

William Oglethorpe

Born c.1980. Urban cheese maker.

Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk



Contents

1. William Oglethorpe and his Team
2. Meeting William Oglethorpe
3. Cheeses
4. Happy Customers

1. William Oglethorpe and his Team

This chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Spitalfields Life website at www.spitalfields.com. The article, written by the anonymous Gentle Author, was published in August 2016.



William Oglethorpe, Cheese Maker of Bermondsey.

Everyone knows Cheddar, Stilton, Wensleydale and Caerphilly, but now there is an unexpected new location on the cheese map of Great Britain. It is Bermondsey and the man responsible is William Oglethorpe – seen here

bearing his curd cutter as a proud symbol of his domain, like a medieval king wielding a mace of divine authority.

Photographer Tom Bunning & I went along to Kappacasein Dairy under the railway arches beneath the main line out of London Bridge early last Tuesday morning to investigate this astonishing phenomenon. As we stepped from the chill of the autumn morning, we entered the humid warmth of the dairy and encountered a line of empty milk churns.

Already Bill had been awake since quarter to four. He had woken in Streatham then driven to Chiddingstone in Kent and collected six hundred litres of milk. Beyond us, in a separate room with a red floor and a large glass window sat a hundred-year-old copper vat containing that morning's delivery of milk, which was still warm. Bill with his fellow cheesemakers Jem and Agustin, dressed all in white, worked purposefully in this chamber, officiating like priests over the holy process of conjuring cheese into existence. I stood mesmerised by the sight of the pale buttery liquid swirling against the gleaming copper as Bill employed his curd cutter, manoeuvring it through the milk as you might turn an oar in a river.

Taking a narrow flexible strip of metal, he wrapped a cloth around it so that the rest extended behind like a flag. Holding each end of the strip and grasping the corners of the cloth, Bill leaned over the vat plunging his arms deep down into the whey. When he lifted the cloth again, Agustin reached over with practised ease to take two corners of the cloth as Bill removed the sliver of metal and – hey presto! – they were holding a bundle of cheese, dredged from the mysterious depth of the vat. It was as spellbinding as any piece of magic I have ever seen.

“Cheesemaking is easy, it’s life that is hard,” Bill admitted to me with a disarming grin, when I joined the cheesemakers for their breakfast at a long table and he revealed the long journey he had travelled to arrive in Bermondsey. *“I grew up in Zambia,”* he explained, *“And one day a Swiss missionary came to see my father and asked if I’d like to go to agricultural school in Switzerland.”*

“I earned a certificate of competence,” he added proudly, assuring me with a wink, *“I’m a qualified peasant.”* Bill learnt to make cheese while working on a farm in Provence with a friend from agricultural college. *“It was simply a way to sell all the milk from the goats, we made a cheese the same way the other farmers did,”* he informed me, *“We didn’t know what we were doing.”*

Bill took me through to the next railway arch where his cheeses are stored while they mature for up to a year. He cast his eyes lovingly over the neat flat cylinders each impressed with word ‘Bermondsey’ on the side. Every Wednesday, the cheeses are attended to. According to their type, they are

either washed or stroked, to spread the mould evenly, and they are all turned before being left to slumber in the chilly darkness for another week.

It was while working for Neals Yard Dairy that Bill decided to set up on his own as cheese maker. Today, Kappacasein is one of handful of newly-established dairies in London producing distinctive cheeses and bypassing the chain of mass production and supermarkets to distribute on their own terms and sell direct to customers. Yet Bill chooses to be self-deprecating in his explanation of why he is making cheese in London. *“It’s just because I can’t buy a farm,”* he claims, shrugging in enactment of his role of the peasant in exile, cast out from the rural into the urban environment.

“I’m interested in transformation,” Bill confided to me, turning serious as he reached his hand gently down into the vat and lifted up a handful of curds, squeezing out the whey. These would form the second cheese to come from the vat that morning, a ricotta. All across the surface, nodules of cheese were forming, coming into existence as if from primordial matter. *“I don’t want to interfere,”* Bill continued, thinking out loud and growing philosophical as he became absorbed in observing the cheese form, *“Nature’s that much more complicated – if you let it do its own thing that’s much interesting to me than trying to impose anything. It’s about finding an equilibrium with Nature.”*

Let me confess I had an ulterior motive for being there. A few weeks ago, I ate a slice of Bill’s Bermondsey cheese and became hooked. It was a flavour that was tangy and complex. One piece was not enough for me. Two pieces were not enough for me. Eventually, I had to seek the source of this wonder and there it was in front of me at last – the Holy Grail of London cheese in Bermondsey.



The curds.



Scooping out the cheese.



Jem Kast, Cheese Maker.



Ana Rojas, Yoghurt Maker.



Agustin Cobo, Cheese Maker.





William Oglethorpe, Cheese Maker of Bermondsey.

2. Meeting William Oglethorpe



This chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Borough Market website at www.boroughmarket.org.uk. The article was written by Clare Finney.

“I suppose the name is a bit of a pun,” Bill Oglethorpe grins, “on me being hard pressed to make cheese in Bermondsey.” It’s not a feat to be sniffed at, for all that Bill’s cheese is deeply aromatic. Though there are at least a

handful of cheesemakers based in London today, back when Bill set up Kappacasein in a converted railway arch in Bermondsey in 2000, he was something of a pioneer.

Bermondsey Hard Pressed was the first cheese he made, using a 100-year-old copper vat he brought over from Switzerland. A hard, alpine-style cheese modelled on L'Etivaz (Bill spent months working with veteran cheesemakers in the eponymous town before establishing Kappacasein), its long maturation time of 12 to 18 months – "though I do get impatient sometimes, at 11 months," he confesses – makes it well suited to the low, steady temperatures of the arch: even if "an alpage in the mountains in June, with a pasture full of wild flowers that have never been cultivated, would really be the ideal".

