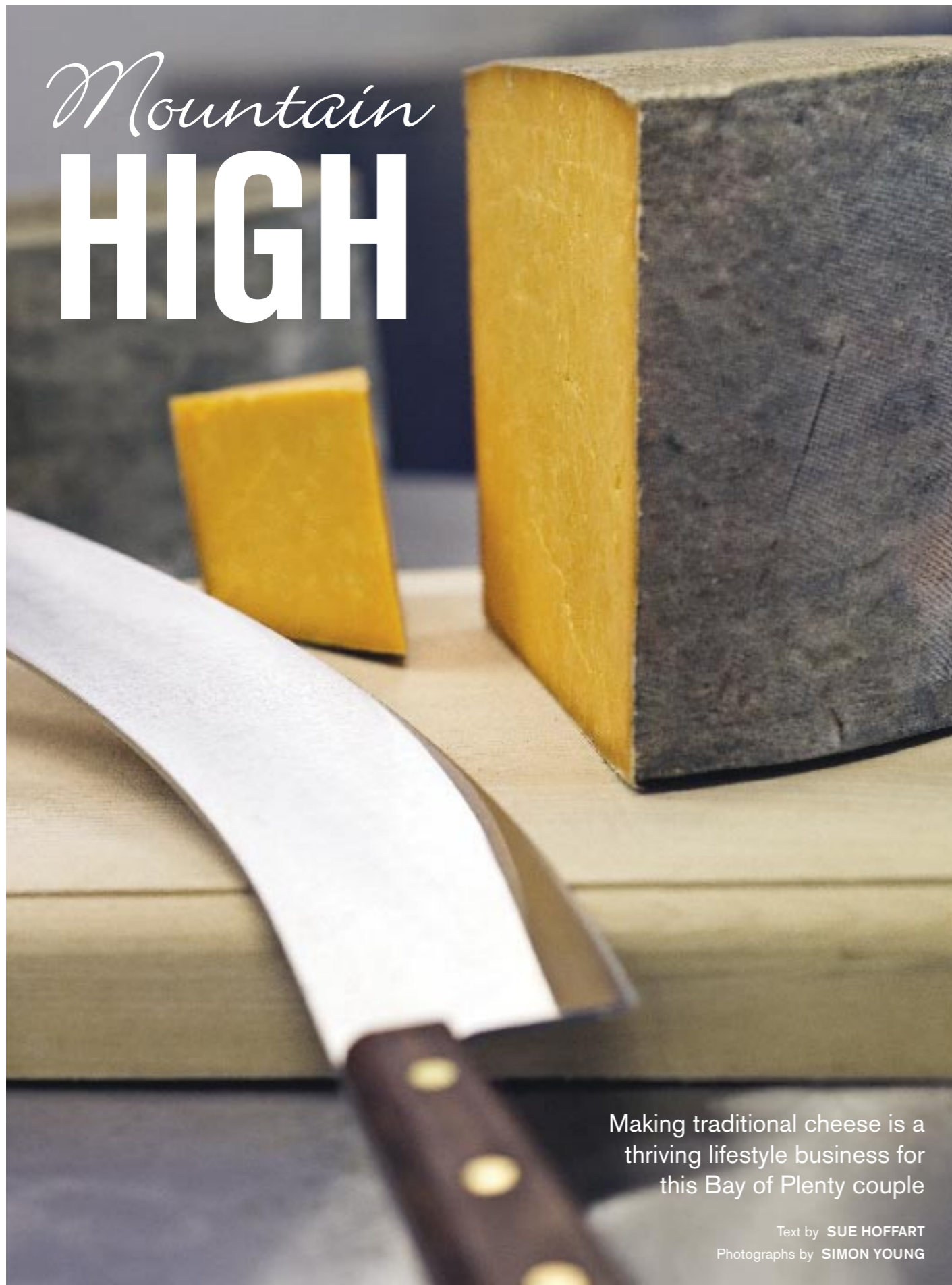


Mountain HIGH



Making traditional cheese is a thriving lifestyle business for this Bay of Plenty couple

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Photographs by SIMON YOUNG



When cheesemaker Chris Whalley fancies a decent cup of coffee, he grabs his paint-stripping gun. The former industrial chemist likes to mess with the technical aspects of food production. In his rural cheese factory, in the Kaimai foothills near Katikati, this translates to fiddling with temperature and acidity levels or monitoring naturally occurring moulds and hygiene requirements. Since he also likes his coffee to taste just right, he uses a heat gun to roast his own coffee beans in the family garage.

The Whalley home sits 50 metres uphill from their factory, on a rise that overlooks farmland and orchards and a generous sweep of the Bay of Plenty. Their Mount Eliza brand name was borrowed from a peak in the densely green Kaimai mountain range at their backs. Fat pigs doze beside the steep driveway and chooks cluck around the lawn, where a horse hangs its head hopefully over the railings in search of a scratch or an apple.

