

Interview with Charles Martell

Written by John Eager

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Charles Martell has been producing cheeses on his Dymock farm since 1972. His Stinking Bishop cheese shot to international fame thanks to the role it played in the film Wallace and Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit (2005)

You have described yourself as 'a child of the sixties' - does that mean you were a hippy?

Like all generations we were a little confused in our teenage years and questioned everything. Yes, I was a hippy at heart but my father was in the military so we were never allowed to grow our hair long!

How did you first get into farming?

My eldest brother was 'the farmer' but didn't end up farming. I always wanted to be close to the land and to farm decently – preferably without a tractor, which I have achieved.

I had a little cottage at Slimbridge where I worked. I managed to sell it well to another staff member. Our small farm, at the time with 10 acres, I bought at auction while standing in what is now our drive. It was 'cheap' because it was derelict and nobody else put in a bid. Later I was able to add more land bit by bit.

How did you get into the business of cheesemaking?

After university I wanted to return to Gloucestershire where I had worked at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Slimbridge. While there I had come across the critically rare Old Gloucester breed of cow. There were just 68 of them left in 1972. I found it an appalling thought to let them die out. I managed to get hold of a bull and 3 cows which we hand-milked at the time. The Old Gloucester breed of cow was originally used to make genuine Double and Single Gloucester cheese, so my way of creating interest in the

breed was to make the genuine cheese with their milk. A chance remark to that effect was made to the Ledbury Reporter and subsequently published. By the end of the next week I seem to remember there was a report in the national daily newspapers that a Gloucestershire farmer was going to make Double Gloucester cheese from Old Gloucester cows' milk. The television picked it up and included me very unwillingly in a documentary which went out in 1973. My life hasn't been the same since.

Besides cheesemaking does your farm produce anything else?

Pork from Gloucestershire Old Spots pigs, Gloucester beef from our surplus steers(male cattle) Cider and perry from our orchards. We are just setting up a distillery and will be producing a spirit from our cider and perry.



Stinking Bishop cheese is now officially recognised as the smelliest cheese in Britain. How do you feel about this particular accolade?

Just a lovely bit of fun – and there's not much point in pretending it doesn't stink!

I've read that your recipe and technique for Stinking Bishop cheese came about as an accident? Is this true? How did the cheese come about?

I've never had a lesson in cheesemaking so Stinking Bishop came about by trial and a lot of error, not really accident –but there were plenty of accidents along the way.I wanted to produce a cheese to honour the memory of the Cistercian monks who used to farm the area and were noted cheesemakers of this type of cheese.

Why is Stinking Bishop so smelly and so sticky?

We wash this cheese in perry which encourages a surface growth of a bacterium called

B. linens which has the characteristic smell and stickiness – which in turn gives a mellow flavour to the interior of the cheese.

How did you find out your Stinking Bishop cheese would make an appearance in the film the Curse of the Were-Rabbit (2005)? What was your initial reaction?

A telephone call I think but I wasn't too excited because although I had heard of Wallace and Gromit I knew nothing about the films. The publicity was fun – some of the journalists who came to our gate led much more interesting lives than I do.

How did you deal with the extra demand for your cheese that followed the film?

We didn't manage very well and I am sure we upset a lot of old customers. We were already running at full capacity before the Wallace and Gromit thing.

In which part of the world would you say Stinking Bishop was most popular?

London for volume but per head I would say the north east of England where Wallace comes from.

I understand you do courses on cheesemaking for international students. Where do your students come from and how do you like being a teacher?

We don't do courses but over the years many foreign students have come to work here and they have all brought something of interest from their own countries while learning about cheesemaking and livestock handling. Having foreign students here has been wonderful because it has been like travelling in reverse – not having the bother of actually going away! Students have come from America in the west to Japan in the east and many countries in between – I think about 17 in all.

Biodiversity seems to have become the latest green buzzword. In regard to your own farming practices is biodiversity something you consider and act on? If so, how?

I am particularly keen on biodiversity in all aspects of our farming here. I keep the local traditional breeds because not enough people do keep and farm with them but instead concentrate on a few ubiquitous breeds like the Holstein cow and monoculture of grain production. I also have researched and sought out over 100 varieties of indigenous Gloucestershire apple varieties, 17 varieties of Gloucestershire plum which I have planted on the farm here, as well as over 70 varieties of perry pear some of which I grow in the farm.

What is your take on organic farming practices?

We do farm organically ourselves (but for my own 'health and safety' I choose to avoid spending long hours sitting down doing paperwork- therefore I am not registered). I don't think we could feed the world farming the way I do and if we fail to come to terms with the burgeoning human population then I don't think we can feed the world using organic methods.

You don't have a website. I find that surprising for an international business in this day and age? Has the information age passed you by?

1. I am too lazy

2. As above I don't want to spend my life sitting in front of a computer (sorry John!)

As a farmer and food producer and, of course, a shopper yourself, how do you see the relationship between supermarkets and producers, supermarkets and consumers and supermarkets and independent shops and traders?

We can't manage without supermarkets now I think. The cucumber sent by ship from

New Zealand to Tesco does most of its individual food miles from the supermarket to the home. – so I understand.

However I don't think supermarkets do much for the local community except for supplying mass cheap food. The profits they make are spent elsewhere.

So personally our default setting isn't the supermarkets – we try to patronise the independents first.

Our policy is to supply independent shops and wholesalers and not supermarkets with our products.

How do you feel about the current economic situation?

I think some of us have over-indulged for the last 15 or so years. The bill is now due.

What advice would you give to local businesses in what is likely to be a tough few years ahead?

Try not to borrow money. It may be cheap now but the rates can only go up. Do what you love doing and do it well – reward will follow.

You've lived and farmed in Dymock for some years now. You must feel quite an affinity to the area? What makes this area special for you?

I've always felt at home here – the people were very welcoming when I arrived here 38 years ago. But I am still a newcomer, although my mother's forebears were named 'Dymock'.

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You must consider yourself a cheese connoisseur; what are your own favourite cheeses?

Cheesemakers aren't really connoisseurs – that title must go to the people that buy the stuff. I do love trying all types of cheese and particularly like it cooked.

Many thanks to Charles Martell for giving the Ledbury Community Portal this interview.

[Images of Gloucester Cattle](#)

[Images of Gloucester Old Spot](#)