

Cheese inspired by rich Manx heritage

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The Isle of Man is a beautiful jewel in the middle of the Irish Sea, with breathtaking views and an incredibly rich culture. It has a long and exciting heritage... and so does its award winning cheese!

Many islanders are descended from Celts and Vikings - and the art of cheese making has grown up through the generations. Now Isle of Man Creamery, a cooperative dairy serving just 51 busy farmers, is making its name supplying high quality cheddars, with added ingredients inspired by the rich heritage of the Island.

But how did cheese get to the island in the first place? The Celts and Vikings are relatively recent history when you consider that cheese was first discovered by accident in the Middle East around 8000 years ago.

Legend has it that an unknown Arab nomad took milk in a saddlebag to sustain him on a trip across the desert only to find that the combination of the heat and the constant galloping motion of his horse separated the milk into solid white lumps and water: curds and whey. The natural rennin in his animal skin saddlebag had enabled the separation process to take place. While the nomad probably didn't understand the technical details, or the importance of his find, he did discover that the water and the white bits were both edible and very tasty. From there it seems there was no turning back.

It's likely that cheese and cheese making made their journey to the Isle of Man with the Romans, but Roman remains are pretty scant save for the odd coin and a (very) occasional straight road. Instead, it's the Celts and Vikings who've stamped their mark on the ground creating a proud archaeological heritage that's arguably richer than anywhere else in Britain.

But what of cheese? While it's possible that the Celts experimented with cheese making, it was the Vikings who are believed to have introduced some of the ingredients that have inspired Isle of Man Creamery recipes of today.

The Vikings are well known for their pillaging activities, but having conquered the land they cleverly assimilated local traditions into their own way of life and worked to build strong communities. They also traded across Europe and as far afield as central Asia. It seems entirely

probable that they were responsible for the introduction of a range of spices, including black peppercorns – certainly this is the story that persists on the Isle of Man.

Apparently a Viking wife, named Hildr, was a particularly proficient cook: something of which her husband was very proud. In particular she was known for the richness of her cheeses, which she made with milk from her favourite cow. Her husband was always boasting about the cheese around the village, and one day the chieftain decided he'd heard enough. He would try out the cheese for himself and see if it was worth all the fuss.

Unfortunately, earlier that day two of Hildr's sons had decided to play a practical joke. They thought it would be great fun to put some hot black peppercorns into the cheese curds. So, while one of them created a disturbance outside for Hildr to investigate the other reached down the muslin full of drying curds, scattered peppercorns into them, and tied it quickly back up to the timber frame of the house.

Hildr then returned, unaware of her son's mischief, and got on with the other jobs of the day, which included making bread and cooking a delicious boar stew.

When her husband and the chieftain appeared for dinner, she was flustered but also proud that the chieftain should visit simply to sample her cooking. She was in high spirits as she served out the bread and invited the chieftain to taste the stew. However, when the cheese was pulled down from the muslin, she was horrified at the black blobs scattered throughout what was now a white doughy ball – but there was no choice – the chieftain was already waiting, so she had to serve it up. She watched, ashamed, as the chief cut himself a chunk and popped it in his mouth. The story tells how his face changed: from superiority to surprise, then through confusion and into pleasure... apparently he loved it!

So an accident that had started as a silly practical joke created a recipe that became Hildr's hallmark.

Findlay Macleod, Managing Director of Isle of Man Creamery assures me that he now manufactures high quality cheddars (which regularly win awards for their flavour and quality) using state of the art processes, rather than by hanging muslins from timbers. He also tells me that 'two of our most popular added ingredient lines: Black Peppercorn Mature Cheddar, and Roast Onion & Sage Mature Cheddar have both been handed down from Hildr.' It's also a testament to her fame that Hildr's name is remembered and not that of the chieftain's.

The Creamery has experimented with other historically inspired cheese ingredients too, all of which sell like hot cakes in supermarkets like Asda, Morrisons and Sainsbury's in the UK, and through their on-line shop at www.iomcreameries.com. The great thing about Manx cheeses is that while they're artisan inspired and excitingly flavoured they're packaged straightforwardly, fantastic to cook with, and perfect for making that toasted sandwich with a difference.

Castle Rushen is one of the best-kept castles in Europe and sits at the centre of the old administrative centre of the Isle of Man, which is aptly named, Castletown. In the Lord's Dining Hall castle staff have displayed a lavish banquet like those enjoyed by the Lords of Mann in the 16th Century. Herbs are scattered across the floor, which get crushed to release their scents as people walk upon the flagstones. This would have helped disguise the less pleasant odours present in the castle. Herbs such as oregano and basil weren't just used on the floor - they were also used to flavour the dishes. The Creamery's Oregano & Basil Mature Cheddar is inspired by this history.

The Manx glens were the inspiration for their Garlic & Chive Mature Cheddar too. There are dozens of glens across the island: tree-lined valley's that follow bubbling streams as they rush from the mountains to the sea. In late spring they are carpeted with the broad green leaves and white starry flowers of ransoms (wild garlic), which are still used by many of the older generation to cook with.

The Isle of Man has been proud of its heritage for generations, but Manx people are now also proud of their island's fabulous cheeses. The Isle of Man Creamery has developed such unique varieties that they're sought out by customers from America to Southern Europe. And having sampled their range I can see exactly why.

- *You can find cheeses from Isle of Man Creamery in the UK at Asda, Sainsbury's and Morrisons, and seasonally at the Co-op and Tesco.*
- *You can buy direct from Isle of Man Creamery on-line at www.iomcreameries.com*
- *You can watch a short film about Manx cheese production, made to support the Year of Food and Farming in Schools, at www.manxheritage.org/cms/video_collection_3486.html*

For more information and for high resolution images of Isle of Man Creamery cheeses please contact: [ffinlo Costain](mailto:ffinlo@ffinlo.org)

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