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THE GREEN THREAD

The makers shaping cheese in Ireland today

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Across Ireland's green pastures, a thriving artisan cheese culture has taken root, shaped by the landscape and generations of makers turning exceptional milk into cheeses distinctly their own.



Rural Ireland lives up to its picturesque reputation. Rolling green hills give way to peninsulas that drop dramatically into the Atlantic, often with livestock grazing right up to the edge. Stone is everywhere: rock walls traverse pastures and line narrow country roads, remnants of famine cottages and once-majestic castles dot hillsides, and iconic landmarks like the Cliffs of Moher rise from the coastline. Green and gray. Everywhere.

Equally emblematic of Ireland is the rain. The Irish don't ponder whether it will rain each day so much as what *kind* of rain it will be. Local lore suggests there are 99 Gaelic words to describe it—sudden downpours that arrive without warning, mist that seems to float sideways on the wind, and drizzles so delicate they barely register.

All that rainfall creates an environment where grass flourishes. It also provides a fitting backdrop for understanding one of Ireland's most distinctive contributions to artisan cheese: the washed-rind cheeses of County Cork from the late 1970s, when a handful of farmers began making cheese as a way to create value from their milk. What emerged over the following decades was a thriving artisan cheese community that would earn international recognition while remaining firmly rooted in family farms. Yet the story of Irish cheese isn't really about the rain, the grass, or even the cheese itself. It is a story about people.

Across Ireland, artisan cheesemaking remains largely a family affair. Founders still work alongside children and grandchildren, and conversations in aging rooms frequently drift toward succession plans, stewardship of the land, and what it means to leave a farm in better condition than it was found. While the cheeses differ—from pungent washed rinds to creamy blues, bloomy rinds, fresh chèvre, and sheep's milk wheels—the values behind them are remarkably similar.

Those values are being tested by the realities of modern farming. Rising feed, fertilizer, and energy costs challenge family farms, with many increases tied to geopolitical conflicts and disruptions in global agricultural markets. The war in Ukraine, for example, has had ripple effects throughout agricultural supply chains, illustrating how events thousands of miles away can affect the economics of a dairy farm in Ireland.

At the same time, Ireland's own history of famine remains deeply embedded in the national consciousness, shaping how many farmers think about food insecurity, agriculture, and their role in producing food.

WHERE MODERN IRISH CHEESE BEGAN

Against that backdrop, the success of Irish artisan cheese feels all the more remarkable. Much of that success can be traced back to a small group of pioneers in West Cork. Beginning in the late 1970s, producers such as Veronica Steele of Milleens, Jeffa Gill of Durrus, and Giana Ferguson of Gubbeen helped establish a distinctly Irish approach to cheesemaking—one rooted not in centuries-old recipes, but in a willingness to experiment, adapt, and express the character of their farms through cheese.

MILLEENS CHEESE

Milleens is often regarded as one of the foundational cheeses of modern Irish cheesemaking. Veronica and Norman Steele purchased their farm near Eyeries on the Beara Peninsula in 1974, and Veronica soon began experimenting with cheesemaking. What started with the milk from a single cow evolved into one of Ireland's most influential cheeses and helped inspire countless others. Many producers throughout Ireland still credit Veronica with encouraging them to take the leap into cheesemaking. Although Veronica passed away in 2017, her absence remains palpable in conversations with her son, Quinlan.

Her legacy, however, remains visible throughout Ireland's cheese landscape.

Today, Quinlan continues the work. Milleens remains a benchmark of Irish washed-rind cheese: earthy, buttery, and mushroomy, with the characteristic pungency that washed-rind enthusiasts adore. Yet Quinlan speaks as passionately about soil as he does cheese: "We're at the tip of the iceberg understanding what's going on under the earth," he explains. "The biodiversity in the soil and the milk and on the rind of our cheese. It's all the same."

DURRUS CHEESE

Nearby, Durrus Cheese traces its origins to 1979, when Jeffa Gill began making cheese on her farm in West Cork. Like many of Ireland's early artisan cheesemakers, she entered the profession out of necessity as much as ambition.

