

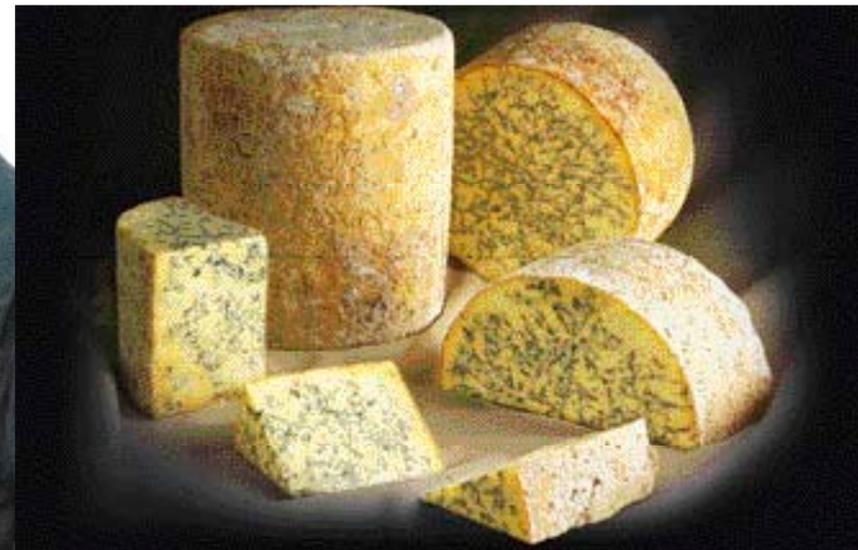
Richard (left) and Tom Calver: "Looking for quality not quantity of milk and cheese"



Westcombe Cheddar: customers appreciate uniqueness



Peter (left) and Mark Hornbuckle: "High quality, clean milk is top of the agenda"



Long Clawson Stilton: year round demand but producers still need to meet Christmas peak

# Value-added production

## Securing a slice of the cheese market creates on farm challenges

**The MDC has supported five cheese projects to help them grow their market share. Why? Because if more milk goes into added-value products, there's less for the more volatile commodity market. This is good news for all producers, but it has its challenges.**

**"Y**ou're only as good as the last cheese you sold," says Richard Calver from Westcombe Dairy. He and son Tom use home-produced milk to supply 4,000 cheddars a year to multiples as well as specialist cheese shops such as Neal's Yard in London's Convent Garden. Since starting cheese production in 1999, they have seen sales increase year on year. Their own promotions, plus those of West Country Farmhouse Cheesemakers – a group of 14 cheddar cheesemakers – have helped to accelerate this growth. Regular breakfast meetings keep Richard focused on the type of milk required for their cheddar. Sitting opposite son Tom, a London chef who was unable to resist coming back home to take on the production and marketing of the cheese, the conversation typically dwells on the

weather and the cows' diets – both factors have a huge bearing on cheese quality.

### Unpasteurised cheese

"Our cheese is unpasteurised and will vary in taste, which is part of its uniqueness," says Tom. "Our customers appreciate this but, at the same time, they want quality and a good flavour." For example, the milk travels a mile from the parlour to the dairy and if the tanker meets a car and has to break, the milk is agitated and, when it goes into the vat, the fat globules will rise to the surface. "This affects the structure and flavour of the cheese," adds Tom. He also points out that changes in cow feeding don't go unnoticed. "Too much maize silage changes the texture of the curd and makes the cheese brittle – when it's fully aged in

12 months it will be more powdery." Richard's targets with the cows – and he relies on three very able herdsmen – is to feed for the correct ratio of milk fat and protein, looking for 4% fat and 3.3% protein and using no more than 45% maize silage. Plenty of clover in the swards helps here. Udder health is another important aspect. Bactoscans are ideally between 15 and 25 with somatic cell count around 165,000 cells/ml. "We're looking for quality not quantity," says Richard. "That goes for the milk and the cheese. We don't push cows for maximum milk – instead we're driven by quality right through the chain."

### Tap into premium

One of 32 producers in the Vale of Belvoir in Leicestershire, Peter Hornbuckle works hard, with son Mark, to meet the challenges set by Stilton producing cooperative Long Clawson Dairy. "We're paid a premium for supplying milk from July to October for the Christmas market," says Peter. "To tap into this we calve heifers in May and June each year but then, for management reasons, we calve cows all year round.

Our challenge here is making sure we get cows back in calf so annual milk production is on target. And on top of this, the Hornbuckles have been converting to organic. Despite higher feed costs, they are still reasonably confident the organic route will reap rewards. "We have to really focus on getting as much milk as possible from grass and home grown forages," adds Peter. "We're pleased with the amount of clover we've introduced and this year we will be trying out some protein crops – lupins are on the agenda." Management is geared towards meeting milk buyer criteria. The fat and protein ratio are important and 4% fat and at least 3.3% protein are required. "We must also provide clean milk – all these factors help to make better cheese and this, in turn, helps to secure our milk price and our annual dividend."

### Penalties

During the past few years the dairy has introduced stiffer payment penalties, particularly for milk hygiene. "It's not easy," adds Peter. "The weather affects production and quality, and has implications on cow health. While we

have no control of this, we have to be ready to respond and keep production on track as best we can. "We keep the cows in three groups and milk through a rotary parlour," adds Mark. "During milking is the best time for the vet's weekly visit. By using InterHerd we know which cows we want to pull out and the vet can see them immediately." Milk quality is monitored carefully with

blips in fat and protein brought to their nutritionist's attention. Longer term challenges lie in breeding the best type of cow for their contract and for their system. The Hornbuckles have already moved away from pure Holstein to more Friesian type cows and introduced 40 Brown Swiss. While they're not sure about cross breeding, they may add some Ayrshires into the herd due to their robustness on grass-based systems and for improved milk quality. "There's plenty of scope," says Peter, although he admits that getting the system right is an on-going process and hard work. "Most important, though, is that we keep our milk contract at the forefront of our minds and make sure we're producing the best product for our cheese market."

Karen Wright

## Cheers for cheese

Estimates for 2007 up to October indicate that 28.2% of total milk went into cheese production and in 2006 a record 400,000 tonnes of cheese were made in the UK absorbing nearly 30% of home-produced milk. Six years ago this figure stood at 25% with 340,000 tonnes of cheese produced. MDC funding, to the tune of £500,000, has supported West Country Farmhouse Cheesemakers, Stilton Cheesemakers Association, Lancashire Cheese, Cheshire Cheese and Blended Cheeses, as well as the promotional and educational work

of the British Cheese Board (BCB). So far, the projects have reaped rewards with these MDC-supported projects recording, on average, 4% growth in sales in 2006/7 compared with the national average for all British cheese – including commodity cheese – of 1.5%. "There's no doubt that British consumers are 'trading up' when it comes to cheese," says the MDC's Amanda Ball. "Consumers are now more aware of cheese 'with a difference' and locally-produced cheeses also appear to be having great appeal."