

# cheese wire

news from the cheese counter

## Canary Island makers set sights on Britain

JOHN FARRAND reports on a UK trade mission to explore the largely undiscovered cheeses of the Canary Islands

Over the last 10 years Spanish speciality cheeses such as Manchego and Cabrales have become common requests over the deli counter, as specialist importers have made high-quality, artisan cheeses more available.

But the Canary Islands have contrived to remain largely anonymous. Now Proexca, the islands' food promotion board, based on Gran Canaria, is instigating a series of events and promotions to raise the profile of the cheeses. This included a Guild of Fine Food study tour to the islands in July. An 11-strong group of key retailers and wholesalers visited four dairies and had the chance to meet and question cheese makers about production, and also the marketing men looking to find routes to market.

So how do you make cheese on islands that are based 100 miles from the coast of north west Africa? Historically cheese would have been made by semi-nomadic herdsmen, who were getting precious little milk from their ewes and goats. Specific goat breeds still exist that are indigenous to the islands and, in fact, the Majorera goat from Fuerteventura produces milk that makes two Protected Designation



Canary's cheeses can never be accused of lacking colour and texture

of Origin cheeses.

Today cheese production is partly automated in high-tech creameries, very often on-farm, but there are a small number of true artisan producers still in existence. It's a tough job when your average goat produces 3.5 litres a day compared to a cow which produces 35-40 litres a day.

Why have these cheeses not been generally available in the UK? The culture of the Canaries is to eat goats' or ewes' milk cheese (indeed they produce some mixed milk cheeses) as fresh as possible, only a few days old. Transportation of this type of cheese to the UK is virtually impossible unless major advances in (expensive) packaging can be made. The older, curado or semi-curado, cheeses play



Producer Vincent Charles Baybaud from Benijos explains more about his cheeses

second fiddle in their own market but this is perhaps where the potential is in the UK.

These cheeses will need a point of difference to succeed in our crowded deli counters. This may lie in these more mature cheeses that don't have the intense goat flavour that you get from the fresher ones.

Typical to the islands is a cornflower called gofio which is used to cover some cheeses during maturation, giving a slightly toasted flavour to the cheese and a powdery white exterior that will satisfy the 'Wow - what is that?' brigade.

Stefano Cuomo of Macknade Fine Foods, retailer and importer, said: "The cheeses look good on the counter, the flavour is sweet and marked without being overpowering. I used some of the smoked variety with pasta...it worked beautifully much like a scamorza."

The tour has resulted in some real business being done, with one of Fuerteventura's leading producers Maxorata beginning talks with importer Brindisa. Many of the retailers took back sampling quantities to try on regular customers, including the more mature goats' cheeses (four to nine months) which have proved particularly popular.

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