

Irish Farmhouse Cheese: A New Food Tradition Born of Many Movements

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ABSTRACT: Irish Farmhouse cheeses first appeared in the late 1970s, initially through restaurants and local shops (Milleens 2022, CAIS 2022). The growth of the number of farmhouse cheesemakers in Ireland from then until now, almost fifty years later, results from movements of people, ideas, tastes and markets.

This paper explores what movements shaped Irish farmhouse cheeses and what motivated farmhouse cheesemakers in Ireland to start and to sustain a business. Through a case study, it is learnt that EU accession is core to the development of Irish farmhouse cheeses and that their makers are diverse in motivation, as well as ideas of success. A motivation typology reveals a tension between the craft and the commercial aspects of the work, and between two crafts: dairying and cheesemaking. At the same time, high levels of cooperation and self-imposed limits to growth demonstrate that Irish farmhouse cheesemakers follow their own routes to success.

This case study contributes to the growing body of literature on new food traditions (Boghossian 2017; Paxson 2016; Boulianne 2014), while also highlighting a part of the Irish food system that is developing methods of transaction and production praised as resilient in an uncertain, unstable food present (Vittuari et al. 2021).

Irish Farmhouse Cheeses: A Context

The idea of a new or invented tradition comes from Hobsbawm and Ranger. They propose that “Invented traditions are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations or which establish their own past through quasi-repetition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, 2).

Agricultural counter-trends were arising throughout industrialised regions in the late 1970s, buoyed by the organic food movement in Europe and the United States, and the nascent Slow Food movement in Italy (Murtagh 2010; Tovey 1997). While cheese was being produced on an industrial scale since the 1930s by Ireland’s newly minted dairy cooperatives (O’Fathartaigh 2014), the last record of cheesemaker on a Irish farmstead as a common practice was roughly a century ago (Sexton 2012; Lucas 1960; Donnelly 1971). The making of cheese in an Irish farmhouse kitchen in the late 1970s can thus be seen as a new tradition, partially in response to the novel situation of rapidly industrialisation agricultural.

Ireland’s Agricultural Landscape

A northerly island with a temperate climate and loamy soils, Ireland is an agricultural nation. Agriculture has

been one of the primary drivers of the young Irish economy beginning in the 1920s, and has been export-oriented since before Ireland’s independence. Isolated by location and culture, Ireland’s trading was primarily with its geographical neighbour, the United Kingdom, until both joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 (Giblin, Kennedy and McHugh 1988).

Membership of the EEC came with financial supports and access to new markets. Irish farms were small in size and diverse in production. Many farmers had come together to form cooperatives through which they could access credit and collectively purchase tools, machinery, seed and other farming necessities. Many of these cooperatives were composed of farmers who were farming dairy cows, and some cooperatives began to pool their milk resources. Processing facilities followed, and by the time of EEC accession, Irish dairying cooperatives were eager and able to follow the lead of other, more mature dairy industries in Germany and Holland which were focused on increasing production (O’Fathartaigh 2014).

Irish farmers were not the only ones to heed the call to produce, and by 1984, the EEC was forced to limit the amount of food produced on farms within the EU, in particular wine and dairy products, including liquid milk. This limit created a surplus of milk and also a financial challenge for those farmers that had taken out loans in the hope of future earnings based on increased production. While the majority of surplus milk produced during this quota period (1984–2015) made butter and skimmed milk derivatives (Donnellen, Hennessy and Thorne 2015, 19), a portion of it became farmhouse cheese. The EU milk quota was to be one of the contributing factors to the success and sustaining of Irish farmhouse cheese, and arguably sped up the formalisation of the supports available for Irish farmhouse cheesemakers.

Just as Irish farmers had access to markets on the European continent from 1973 onwards, so too did farmers from the continent have access, and freedom, to move to and farm in Ireland. Many did, attracted by the amount of land available and the relatively open approach to farming methods. Freedom of movement also allowed for ideas, such as the organic movement and the Slow Food movement, to cross borders and inspire first or second generation farmers to adopt different practices, and others to become “good food” suppliers and supporters (Tovey 1991; 1997; Tobin, Hickey and Linehan 2016; Murtagh 2010).

