



Stilton is a key element of our Co-op Irresistible Cheese Selection



meet the producer

The dairy where Kim works supplies Co-op with tasty, creamy Stilton cheese

Winter blues



Our creamy, tangy Stilton can be found in your local Co-op store all year round - and it's ideal for your Christmas cheeseboard. Rosie Mullender headed to Leicestershire to find out how it's made.

No Christmas cheeseboard would be complete without some Stilton,' says Kim Kettle. Plunging a cheese iron – a thick, hollow skewer – into a wheel of cheese, he removes a crumbly, blue-veined plug. 'Christmas without Stilton would be like Christmas without turkey.'

Kim is production director at Long Clawson Dairy near Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire, where he's spent more than 40 years perfecting the art of making Stilton. I've joined him to find out how this classic Co-op staple is made.

'Blue Stilton has been given EU Protected Designation of Origin status, which means it can only be made in Leicestershire,

Nottinghamshire or Derbyshire, from milk produced in the area,' Kim explains as we walk between hundreds of cheeses in one of the dairy's eye-wateringly tangy maturation rooms.

'The town of Stilton itself is in Cambridgeshire, so ironically blue cheese made there isn't allowed to be called Stilton.'

The golden rules

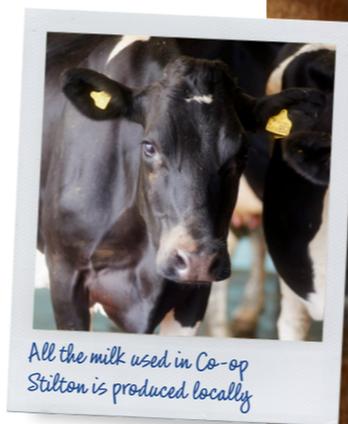
It's more than a name though – other rules for making traditional Stilton include separating the curds and whey from the milk in open vats, forming the cheese in hoops (cylindrical moulds) without pressing, and allowing it to form a natural crust.

'Making Stilton is quite a

complicated business, so everyone who works here has a set of golden rules to follow to make sure their part of the process runs as smoothly as possible,' says Kim. 'That's because we want our award-winning Stilton to be perfect every time.'

If anyone can make a flawless cheese, it's Long Clawson Dairy. Founded in 1911, it boasts over 100 years of cheese expertise. Some of the local farmers who supply the dairy can trace their family trees back to the 12 founders.

And today's process is fascinating. An impressive 200,000 litres of milk from 43 farms are delivered to the dairy each day, which is pumped into 20,000-litre ▷



All the milk used in Co-op Stilton is produced locally

'It should be creamy and not too salty, crumbly and open-textured, with even veins of mould that give a great tang and a good natural crust'

Kim Kettle

meet the producer



Left: the cheeses are smoothed and turned before being graded (main picture)



Kim with a wheel of Stilton he's lovingly created for Co-op

vats. Next, cheese starter is added (friendly bacteria that ripen the milk), and blue mould culture – the penicillin that's responsible for creating the striking blue veins. Rennet is also added, which helps the cheese curds and liquid whey separate over the next 20 hours. It's synthetic to ensure Long Clawson Stilton can be enjoyed by vegetarians. The thick curds are then cut into blocks, milled into pieces, and poured into hoops.

'After five days, each 11kg cheese will have lost 2kg of water. We'll remove it from its hoop, then wrap, seal and mature it over six weeks,' Kim tells me. 'During this time, we turn the cheeses by hand every day to make sure the remaining moisture is evenly distributed, and pierce over 600 holes into each cheese to encourage the veins of mould to form.

Any that don't bloom as we'd like won't be classed as Stilton.' The result is a cheese that's equally delicious on its own or in a host of delicious recipes.

Dreamily creamy

Kim's passion is clear – the dairy is pristine, and from milk to maturation, his cheeses are tested for quality every step of the way. So what should you look for in a really good Stilton?

'It should be creamy and not too salty, crumbly and open-textured, with even veins of mould that give a great tang and a good natural crust,' he says. 'Blue Stilton is known as the king of English cheeses, and with good reason. As well as being the best bit of any cheeseboard, it's so versatile, and goes with everything from pasta to steak.

'Try baking a potato,

scooping out the flesh and mashing it with Stilton. Add it back into the skins and grill until bubbling hot on the top– it's absolutely wonderful.'

A recent convert to the joys of blue cheese, I'm thrilled when Kim hands me a block of Long Clawson Stilton, ribboned with blue veins, to take home. It's everything he promised it would be: creamy, tangy and something no cheeseboard should be without this Christmas.

PHOTOGRAPHY WILLIAM SHAW

Loving British cheese? Then turn to page 61 for our festive cheese map xxxxxx xx x xx x xx x xx x xx x xx x x