There was no elaborate business plan. There was a farm, a need to earn a living, and milk that could become something more valuable. More than four decades later, Gill's daughter, Sarah Hennessy, is helping guide the next chapter of the business.

The creamery keeps making cheese largely by hand in a converted farm building, using a Swiss copper-lined vat that has served faithfully for decades. Taking inspiration from Milleens, their flagship Durrus is also one of Ireland's defining washed-rind cheeses. It's supple, savory, and earthy, with a complexity that develops beautifully as it ages. Smaller-format Durrus Óg and the firmer Dunmanus demonstrate the same commitment to craftsmanship. Even as production methods evolve, the focus remains on maintaining the character that made Durrus famous in the first place.

GUBBEEN FARM

Further south, near the coastal town of Schull, Gubbeen Farm feels less like a cheese business and more like a complete agricultural ecosystem. In fact, out of these original three makers, it remains the only farmstead

Travel Tip:

Think you can decline the rental-car insurance? Think again. Ireland is one of the few destinations where many American auto insurance policies and credit-card rental protections don't automatically apply, so check your coverage before you travel.

And those famously narrow roads? Ireland was never conquered by the Romans, meaning it never inherited the extensive Roman road network that shaped much of Europe's transportation infrastructure.



DURRUS CHEESE FARMHOUSE CHEESE



A TRAY OF CHEESES FROM MILLEENS CHEESE



WHEELS OF CHEESE IN BRINE AT GUBBEEN FARM



STIRRING CURD AT CASHEL FARMHOUSE CHEESEMAKERS

operation, milking its own herd of cows that graze surrounding pastures. Tom and Giana Ferguson purchased the farm in the early 1970s, and Giana became one of Ireland's pioneering artisan cheesemakers. Today, Fingal Ferguson, their son, helps oversee a diverse operation that includes livestock, charcuterie, vegetable production, poultry, and handcrafted knives alongside cheesemaking. Fingal shares their family philosophy: "Everything from Gubbeen goes back into Gubbeen."

That's what Irish washed-rind cheeses set out to do: capture the essence of place, or what is often referred to as terroir. Their signature Gubbeen cheese reflects the farm's unique location between Mount Gabriel and the Atlantic Ocean. Produced entirely from the milk of the farm's own herd, the washed-rind cheese is buttery, savory, and deeply expressive of place. For Fingal, every decision revolves around place: "Our goal is to pass forward something better than we got ourselves," he says. "Pass on something better to the next generation."

CASHEL FARMHOUSE CHEESEMAKERS

That sentiment echoes throughout Ireland's artisan cheese community. In County Tipperary, Cashel Farmhouse Cheesemakers represents another important chapter in the country's cheese story. Founded by Louis and Jane Grubb in 1984, Cashel Blue became Ireland's first blue cheese, introducing generations of Irish consumers to artisan blue cheese. At the time, producing blue cheese in Ireland seemed like a risky proposition. As their daughter Sarah Furno recalls, many didn't eat blue cheese. Yet the Grubbs persisted, creating a style that was approachable without sacrificing character. Cashel Blue is now one of the world's most recognizable blues, known for its creamy texture and gentle blue character.

Today, Furno and her husband Sergio Furno operate Cashel while Louis remains actively involved. The creamery also produces Crozier Blue, made from

Everett Antonelli holds a falcon at Ireland's School of Falconry.



More Travel Recommendations:

Sure, some of these might be cliché; others may be tourist traps. But all were highly entertaining, enjoyable, and/or breathtaking!

- ☐ Slip into a traditional music session (known as a "trad")
- ☐ Watch Irish dance at its source
- ☐ Walk a hawk at Ireland's School of Falconry
- ☐ Take a seaweed bath in a whiskey barrel overlooking the Cliffs of Moher
- ☐ Visit ancient ring forts (but keep an eye out for fairy trees and circles!)
- ☐ Hike or take a horse-drawn jaunt through the Gap of Dunloe
- ☐ In a pub, search out a "snug"—a private, enclosed, hidden booth
- ☐ Explore EPIC: The Irish Emigration Museum in Dublin
- ☐ Eat oysters straight from the Atlantic in Galway



CUTTING THE CURD AT
COOLEENEY FARM



DICK WILLEMS
AND HIS CHEESE
AT COOLEA



THE SHEEP AT VELVET CLOUD



Travel Tip:

Take the path less traveled and support a local farmer. Cattlemen Pat and his cousin guide guests right along the edge of the cliffs on their private property. Check out Doolin Cliff Walks.

