

THE SPREAD

Cheddar that cuts the mustard

Empire Cheese partners with Mrs. McGarrigle's to produce two tasty products, one sweet and one spicy



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Curd belly. A condition resulting from opening a warm bag of fresh curds from Empire Cheese and finding yourself on a salty, squeaky binge. You reach into the bag, telling yourself you'll eat "just a couple" until their springy, supple texture conquers your willpower.

It has taken a decade, but I've learned to (slightly) rein in my curd addiction when my husband and I visit his hometown of Campbellford, Ont., where the Empire Cheese and Butter Co-Op is located. I typically numb my craving by nibbling on one of their award-winning cheddars instead. Though I appreciate the complexity of the aged cheddar, I am a devotee of their mild marble. Its youth (aged only up to three months) showcases some of the same qualities that I love in the curd – a creamy, buttery flavour. This rich quality comes from the fact that Empire does not separate the cream from their milk; it goes straight into the final product.

The great flavour is also attributed to doing things "the old-fashioned way," general manager Jack Oliver says. Empire still uses the traditional open-vat method that allows cheese maker Mark Erwin to monitor each vat individually to make critical timing decisions, such as determining when the curd is ready to be cut. "He calls it on every vat and each vat can be a little different," Mr. Oliver says.

The first Empire Cheese factory was built in the 1870s and the co-op was formed in 1953 with 44 dairy farmers, though today that number is down to nine. Aside from its regular cheddar line, Empire makes a number of flavoured cheeses, including horse-radish, jalapeno and caramelized



This Empire cheddar is flavoured with Mrs. McGarrigle's Canadian Maple Mustard. TAD SEABORN

onion. This spring, they partnered with Mrs. McGarrigle's (a fine-food shop in Merrickville, Ont., that produces a line of handmade, award-winning mustards) to create two new products: a medium cheddar made with Canadian Maple Mustard and an old cheddar made with Hot Whisky Mustard.

As Mrs. McGarrigle's owner Janet Campbell explains, the idea for the collaboration sprang up naturally. "In our retail store, we carry the Empire cheddars and we also carry a Scottish cheddar made with whisky. I thought, their cheese is just as good, why don't we do this locally?"

The process took some experimentation (and much taste testing on both ends) with the ideal

pairings resulting in a milder, medium cheddar (aged six months) combined with the sweet maple mustard and the stronger cheddar (aged one year) paired with the more powerful hot whisky mustard. The whisky in the mustard is also a local product, made by Forty Creek Whisky in Grimsby, Ont.

Both cheddars are well balanced: Their characteristic full flavours carry the tangy mustard notes smoothly. I found the mellow sweetness of the Maple Mustard Cheddar (with its crunch of mustard seeds) a great snacking or cheeseboard choice. The Hot Whisky Cheddar has a bigger, mouth-filling flavour and stronger finish. There's more of a bite in the aged cheddar that comp-

lements the stronger Hot Whisky Mustard notes. I love this spicy, tangy cheese for melting or sliced into a sandwich with shaved ham, and pickles on the side.

The Maple Mustard and Hot Whisky cheddars are still in limited release, but can be found at the Empire Cheese store or Mrs. McGarrigle's Fine Food Shop. For more information on other retailers, contact Empire at www.empirecheese.ca or Mrs. McGarrigles at www.mustard.ca

And pick me up some curd if you go. I swear, I'll only eat a couple of pieces.

Sue Riedl blogs about cheese and other edibles at cheeseandtoast.com.

EAT YOUR EINKORN

Petko Angelov grabs an old, rusted sickle and leads people clad in folk costumes to a ritual harvest in his fields in southern Bulgaria. The fields have been sown with the first wheat planted by humanity – einkorn.

The ancient grain's origins can be traced back some 10,500 years to the dawn of agriculture. Today its popularity is mounting in the Balkan country as people seek out healthier food and interest grows in sustainable farming methods and national pride. Mr. Angelov, a retired pilot, is at the heart of the growing army of einkorn producers, providing the rare seeds from his crops in the southern village of Rabovo in the Rhodopi mountains, close to the border with Greece and Turkey.

"The einkorn is really gearing on. There is at least 300-per-cent rise in the demand for seeds, especially from Bulgarian origin," Mr. Angelov said.

In Bulgaria, einkorn can be traced back to the Neolithic Age some 9,000 years ago. Archeologists found charred kernels of the crop in the village of Ohoden in northwestern Bulgaria. Wild varieties still grow in the eastern European country.

The tall and sturdy plant has long been abandoned because its yield is low, its hulled ears need additional processing and its type of gluten makes baking a challenge.

But renewed health consciousness and a surge in organic farming has helped trigger a comeback. Einkorn is a thrifty grain that thrives without fertilizer in poor soil; it is genetically pure and has never been hybridized.

Bulgaria exports about 2 million tonnes of wheat a year. Now farmers are increasingly turning to einkorn – fields have tripled to about 400 hectares from a year ago.

The Black Sea grain-producing country is quickly catching up with producers in France, Italy and Austria, where einkorn and other rare types of wheat, such as spelt and emmer, are being grown on larger areas.

Mr. Angelov said offers are already arriving from richer western European markets, Japan and South Korea, and farmers are getting ready to export once the volume produced increases.

Reuters

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