

A roving ambassador for cheese

Peter Marsh

Sometimes, doing a headstand works wonders, says Glyn Woolley. That is exactly what he did when tempers were running so high over a pay deal at the London milk depot where he was working in the 1970s that the delivery men threatened to strike. "I said: 'If I stand on my head on the table, will you go back to work?'" He promptly upended himself and the milkmen were, it seems, impressed. "They went back to their milk rounds and came back the next day for a proper discussion in a much calmer atmosphere," says Mr Woolley.

Today, in a cramped office in an industrial estate in Corsham, Wiltshire, Mr Woolley laughs as he recalls those events. During a lifetime in the dairy industry, he has had to be resourceful to become the owner-manager of Coombe Castle, a leading exporter of specialist UK cheeses, that sends products with names such as Stinking Bishop and Lord of the Hundreds as far afield as the US and Japan.

"I am a fighter and I don't like to give up on anything even if it means a huge amount of effort," he says. During the 2002 foot and mouth outbreak in the UK, for instance, that meant "days spent pestering" government officials, and getting the local MP to intervene so the company could sell cheeses from regions not affected by the disease.

He had already learnt the value of persistence a couple of years earlier, when a consignment of cheese to the US was ruined in transit. "When they opened the door to the container the cheese ran out," he says. "It had melted because the controls in the refrigeration had become faulty." A drawn-out fight with the insurers ended with Mr Woolley sending a long letter to the chairman of the insurance company: "He agreed, so within a matter of days we got the £50,000... it taught me the valuable lesson that you should never give up."

Mr Woolley set up Coombe Castle in 1980 with two co-founders but now owns 100 per cent of the business. A wiry 64-year-old, who packs a lot of energy into his 5ft 6in frame, Mr Woolley says he is "continually fascinated" by British cheese because of the variations in the product according to the region where it is made and the traditions behind it.

"If you can sell to consumers in another country, such as Japan or Australia, a specific variety of British cheese, you are not just selling them an item of food but telling them something of interest about Britain and its heritage," he says.

Mr Woolley started Coombe Castle after 15 years at Unigate, one of the UK's big integrated dairy companies. That move coincided roughly with the revival of a specialist cheese industry in the UK, after a period when mass-produced slabs had become synonymous with British output. About 200 small, mostly rural producers make cheese using traditional, labour-intensive techniques – some of which eschew pasteurisation. Sales of these "artisan" cheese products in 2009 were about £200m (\$318m, €228m), a huge increase since the mid-1990s. While most of it is bought domestically, exports have become an increasingly big source of revenues.

Coombe Castle's key commercial partners are about 40 mainly small and specialist cheese producers, which provide it with most of its products. The business has also developed relationships with 40 or so overseas distributors and retailers. Out of Coombe Castle's expected sales of £8m in the year to March 2010, three-quarters will come from cheese exports to 40 countries.

"British cheese did not have much of a name in the US until a few years ago," says Edouard Damez, a cheese buyer at H-E-B Central Market, a Texas-based retail group. "Glyn is one of the people who have helped change perceptions."

Mr Woolley reflects that he has always tried to take an imaginative approach. "I realised that if you are going to sell a new type of British cheese in another country you will have a better chance of success if you give it an unusual name," he says. Monikers Mr Woolley has helped devise for cheeses include Royal Blue Stilton, Dorset Drum and Slack-Ma-Girdle (see below).

As a child, says Mr Woolley, "I had a lot of time on my hands and I loved to read and write... My childhood encouraged me to use my imagination. Also, I had to be a fighter and an improviser". Not only was he raised on a remote Welsh farm by an aunt who had no other children, but chronic asthma meant he did not attend school until he was 10.

That inner resilience was needed in the years following the launch of Coombe Castle with a colleague from Unigate and a farmer who was to provide much of the cheese. The investment cash Mr Woolley provided was £100, to pay for the equipment needed to run the business from his home. He took 25 per cent of the equity, with the rest owned by the two partners. At first, they exported whatever cheese they could get hold of, including some "commodity" brands such as standard types of cheddar. By 1988, Mr Woolley wanted to concentrate more on specialist varieties, so he bought out his partners.

The business's next crisis was on Black Wednesday in 1992 when sterling slumped against the other European currencies. In one hour, says Mr Woolley, the company was nearly sunk and only slashing costs over the following weeks saved it.

Less dramatic, but equally serious, was that by the mid-1990s the industry was increasingly hard for smaller companies. "After a lot of sleepless nights worrying whether I could stay in business, I tried much harder to start developing relationships with key specialist suppliers where the prospects of getting reasonable margins were higher," Mr Woolley says.

At that point, running the business became easier, partly because more specialist cheesemakers were starting up who wanted to develop export markets. Under the arrangement with his suppliers – Mr Woolley calls them "collaborators" – Castle Coombe not only provides an export outlet for individual products but also helps to develop the market overall. For instance, he arranges for foreign buyers to visit farms and dairies where the cheese is made. David Hartley, managing director of Wensleydale Creamery, a Yorkshire-based producer, describes him as a "roving ambassador" for the sector.

"I used to spend half the year travelling overseas to visit customers – now this is down to two months," says Mr Woolley.

Such is the popularity of the cheeses that he expects the company to achieve sales of £10m in 2011.

The company could have expanded faster if he had been prepared to gamble early on and take in equity or debt from outside to finance growth. But Mr Woolley has always taken a conservative approach to finance and, like many small business owners, prefers to have money in the bank: Coombe Castle currently has no debts and a cash balance of £100,000.

External finance would also have meant sharing control of the business again. "I never liked the idea of others coming in and interfering with how I wanted to run the company," he says. "I could perhaps have grown the business faster but I doubt if I would have had as much fun."

Names that add flavour

The UK produces about 700 distinct varieties of cheese, and many make the most of unusual names.

Some of these are based on genuine traditional monikers whose origins are lost in the mists of time.

Glyn Woolley, managing director of Coombe Castle, which has built a reputation for exporting distinctive artisanal cheese, says the names often help the cheese to sell in overseas markets. "The Americans in particular like a distinctive name," he says.

One supplier to Coombe Castle is Charles Martell, who has made cheese on his Gloucestershire farm since 1972. Mr Martell says that when he came up with an idea for a "soft, squidgy" cheese coated with nettles and with a lemony flavour, he wanted to give it a name people would remember.

Together with Mr Woolley, he opted for Slack-Ma-Girdle, named after a cider apple that was formerly grown in large numbers. Slack-Ma-Girdle is probably derived from "slack my girl" – an expression whose meaning is obscure and possibly risqué.

They decided to use the name only when selling to the US. In Britain, the cheese goes under the more restrained name of Mayhill.

Other cheeses sold by Mr Woolley on behalf of UK cheese producers include Celtic Promise, Shepherd's Purse Lavender, Fiddler's Green and Sticky Toffee

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