The National Dairy Council, the government dairy marketing body, helped to establish the Irish Farmhouse Cheesemakers’ Association (CAIS) in 1983. Initially an

organisation for peer-to-peer learning, CAIS supported the creation of farmhouse cheese making courses in national universities and in the national agricultural research centre, Teagasc (Milleens 2022). In terms of a market for farmhouse cheeses, all cheese types except the hard, highly acidic cheddar had not been part of the typical Irish meal since the 1700s, according to travellers’ accounts (Lucas 1960). The re-introduction of farmers’ markets (joining the longer-standing Irish Countrywomen’s Association Country Markets) and the establishment of small-scale distributors connected to the recently-opened supermarkets in the late 1980s provided points-of-sale for the pioneer cheesemakers, and restaurants, guesthouses and cookery schools such as Ballymaloe, as well as early connections to foreign markets such as France, slowly reintroduced the taste and smell of small-scale fermented dairy products to the Irish public (Tobin, Hickey and Linehan 2016).

Coming back to the near present, the agri-food sector is the largest indigenous industry in Ireland and employs 164,400 people, 32% in food and 61% in agriculture, forestry and fishing (OECD 2022; Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine 2021). The Irish artisan sector accounts for 350 producers, 3% of the local market share, encompasses cheese, bread, beer, coffee and chocolate (Bond 2018). Much has been standardised since the late 1970s, with many cheese producers no longer using raw milk, and a guidance created for the use of “artisan” and “farmhouse” in food marketing by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland in 2015. Farmhouse cheese production is now encouraged as a viable livelihood for young farmers or people interested in food production, and has been referred to as a type of “food start-up” in government-supported industry food strategy (Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2015, 55). Accordingly, accelerator programmes focused on scaling a food business in order to supply national supermarkets have been created, for example Food Works Ireland, the Food Academy Supervalu, and Grow with Aldi (Food Works Ireland, 2020; Supervalu, 2020; Aldi, 2020).

In summary, as a new food tradition, farmhouse cheeses in Ireland were not evident for at least one hundred years before the 1970s. Their production arose in the face of two novel situations, namely the rapid mechanisation and industrialisation of Irish agriculture, and the introduction of the EU milk quotas in 1984, and their form and content were shaped partially by the movement of people bringing knowledge, skill and tastes from places with established farmhouse cheese traditions.

The case study was chosen as a research method for its ability to “deal with a full variety of evidence” (Yin 2009, 11). The case study composed of a review of the academic literature, as well as primary data collected from ten farmhouse cheesemakers in Ireland through semi-structured interview, site visits, grey literature such as newspaper articles, and social media analysis.

To identify ten farmhouse cheesemakers, a rough census of farmhouse cheesemakers in Ireland was taken by

combining the publicly available membership list of CAIS,¹ the 2011 publication *Farmhouse Cheeses of Ireland—A Celebration* and the Bord Bia 2010 booklet *Your Guide to Irish Farmhouse Cheese* (CAIS 2022; Anderson and Glyn 2012; Bord Bia 2010). The selection criteria were: the business must meet the FSAI definition of “farmhouse”,² it must have been in operation for at least five years, and must be producing cheese (Food Safety Authority of Ireland 2015). This created a pool of thirty-nine possible participants, from which ten were selected based on diversity of location and time availability (see Figure 1 for the full business profiles).

Types of Motivation	Definition	Keywords and Key Actions
Commercial	The desire to achieve financial objectives.	Financial goals; supplement household income; make a living; make lots of money; selling; salesperson.
Lifestyle	The desire for a lifestyle associated with a particular kind of work, often different from a 9-to-5 office job.	Personal well-being; meaningful, challenging work; job satisfaction; flexibility; work-life balance.
Craft	The desire to practice the craft in question.	Passion; quality; creativity; traditional values or skill; knowledge; experiment.
Alterity	The desire to create “an alternative system of food production and distribution not based exclusively on commodity relationship and profit maximisation.”	Social value; environmental well-being; social well-being (altruism); direct sales; consumer-producer relationship.