Travel Tip:

Most of these cheesemakers are not open to visitors. Check out Galway Cheese for cheesemaking events. Cashel and Saint Tola also offer various farm events and agrotourism activities. Check events online in advance and make reservations.



A GOAT GETS A
BACK SCRATCH
AT SAINT TOLA

sheep's milk, and Shepherd's Store, a seasonal sheep's milk Gouda. Cashel is an example of embracing innovation while maintaining traditional values. More than 500 solar panels now provide much of the facility's energy; water recovery systems, waste reduction initiatives, and investment in equipment reflect a long-term view of sustainability.

COOLEENEY FARM

At Cooleeney Farm, the Maher family has spent generations cultivating exceptional milk. Records of awards date back to 1905, but it wasn't until the mid-1980s, amid volatile milk prices, that Breda Maher decided to learn cheesemaking and create an additional outlet for the farm's milk. The result was Cooleeney, one of Ireland's most successful bloomy-rind cheeses. Over time, the range expanded to include Dunbarra, Darú, and Gleann Óir, a goat's milk cheese made with milk from a neighboring farm. Today, four generations of the Maher

family remain involved in the business. Visitors quickly discover that Breda's enthusiasm remains: "I don't ever see it as work," she says. "I just love it. It's not work for me. It's fun."

COOLEA

West Cork's Coolea offers a different perspective on Irish cheesemaking. Founded by Dutch immigrants Helene and Dick Willems in the '80s, the creamery introduced a Gouda-inspired tradition to the Irish countryside. Their son, Dick, now leads production, working with a remarkably small team to produce a single cheese. Made only during the grazing season, Coolea develops from savory and buttery in its youth to rich notes of caramel, toasted nuts, and toffee as it matures. Though inspired by Dutch cheesemaking traditions, it has become unmistakably Irish, a product shaped as much by West Cork pastures as by European heritage.

SAINT TOLA

Ireland's artisan cheese story extends well beyond cow's milk, with newer producers exploring goat and sheep milk cheeses. In County Clare, Saint Tola has become one of the country's most respected goat dairies. Founder Siobhan Ní Ghairbhith left a teaching career more than two decades ago to return to the land and build a farmstead cheesemaking business. Today, St. Tola's herd of Saanen, Toggenburg, and British Alpine goats produces milk that is turned into a range of fresh and aged cheeses, appearing on chef-driven menus throughout Ireland. Their ash-ripened and mold-ripened cheeses showcase the bright citrus, minerality, and elegance that make great goat cheese so compelling.

VELVET CLOUD AND GALWAY CHEESE

Farther north, a newer generation of producers continues to expand the

definition of Irish cheese. In County Mayo, Michael Flanagan launched Velvet Cloud roughly a decade ago, choosing to focus on sheep's milk despite the challenges of operating in a country with relatively little sheep dairy infrastructure. "I chose sheep because I'm a bit crazy," he jokes. Today, Velvet Cloud produces yogurt, fresh cheeses, and aged cheeses including Rockfield, inspired by the mountain cheeses of the Pyrenees.

Meanwhile, in County Galway, Larry and Anne Fahy of Galway Cheese have been producing award-winning artisan cheese since 2013, transforming locally-sourced milk into tomme-style and semi-soft cheeses that showcase another expression of Ireland's evolving cheese landscape.

Together, producers like these demonstrate that Irish cheesemaking is growing through experimentation, adaptation, and a willingness to chart new paths. **C**

GOAT CHEESE AGING
AT GALWAY CHEESE



Thanks to the work of Neal's Yard Dairy, you can find Gubbeen, Durrus, Coolea, and Cashel (as well as Crozier Blue) at many specialty cheese counters across the US. At the time of writing this article, Cooleeney is mid-deal on a new relationship that would result in availability of Gleann Óir in the US.