

WILL STUDD

Australia's die-hard cheese expert has a soft spot for artisan cheeses, especially those made from raw milk - a delicacy for which he'll fight to enjoy.



IF YOU KNOW CHEESE, YOU KNOW OF WILL STUDD. NO OTHER NAME IN AUSTRALIA IS SO SYNONYMOUS WITH ARTISAN CHEESE. BESIDES HIS TWO TOMES ABOUT THE DELICIOUS DAIRY PRODUCT, WHICH HAVE MADE HIM AN AWARD-WINNING INTERNATIONAL AUTHORITY, HIS TELEVISION SERIES, *CHEESE SLICES*, SEES HIM TRAVERSE THE GLOBE IN SEARCH OF THE STORIES BEHIND THE WORLD'S BEST, LEAST-KNOWN AND MOST-LOVED CHEESES.

"There is such an amazing diversity and so many wonderful stories about the traditions and skills of artisan cheesemaking," says Will. "It's something you find all over the world, not just in countries with green grass and cows. There are even people in desert areas making great sheep's- and goat's-milk cheeses."

The British expat has spent the better part of the past four decades seeking out the world's finest cheeses. Whether he's exploring Italy's largest specialist cheese fair or taking a gander at the cheese revolution in Japan, Will's knowledge is evident and his enthusiasm is infectious.

Not surprisingly, the question Will is most often asked, is how he came to be so passionate about cheese. "As a child, in England, I was packed off to boarding school from the age of eight, where the terrible food taught me to appreciate what I was missing out on. I have fond memories of coming home to abundant seasonal produce picked fresh from my family's huge vegetable garden and orchard in Kent," he says.

The family spent every summer holidaying in Southern Ireland, where Will had his first taste of raw-milk cheese. "There was no electricity, water was piped from a mountain spring, and fresh milk had to be collected in large pails. Being raw [unpasteurised] milk, it would eventually curdle. My aunt, who wasted nothing, showed me how to turn the milk into delicious natural yoghurt. Occasionally, she would experiment with a drained, salted cheese sprinkled with fresh chives."

Such early encounters, including a part-time job, blossomed into Will's lifelong love affair with cheese. As an 18-year-old student, he began working at upscale food providore Justin de Blank in London's Belgravia, where he first tasted Swiss *Gruyère* cut from a wheel.

"It was a defining moment in terms of my love of cheese," he says. "It was a revelation just how much better it tasted than the stuff we'd normally get in the supermarkets in the UK. When I really looked at it, I realised three things: first, it had been carefully matured; second, it hadn't been vacuum-packed; and third, it had been selected on the basis of flavour rather than just on price. Since then, my whole outlook and the driving force behind my career has been about looking for quality and flavour."

Entrepreneurial in his early 20s, Will borrowed £6000 to open his first up-market delicatessen, Relish, in central London, where he sold the finest fresh produce he could find. It was so successful that within five years, he'd self-funded the expansion of the chain to include seven delicatessens around central London.

Despite the success of his business, by 1981, it was time for a sea change. "I met my Australian partner, Bonnie, in London, and after our daughter, Fleur, was born, we decided to immigrate to Australia in search of better quality of life for our new family," he says.

Surveying the local food scene at the time, he was impressed by the high standard and affordability of our produce, but dismayed by the dismal state of the cheese industry.

"There was basically no production of specialist cheeses other than some very small producers of Italian and Greek cheeses on the outskirts of major cities," Will recalls. "The Australian cheeses were blocks of industrialised cheddar with strange names, such as Coon and 'tasty.'" He found the paucity of European cheeses depressing, and their presentation more so.

Will briefly considered a career as a cheesemaker, but instead established a wholesale food company, Butterfields, importing and distributing specialty cheeses. He merged the distribution part of the business into the group running King Island Dairy in the mid-1980s and continued importing under the new name of Fromagent Australia. In the early '90s, he formed the Calendar Cheese Company, supplying quality cheeses to delis and restaurants across Australia, but he has recently sold most of his shares in the business to focus on his books and television show, *Cheese Slices*.

"My first experience of working in television was with Geoff Jansz on *What's Cooking*," Will recalls, "but my real break came after filming with Neil Perry at Richmond Hill Cafe & Larder, which I established with Stephanie Alexander and partners in 1997."