This is exactly the kind of rural idyll Englishman Chris and his Matamata-born wife Jill envisaged when they decided to emigrate from the United Kingdom with children Rebecca, now 14, and Owen, seven. The move, in October 2006, was spurred by a family camping trip to Wales. Chris was fed up with his 20-year career in the printing industry and looking for a new direction when the cheese lovers visited a small dairy factory while on holiday. Inspired, he quit his job and spent a year working alongside cheesemakers and attending courses, learning to make the kind of hard, English-style Cheshire, red Leicester and double Gloucester cheeses that have become his specialty.

The promise of self employment appealed to Chris, as did the prospect of rural living. Jill had no qualms about giving up her



foodproducer

occupational therapy practice in North Yorkshire. "I love the country life," she says. "I'm never happier than with a bale of hay in my hand. My dream was to marry a farmer - now I am one."

She is also assistant cheesemaker and works part time as an occupational therapist, based in Tauranga.

Prior to moving, the couple researched New Zealand's dairy industry and discovered a gap on the nation's cheeseboards. They found plenty of gouda and soft cheeses and abundant blues but realised much of the hard cheese is imported.

"I think it's more difficult to make a hard cheese," Chris says. "There is more handling, more variables, you need more equipment. But we fancied doing something a bit out of the box."

Their Mount Eliza Cheshire cheese has a hard, crumbly texture and a tangy taste akin to sour cream. Jill likes to pair it with fruit chutneys and crackers, fruit cake or sweet biscuits. The Red Leicester takes its red colour from a dye extracted from the South American annatto berry. It is smooth textured, with sweet, nutty flavours and is a good melting cheese. Each hefty block weighs between 7kg and 8kg.

Setting up was tougher than expected. All the equipment had to be imported from the UK and Germany, including moulds and vats, special cheese-cutting blades and the food-grade butter muslin cloth that is used to wrap the cheese. And builders and plumbers were unaccustomed to dealing with the specifications of a boutique cheese factory.

This page: Jill and Chris Whalley love the country lifestyle. After 20 years in the printing industry, Chris welcomed the change to self-employment and for Jill it was a dream fulfilled.



An existing calf shed has been renovated to pristine food factory standards. From the old stockyards, visitors enter a sanitised zone of stainless steel and scrubbed hands, with compulsory sterile covers for heads and feet.

Chris is at home here, thanks to 20 years of working in factories and puzzling over scientific processes. Jill is in charge of marketing and sales, though she does help shovel curd and turn the cheeses, then bandage them in muslin to protect them and prevent over-drying. The Whalleys say they are the only commercial cheesemakers in New Zealand using the traditional method of wrapping – or bandaging – cheese. Other manufacturers prefer to encase their products in plastic or wax, or use a vacuum sealer.

Many of the Mount Eliza cheeses are also allowed to gather the naturally occurring microscopic mould that flies through the air around their property. They love the way the penicillium roqueforti bloom streaks their cheese rind in blue and lends a distinctive, musky aroma, and the fact that the bluey growth is both natural and traditional.

“Some of these cheeses date back to Roman times,” says Jill. “They generally made hard cheeses because they could be kept for long periods, or through the winter. Cheese is a way of preserving milk.

“I think the food industry has been so obsessed with having all food the right shape and size that we’ve gone overboard. So a truly natural product that varies in shape and size can be seen as inferior. Whereas in fact it’s good, natural and superior.”

It seems the Whalleys are not alone in their thinking. They currently produce about 100kg of cheese a week, supplying specialty stores nationwide, and sell at farmers markets in Tauranga and Katikati.

Although Chris is in no hurry to expand the Mount Eliza range, a new farmhouse cheddar is currently maturing. “We are trying to make a limited range of cheese very well,” he says.



These pages: To establish the factory, specialty equipment was imported from the United Kingdom and Germany. Mount Eliza now produces about 100kg of cheese a week.



CURDS AND WHEY

The labour-intensive cheesemaking process requires about eight hours of constant monitoring and physical exertion.

A mix of bacteria – the cheese culture – is added to locally purchased milk. The culture produces lactic acid which sours the milk and gives the cheese its tartness. After about an hour, rennet is added to create a jelly-like consistency. About 45 minutes later, the resulting curd is cut into bean-sized pieces, heated and the whey drained off. Most whey is spread on paddocks as fertiliser, though some is fed to resident pigs. The mixture is left to settle, then chopped into blocks. At this stage, Jill says, “It looks like really badly cooked, overdone, rubbery scrambled egg.” The blocks must be turned every 10 to 15 minutes to drain off more whey and acidity has to be monitored. At the desired acidity level, the cheese is re-cut, salt is added and it is packed into moulds. These moulds sit in a press for two days, which forces the curd together, extracts any remaining whey and forms cheese. A thousand litres of milk will produce about 100kg of cheese. Each block of cheese is bandaged in muslin and, if properly stored, the finished product should keep for at least a year or two. 