

IRISH CHEESE TODAY - TRENDS

In France they boast that you can eat a different cheese every day of the year. If you include flavoured cheeses, then the 500 or so cheeses made in Ireland should be sufficient to keep any Turophiles (cheese lovers) going for almost a year and a half.

CHEESEMAKERS

There are currently 86 cheesemakers in Ireland. Much of the cheese by weight made in Ireland is produced by several large scale creameries owned by 14 companies, a number of them international. The cheese that they produce comprises mainly of cheddar and mozzarella (for pizzas). The significant variety of cheeses that is produced in Ireland is in fact made by 72 artisan cheesemakers across the country.

The Map of Irish Cheesemakers shows them scattered across the country though with a major concentration in County Cork. In fact one third of the artisan dairies producing cow's milk cheese are in County Cork. By contrast in a line North from Dublin there are only 15 artisan cheesemakers, less than 20% of the total.

The last major publication on Irish cheeses (Irish Farmhouse Cheeses) produced by Bord Bia in 2010 listed 45 farmhouse cheese makers of whom 14, almost one third, have now retired or ceased production. These have been more than replaced by a new generation of younger cheesemakers some of whom have been very adventurous in the specialist cheeses they produce. Of interest also are the number of cheesemakers who have settled in Ireland from mainland Europe and have brought with them their Cheesemaking traditions eg Coolea and Killeen cheeses (Holland) Carlow and Once Upon a Time cheeses (Italy) and Dozio (Switzerland). Two new additions from further afield are Minas Cheese (Brasil) and Sabanero (Venezuela).

The scale of the cheesemakers differs significantly. Cashel has recently invested in a significant upgrade of their facilities to become one of the most modern and largest artisan dairies in the country. Other cheesemakers are at the other end of the scale with just a handful of goats only producing cheese on a seasonal basis.

There are around 49 cheesemakers producing Cow's Milk Cheese. 23 cheesemakers produce Goat's Milk Cheese. Only 12 make cheese from Sheep's Milk and just two from Buffalo's Milk. Some cheesemakers make cheeses from more than one animal eg Cashel from Cow (Cashel Blue) and Sheep's Milk (Crozier Blue and Shepherds Store), Killeen makes cheeses both from Cow and Goat's Milk; but most cheesemakers will specialise. Many make their cheese exclusively from their own milk; others will add the milk of their neighbours and other farms.

CHEESES

Style of Cheese

Ireland produces some great cheddars (eg Hegarty's and Mount Leinster) and also a fair amount of Gouda some of which have won significant awards (Coolea – Cows milk) and Killeen (Goats Milk). The list of the 500, or so, cheeses include British Regional styles as well as Dutch, French, Swiss and Italian style cheeses. More recently they now include typical Venezuelan (Sabanero) and Brazilian (Minas) style cheeses. Blue cheeses have come of age since Cashel launched the first significant blue cheese in Ireland. The Irish like soft cheeses just as much as hard and the list of cheeses reflect this ranging in texture from

soft, semi-soft, semi-hard, hard to the almost parmesan-like Kilnalahan Extra Mature from Kylemore Farmhouse Cheese.

Cow, Goat, Sheep & Buffalo Cheese

As expected cow's milk cheese dominates (72%) but there are a significant number of cheeses (17%) from the 23 goat's cheese producers which include St Tola and Ardsallagh best known for their soft cheeses and Killeen for its Gouda harder cheese style. Modern cheese making practices, eg separating the male from the females have eliminated the strong goaty flavour that dominated past soft goats cheese. Sheep's milk cheeses (11%) from the Island's 12 producers often follow continental styles. And don't forget the Buffalo cheese which curiously centres on Macroom and Co Cork.

Cheese Trends: Vegetarian, Raw Milk, Washed Rind

Most cheeses are vegetarian (60%), which are more common the fresher the cheese. Vegetarian rennet can give a bitter taste in some aged cheeses. A more recent trend is the increase in the number of cheeses made from raw milk (25%); sadly almost discouraged in countries such as the USA and Australia. Organic cheeses account for only 1% of cheeses produced. Pungent washed-rind cheeses are becoming more popular, those of West Cork; Milleen, Gubbeen and Durrus, have a world-wide reputation and were said to have been the start of the Farmhouse Cheese revolution in Ireland in the mid 1970's.

Flavoured Cheeses

Though frowned on by the purists, many Irish love a bit of something in their cheese; of course there's porter, whiskey and wine; but what about apricots & almond, bee pollen, Fenugreek, Dillisk (uniquely Irish – eg Carrigaline Cheese) and the more expensive truffle cheeses? Flavoured cheeses account for 23% of cheeses produced with smoked cheeses at another 5%.

THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Throughout the centuries Irish cheese makers must have faced many crisis; some natural others man made. During the current Corona Virus Pandemic the challenge of the Irish dairy industry is that whilst animals keep producing milk, the demand for it has dropped significantly. For cheese makers the outlets that use a lot of cheese; restaurants, cafés and other businesses are closed. Many of the traditional outlets for specialist cheeses such as farmers markets, fairs etc have also been closed so access rather than demand has slumped. Those farmers producing the softer cheeses with the shorter shelf life are more at risk, particularly in the goat's cheese sector but even hard cheeses have fallen on hard times.

CASE STUDY: KYLEMORE FARMHOUSE CHEESE

Kylemore Farmhouse Cheese has several hundred wheels of their award winning Kilnalahan Extra Mature Cheese still unsold. Called by some an 'Irish Parmesan', it has been matured for a long time to give a very hard cheese that has smooth, delicate flavours with caramelized tones. The natural handmade rind can be eaten and the cheese is excellent for melting; for pasta, fondues, sauces, and even just grilled on top of bread. Normally a cheese like this should sell well but access to many of its usual outlets has ceased so the cheesemaker is now very dependent on selling the cheese online direct to the public: Click on www.kylemorefarmhousecheese.ie to order on line or call 08384 55272.