Figure 1. Motivation analysis framework based on Pret and Cogan (2018) and Kirwan (2004).

Motivation Framework

To avoid the over-collection of data, Yin (2009) recommends some theory generation before any data is collected. With this in mind, a framework for analysing the motivation of the farmhouse cheesemaker was developed. Owner-manager motivation gives an indication of what moves an owner-manager to begin and sustain a business, and has been noted as highly important in the direction of a business of this micro scale (Parry 2010). To build the typology, first a general definition of farmhouse food producer was sought. Farmhouse is close to artisan in the FSAI marketing guidelines. The artisan producer has been referred to in the literature as an individual that produces food in a way that is low in mechanisation and high in geographically-embedded

No.	Business Age (Years)	No. of Workers	Participant Profile
1	22	4	First time farmer and cheesemaker.
2	10	1	Diversified farmer, first time cheesemaker.
3	5	3	Diversified farmer, first time cheesemaker.
4	30	5	Diversified Farmer, first time cheesemaker, no longer farming.
5	29	4	Second generation cheesemaker from abroad,
6	18	4	Diversified farmer, cheesemaker from abroad.
7	28	7	Diversified farmer, cheesemaker from abroad.
8	13	4	Cheesemaker and farmer from abroad.
9	25	7	Diversified farmer, first time cheesemaker.
10	18	7	First time farmer and cheesemaker.

Figure 2. Case study business profiles.

knowledge and skill, and as someone that uses local ingredients (Sage 2003; Tregear 2005; 2011; Blundel and Smith 2013; Kirwan 2004). At the same time, the farmhouse food producer who is part of a new food tradition, as is the case in the Irish farmhouse cheeses community, is entrepreneurial, more so than the traditional artisan or craftsperson of the past (Pret and Cogan 2019), since they are pioneering a way of producing and a product that has not been present in a food culture for a certain period of time (Boulianne 2014; Boghossian 2017). Pret and Cogan (2019) propose a typology for artisan entrepreneurs in general: businesses can be started for lifestyle, commercial, craft and/or altruity reasons. To account for the fact that new traditions often form in opposition to something (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and also to acknowledge the partial origins of farmhouse production in alternative agricultural movements of the 1970s, the “altruity” motivation as proposed in the Pret and Cogan 2019 typology was substituted for “alterity” as defined by Kirwan (2004) (see Figure 2). This adapted motivation typology informed the development of semi-structured interview questions. Also included in the interview were questions concerning attitude towards business growth, and strategies the cheesemaker used to overcome business challenges.

The data was were analysed using NVivo software and an open-coding method, allowing for themes to emerge, as well as the findings that emerged from the data when filtered through the motivation typology.

Findings

The case study demonstrated that solely commercial motivations for starting and sustaining a farmhouse cheese business were rare, yet commercial motivations were part of the motivational mix for the majority of case study participants (see Figure 3).

Participant	Commercial	Lifestyle	Craft	Altruity
1	✓	✓	✓	
2		✓	✓	✓
3		✓		✓
4	✓			
5		✓	✓	
6	✓		✓	✓
7	✓		✓	✓
8		✓	✓	
9	✓	✓		✓
10	✓	✓		✓

Figure 3. Motivations to start a cheesemaking business.

The Desire for Tastes

At the time of EEC accession, farmhouse cheese began to be produced in small quantities in the West Coast of Ireland by three cheesemakers, all spurred by experimentation and the drive to fulfil a desire for cheese not available (Milleens 2022). At this time, there was a low demand for non-cow dairy products (participant 6), and a lack of diversity of cheeses in the local shops (participant 7).

“I grew up [*abroad*] and one of the sadnesses was all you could buy [*in Ireland at the time*] was cheddar, cheddar, cheddar, and I craved and longed for soft cheeses, cheeses that smelled [...]” (participant 6).