Still, the arch was here, and it was available. What's more, being in London Bill's cheese are but a 10-minute bike ride away from his point of sale. He has his own retail stall at the Market, so he can sell his cheeses as well as melt them over potatoes and sourdough toast at his famous street food joint on Stoney Street. Where L'Etivaz was traditionally made to keep for a long time and be transported over long distances, Bill has no such problem. Nevertheless, he insists on staying as true to the spirit of alpine cheese as it is possible to do within the sprawling urban environs of SE1.

"In the Alps, of course, the cheesemakers go from one room, the milking parlour, to the next, the dairy," he says, "but there is still a wait time to allow the milk to mature." Here in London, this essential 'wait time' takes place not in stasis, but in the back of Bill's specially adapted van. "We put the starter in when we collect the milk from the farm in Kent," he says. "The milk is still warm from the cow, so the ripening takes place on the way back to Bermondsey. By the time it gets here, it's ready." A little bit of heat, to bring it up to 33C, some activated calves' rennet, and "the acidification can start".

Hard pressed isn't just a pun, it is also a classification of cheese. "You have un-pressed – cheeses that are drained – semi-pressed, and hard-pressed cheeses." By pressing and heating, he continues, you reduce the percentage of moisture in the cheese. "That means it can age for longer," Bill explains, "because it is drier and more stable." The press Kappacasein uses – a big, heavy thing, also hailing from Etivaz – is a hard taskmaster, as Bill has come to realise increasingly. "We've been making some of our wheels too small, and as a result I think we were over-pressing. The system is built for big cheeses, so we've started making ours bigger, so they can withstand the weight and reach the right texture."

Another change Bill is instigating this year, inspired by L'Etivaz, is to only make his Bermondsey Hard Pressed in summer. "In Etivaz the cheese is

made between May and October, when all of the herds are grazing on the wild, uncultivated pastures of the mountain side.”

There are no mountains at Commonwork Organic Farms in Kent of course, but there are pastures with wild grasses, and for as long as is possible the cows are grazed outdoors. “The taste of the milk, and the cheese, is so much better for it,” says Bill. “I’ve been reading a lot about Buddhism recently, and one of their key principles is that change happens all the time and one should embrace it.” How better to put this philosophy into practise than to work with the seasons to further refine what is already the ultimate expression of positive change: aged, alpine-style, Bermondsey-made cheese.



Borough Market, London.

3. Cheeses

This chapter, describing some of the cheeses produced by William Oglethorpe's Kappacasein dairy, was archived in 2021 with acknowledgement and thanks from the Kappacasein website at www.kappacasein.com.

Bermondsey Hard Pressed



Bermondsey Hard Pressed.

Made like a traditional, alpage gruyere, the Hard Pressed Cheese is the pillar of our dairy. We produce 2 to 4 large 24kg wheels per week. They are matured for 6 to 12 months in our maturing rooms, being washed and turned twice a week throughout their maturation. The flavour is characterised by a sweet nuttiness and is complimented by a firm, pliable texture.

London Raclette

The London Raclette has a bright and complex flavour profile. We produce 9 to 18 wheels per week, they are matured for 3 months upwards during which time they are washed weekly to develop a natural wash rind. The London Raclette is best cooked on a Swiss raclette machine and scraped over potatoes but more mature wheels can also serve as an interesting addition to a cheese board.

Bermondsey Frier

The first cheese produced by Kappacasein, the Frier is made to an Italian Formaggio Cotto recipe. It is a cheese made to be fried. Cooked in slices on a hot, salted skillet, the Frier browns on the outside while retaining a firm

and squeaky core. It is minimally salted, allowing a true milky flavour to emerge.



Bermondsey Fryer.

Ricotta



Ricotta.

Traditionally made Ricotta. Made simply by heating the whey left from cheese making. Adding only a small percentage of milk and a bit of acidity yields delicate grains of curd.

4. Satisfied Customers

The following reviews were archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Tripadvisor website at www.tripadvisor.com.

Best cheese

Can't miss it since it's in the corner. It takes a while to grill the cheese but you're guaranteed hot and crispy sandwich! The cheese is very flavourful, just the way I like it. A couple saw me having it and even asked where I got it. I must make it look like it's so delicious, gobbling it down beside the road. I would have more if I could.

Date of visit: December 2018

Swiss Raclette

I had the long-awaited item on my list, ticked today. I had a lunch of melted Swiss raclette on a pile of baby potatoes, baby gherkins and pickled onions; this order was well cooked and the melting cheese was super. The gherkins and pickled onions were not too sour. There was a long queue for the toasted cheese sourdough sandwich, hence I could not have one for a taste.

Date of visit: June 2019

A gem

Amidst all the suggested stops we had accumulated as our time in London was approaching - besides the museums, historic sites, theatre options, fine-dining restaurants, unique London experiences - there was Kappacasein, a stone's throw away from the London Tower stop on the Underground. To be clear, it's a bit underwhelming at first, a small shop surrounded by scores of other small stalls and shops in the Borough Market. But the grilled cheese sandwich!!! The menu is easy to navigate - grilled cheese or raclet (melted cheese on potato and pickle.) I opted for the grilled cheese and, before we leave London, will go back at least twice, once for another incredible grilled cheese sandwich and then to be more adventuresome and try the raclet. You'll enjoy wandering through Borough Market and your special reward is the perfect lunch or snack. Stop at the nearby Monmouth coffee shop for the perfect chaser!!

Date of visit: February 2020
