh grass, milled barley, silage and hay and the best milk is to be had right now in autumn. Crucially the milk is not homogenised, a process that would destroy those melt-in-the-mouth globules of fat. The bulk of the gals' output is made into cheese (cheddar, gouda, edam, romano and curd) as well as creme fraiche, yoghurt, ricotta, feta, pure Jersey cream and, in a good year, sensational butter, a product much prized by South Aussie chefs. (Four years of drought, however, has limited butter production.)



It's a wrap: McCaul removes the cheesecloth

The company's acclaimed, clothbound cheddar is made in the old-fashioned way, turned in open vats, a method McCaul learned from his father who, in turn, learned it from his. The curd is stretched as a block for several hours and flipped at every turn. This process is crucial, says McCaul, physically changing the composition of the curd and allowing the culture to work longer. The only preservative used is sea salt and the starter cultures and rennet are exclusive to the dairy.

McCaul's commitment to traditional methods was recognised last year when the company's Alexandrina Vintage Cheddar (aged 12 to 15 months) won its class, British-style hard cheese, at the inaugural World Jersey Cheese Awards held on Jersey, the largest of the Channel Islands. That's a big achievement for a cheese company in business for less than a decade.

Visitors to the cheesery can watch the cheesemaking process through a large window while they enjoy a tutored tasting. The cheese is made in small batches with minimal mechanisation, the milk passing through a very clever separator that takes off some of the cream, but not all. Cheddars are made in hoops, the cheesecloth is imported from Britain and much of the equipment has been sourced from defunct cheese factories. (There was a time, says McCaul, when there were more than 30 cheese factories in South Australia alone.)

Crucial to the company's success is McCaul's intimate knowledge of each cow and her particular qualities. "Unfortunately given the nature of our work I tend to recognise them best by their udders rather than their faces," he quips.

Artificial insemination (semen is imported from abroad) is crucial in expanding the herd's genetic base. "One of our problems is the Jersey genetic pool worldwide is quite small," McCaul says.

Thus the Jersey cow fraternity is a tight-knit one, devoted to this pretty creature, and let's hope it remains that way for those of us who love real milk and proper cream.

Checklist

The Alexandrina Cheese Company is open seven days (Monday-Friday, noon-5pm; weekends and public holidays, 10am-4.30pm) at Sneyd Road, Mt Jagged (8km south of Mt Compass). The company's products are also available at the Willunga Farmers Market in McLaren Vale, selected boutique retailers across South Australia and Bills Farm at Melbourne's Victoria Market (shop 17-18). Sydney and Brisbane distributors to be announced.

More: www.alexandrinacheese.com.au.