Cheese began to be made in the home kitchen to fulfil personal desire and the desire to make use of excess milk from the household farm. Not only was there a lack of diversity in fabrication styles, there was also a lack of diversity in milk types. Of the two goats’ cheese makers interviewed, one came from another European country, bringing the goats with them, and another started making goats’ cheese by chance, after being introduced to the health properties of it. Initially, those who relocated intended to make only goat’s milk but the market was not there. The Irish public had no taste for sheep or goat food products at the time, unlike other cuisines on the European continent. This quote demonstrates that change in tastes for farmhouse goats cheese over time: “When I started it was not easy to sell goats cheese and now it’s easier to sell goats cheese than cows cheese [...] Now I don’t have enough (*cheese*). In the past two years I haven’t taken on any new customers” (participant 7).

A Love of the Craft

A personal interest can be connected with an appreciation of the craft of cheesemaking. Contrary to industrial cheese production, farmhouse cheese is made by hand, and the cheesemaker is directly engaging in the process of cheese making daily, from inoculating liquid milk, to cutting curds, to filling molds, to testing, turning, aging.

The process itself and the constant tweaking that is needed to achieve the desired result is the source of most joy for participant 7. Cheesemaking equipment similar to traditional cheese presses and copper vats found in alpine cheese making establishments were used by some. Another participant stated that when they retire from commercial farmhouse cheesemaking, they will get some goats and make some cheese (participant 1). These elements demonstrate a love for the craft of cheesemaking. In addition, for some, cheesemaking was not the only craft present on the farm: animals were also being raised and milked. Indeed for one participant (3), “we don’t have to put an effort into loving farming. We kind of have to put an effort into loving cheese.”

The level of control over the cheese and the degree of attention it required were at the same time sources of stress and reward for this participant: “You’re in control of it, you get the reward if you put the effort in, but if you don’t, you only have yourself to blame.”

Another indication of the love of the craft, whether it was cheesemaking or dairying, was a lack of interest in leaving the hands-on work to become a manager (participant 7; participant 3).

The Lifestyle

The decision to dedicate one’s life to a craft is a lifestyle choice. Other aspects of running a small business can also be attractive for some, such as independence, autonomy, and the ability to set one’s own targets and definitions of success (Parry 2010). It was widely acknowledged that hard work was core to the daily life of cheesemaking, and that rewards, particularly financial, could vary. Participant 5: “I make a living of it. I’m not poor. It was always supposed to be a way of life, not a money-making business. Needing [...] in a position to expand but I’m reluctant. I like my life the way it is: 100% effort but I have a life outside, hobbies.”

The lifestyle of hard, manual work connected with seasons, animals and a living foodstuff aligned with personal values concerning what we eat and how we farm. A desire for a national food policy that supports family farms, decentralised distribution and processing facilities, and a stronger vision regarding Ireland’s “good food” potential was expressed (participants 1, 2, 6, 9). To further elaborate, evidence of the interest in decentralisation could be found the high level cooperation within the case study. Some were members of a producer group. Others cooperated with local dairy cooperatives. Participant 2 made organic cheese in the local processing cheese facility and made farmhouse cheese by hand. This was a temporary

arrangement: after a period away, they returned to the same facility to find that it had been purchased by a larger cooperative and had closed its doors to outsiders. Lastly, there was cooperation between established farmhouse cheesemakers and new entrants: one participant supported the set-up of another farmhouse cheese producer in the area, sharing cheesemaking knowledge, cheesemaking facilities, and supply chain contacts (participant 3 and participant 8). This quote demonstrates the potential for a diverse farmhouse cheesemaking community if businesses remain small: “The whole artisan market has grown. New people have started up and I don’t see them as a threat at all. I can’t supply enough, I don’t have the stock to supply my customers... as long as they don’t start producing ten times as much as I do...I think it’s just normal.”

Overall, the participants in the case study held an attitude that capped employment growth, capped cheese output, and slow but continuous financial growth were the most desirable forms of growth for a farmhouse cheese business. Consideration of product quality and lifestyle demands informed business growth attitudes, as well as a reluctance to distance themselves from the craft of cheesemaking or dairying by becoming a manager. All of the above motivations (see figure 4) combined resulted in a commercial approach that follows the needs of the craft as well as the market as well as the cheese-maker/owner-manager. For some, the business potential of the activity was an unexpected outcome of home experimentation; for others, it was the driving factor for moving from milk production into cheese production.

