

A few details about Fenellas cheesemaking training.

It was an internet search that brought up [AB Cheesemaking Courses](#) . Various courses run by Chris Ashby and Val Bines who were a great double act on my first course and had been running the courses together for years but, by the second course, Val had left and now runs courses at the Duchy College in Cornwall.

It was a real trek to get to Reaseheath College in Nantwich but every minute was worth it. I really needed the confidence that a course can give you although I'm sure one can set up just as well with books and chatting to cheesemakers. But I felt that I needed more information.

In fact after the first course I thought I'd shadow a Cheesemaker for a couple of days instead of going on the second course. That was great but I still felt I needed the second course and really, really enjoyed it.

Anyway, the details:

Course number one was Basic Cheesemaking which covered a lot of science and theory and history on day one.

Day two (much better!) was in the dairy and fantastic. I felt a bit demoralised and doubtful after the first day as it seemed that cheesemaking was hard to get right and so complicated but fears were allayed by the second day.

We split into groups for hands on cheesemaking of various hard cheeses. We did Cheddar as it seemed to me to be the most difficult and I prefer it to Caerphilly or Red Leicester!

{highslide}cheddaring.jpg&captionText:'Cheddaring'{/highslide}

We had a large vat and spent ages watching the milk to see if the curd was ready to cut. Not boring at all. A lot of record keeping and taking of titratable acidities. Something I've yet to do here.

{highslide}curdcutting.jpg&captionText:'Curd cutting'{/highslide}

By the end of the day we had the cheese in a cheese press and left it overnight. One of the things you don't really get a true picture of is the scale of cleaning as Val and Chris had come in early to get the vats ready for the milk. We just did it during and after the process. Big surprise that you use tap water to rinse off the hypochlorite sterilising solution which seemed bizarre to me but means we think our water is clean!

How Val and Chris managed to supervise so many different cheeses with so many novices around I do not know but they did. They are both great teachers with decades of differing experience between them. I keep wanting to nominate them as Food Heroes actually as I think they have sent an awful lot of people on the way of a traditional industry that needs to be kept going. A lot of agricultural colleges no longer cover cheesemaking which is a shame.

The people on the course were a mixture of farmers ready to diversify, sales reps, cheese buyers, factory cheesemakers sent by their companies and a couple of people like me; no agricultural background but with a dream to make cheese. They had come from all over Britain and a list of accommodation is supplied with the course details. I stayed within walking distance

at Henhull Hall. A working dairy farm where I watched the milking which was great and had wonderful breakfasts.

{highslide}cheesecourse.jpg&captionText:'The huge room at Reaseheath'{/highslide}

Considering the different needs of the course members, I thought that Val and Chris aimed it just right and made it clear that the course was aimed at showing people how to make cheese.

The final half day was unwrapping our cheeses and placing them in the cold store for another course to sample at some stage. On my second course Chris let us sample the cheddar we'd made and it was lovely although she did say a grader wouldn't keep it back to mature much further. I presume this means it wasn't great! Before going home we did blind tastings of various cheeses. Some of the small group I was in thought one cheese was rancid but I liked it. It turned out to be a traditionally bandaged farmhouse cheddar so I obviously like that sort of thing i.e. the expensive ones!

The next course was Soft Cheese and I enjoyed it even more. I think this time because a year had passed and I had much more insight and a bit more practical knowledge. I also had a lot of questions as I was about to do my own cheese room. Actually Chris's advice was invaluable. I also knew that I was nearly there compared to the previous course and that made a big difference. There were a lot of questions about sinks and cold rooms and packaging etc... Some advice I'll touch on when I talk about the room.

{highslide}camembert2ndcourse.jpg&captionText:'Camembert draining'{/highslide}

Becky (another nurse married to a dairy farmer in Devon) and I made Camembert which was great fun. I don't know about hers but when I came to eat mine 2 weeks or so later something had gone wrong. I had friends to dinner with their French friends so I madly inflicted it on them! I'm sure the whole incident will be dined out upon as when I cut the cheese it sort of exploded with liquid milk going everywhere. Basically I suppose the inside had not changed from first pouring. It was very funny anyway. The French can maintain their national pride!

{highslide}brining.jpg&captionText:'Brining'{/highslide}

The Blue cheese that another group made was fantastic and I'm following that recipe for my Blue cheese here, Fort Grey. Also made was mozzarella and ricotta.

In short, I needed both courses but got a lot more out of the second because I was ready for all the information. It gave me the confidence to get going and I came home ready to start. It also gave me a network of people with whom to share tips etc and Chris answers queries by e-mail which is really useful. Without threatening anyone's patch, talk as much as you can to other makers. I found Martin Moyden on the Specialist Cheesemaker's Assoc. members list. He is in Newport Shropshire and has given me a lot of advice. I went to see him during the second course. Seeing others' equipment and how they adapt it etc is so useful and how they come to price for the cheese etc.

A Cheese makers tale to be continued.....

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