Thankfully – and in no small part because of Will's efforts – the local landscape is dramatically different today, with a wide range of artisan cheeses, both locally produced and imported, readily available. However, when it comes to true progress in the industry, a thorn remains in Will's side: the raw-milk issue. Despite his many years of wrangling with Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), Australia remains one of the few countries to almost totally ban the production and sale of cheese made from raw milk on the grounds of perceived food safety issues. (As the law stands, cheese produced in Australia must be heat-treated to destroy foodborne pathogens.) Will, and others in the industry, argue that while pasteurisation kills pathogens, it also kills flavour, and that with modern dairy practices the risks are virtually non-existent. »

“There is no rational, scientific reason,” Will says. “It’s partly due to the influence of the large cooperative producers who are stakeholders in FSANZ, and partly due to the influence of the state dairy authorities.” He adds that you only need to taste raw-milk cheese once to tell the difference, and argues that by pasteurising milk you destroy its terroir, the special characteristics of the climate and geography it comes from; in other words: its sense of place. “When you pasteurise milk, you denature it and hide its origin. Once you deny small cheesemakers the ability to choose their milk source, you’re effectively denying the regional identity of the cheese and encouraging large-scale production.

“Discovering the depth of flavour in a well-made raw-milk cheese is like watching colour television for the first time after years of black and white. It also connects us to the centuries-old tradition of making cheese from raw milk. The right to continue this traditional method of cheesemaking is one of the most important issues facing cheesemakers around the world today.”

In January 2002, Will infamously imported 80 kilograms of *Roquefort* “for personal use” as a protest against the banning of the cheese in 1994, which occurred when he questioned FSANZ as to why imported *Roquefort* was okay but local production was not. (To his horror, this resulted in the imported cheese being banned, too.)

The *Roquefort* was impounded and, after a protracted and expensive court case, during which a dairy magazine dubbed Will a “food terrorist” and he was threatened with 10 years in jail or a \$100,000 fine if he sold any of the cheese, he was ordered to bury it in a landfill. In September 2003, the crusading cheese lover gave the *Roquefort* a fitting burial, complete with a hearse, a coffin draped with the French flag and a rousing rendition of *La Marseillaise*, assuring plenty of media attention.

The case resulted in a call for a review of the regulations. However, except for the lifting of the 11-year ban on importing *Roquefort*, not much has changed. A recently released assessment report by FSANZ again resulted in no fundamental changes to the current regulations except for ongoing review. “I’m a fairly patient guy, but I reckon waiting 10 years for that is a pretty woeful result considering where we sit compared with the rest of the world,” Will says.

New Zealand, however, recently changed its laws to allow the sale and production of raw-milk cheeses. “New Zealand used to have even more stringent laws than Australia, but since it’s changed the regulations, there are great cheeses over there. You can go into New World [a local supermarket] and buy a French raw-milk cheese – it’s fantastic. Eventually, there will be some real specialists and they’ll make a real go of it,” Will says. “It’s not rocket science. If the Irish, British, Americans and Kiwis can do it, why can’t we?”

“People who make raw-milk cheeses tend to take a lot more care in how they make them, to tease out the true flavours of the raw milk. We have fantastic-quality milk in Australia but we still don’t have the choice about how we can turn that milk into great-quality cheese.”

Will says it was the support and enthusiasm he encountered in the wake of the *Roquefort* case that encouraged him to make *Cheese Slices*, which roams the globe, exploring not only the famous but also the lesser-known cheeses, such as Himalayan yak’s cheese, one of the oldest and most primitive.

Cheese Slices is part food show, part travel show and part documentary. It records history for posterity, whether visiting the few remaining producers still making clothbound cheddar in Somerset in south-west England, or travelling high into the mountains of Spain to document the producers making Basque cheeses according to centuries-old techniques and traditions.

“Since the 1950s, the global dairy industry has focused on what it calls ‘progress’, which is about producing uniform, predictable industrial cheeses and taking the guesswork out of producing,” Will says. “Only in the past 20 to 25 years have we seen more people looking for interesting cheeses that really reflect where they come from.

“The people we meet are genuinely obsessed with what they do – you have to be obsessed to make cheese 365 days a year. I really admire that – I admire their passion. People talk about my passion for cheese. Yeah, sure, I’m passionate about cheese, but it’s the people who make it and

where it comes from that I’m really passionate about. Without their commitment, we wouldn’t have all these extraordinary cheeses.” For more information about Will, his TV series and his selection of cheese recipes, visit cheeseslices.com. ●

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