Analysis

This case study demonstrates that farmhouse cheesemaking in Ireland was a pioneering activity when it first began: new food products that contained new tastes and smells were introduced to the Irish market and slowly adopted. The first farmhouse cheesemakers began motivated initially through a personal interest in the product, combined with a need to make a living. The ability to visit other European countries, to visit traditional cheese making establishments, to import second hand equipment and to learn skills were essential to the creation of Irish farmhouse cheeses. At the same time, the ability for people of other food cultures to relocate to Ireland and practice farmhouse crafts in micro-enterprises increased the diversity of what was being made and how it was being made. The EEC limits to liquid milk production was a further motivator for certain Irish dairy farmers to diversify into cheese production. By the mid 1980s, farmers did not need to leave the island to learn farmhouse cheese productions skills: dedicated courses had been established in national universities, supported by the National Dairy Council and the newly formed Irish Association for Farmhouse Cheese (CAIS). Thus, a restrictive policy boosted the support and promotion of Irish Farmhouse Cheese

Twenty years on and farmhouse cheese production is a way to make a living from small-scale dairy farming. However, the personal risk is higher because the cheesemaker is responsible for the sale and success of the cheese, unlike selling milk into a dairy cooperative. At the same time, the market for farmhouse cheese has grown, the diversity of cheese available for sale has grown, and supermarkets are stocking farmhouse cheeses through speciality retailers and cheesemaker producer groups (Guild of Fine Food 2019). Farmhouse cheesemaking has moved into its second generation and is an aging new tradition.

The most recent industry-led policy for Irish agri-food highlights artisan food production as a method of farm diversification on the one hand, and food start-ups (businesses that begin micro with an ambition to continuously scale) as a means of increasing the national agri-food industry product mix (DAFM 2021a; 2021b). From this case study, it can be seen that Irish farmhouse cheese businesses have had the pioneering and adaptive characteristics of a start-up, without the ambition for continuous business growth. A passion for the craft and a prioritisation of lifestyle choices instill natural production limits. This in turn allows for more people to enter the space as cheesemakers, and increases the diversity of product, land management, and practice.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to view the business and craft of Irish farmhouse cheesemaking through the eyes of the farmhouse cheesemaker in Ireland. It did so through a case study of ten Irish farmhouse cheesemakers. It has become evident that the accession to the EEC deeply shaped the Irish cheesemaking sector of today, through the free movement of people, ideas and skills, but also through the EEC-mandated restriction of movement of commodities during the 1984–2015 milk quota period. It has been proposed that Irish farmhouse cheesemaking is a new Irish food tradition, arising in response to the ongoing industrialisation of Irish agriculture, and spurred on by the “good food” movement happening across the continent of Europe at the time, as well as the subsequent quotas used to slow the rate of production which the industrialisation of agricultural processes facilitated.

The diversity of owner-manager motivations can be accredited to the diverse points of entry into Irish farmhouse cheesemaking. However, the case study was consistent in examples of cooperation and limits to growth, highlighting that while the Irish farmhouse cheese business and craft is a mutable thing, the new tradition may be one of sustainable, interconnected small-scale farmhouse food production, that has arisen from a cross-fertilisation of ideas and people from the European continent. If understood and nurtured, this approach could be one that is resilient in the face of near-future supply chain threats.

From the findings, it can be said that the typology developed for farmhouse food producer motivations is comprehensive: throughout the case study, no other motivational category appeared. However, as a categorising tool, it would be strengthened through testing on a larger sample.

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Notes

1. CAIS stands for “The Association of Irish Farmhouse Cheesemakers”.
2. The FSAI define the term “farmhouse” as: “The term ‘farmhouse’ or similar terms that create an impression that a food originates on a farm should only be used on foods that can legitimately claim to meet all of the following criteria:
 - c. The food is made in a single location on a farm (where an individual or group of individuals exercise(s) an agricultural activity).
 - d. The food is made by a micro-enterprise (employs fewer than ten people and whose annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet does not exceed €2 million).
 - e. The characteristic ingredient(s) used in the food are grown or produced locally (within 100 km of the manufacturing/food service establishment).”

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