



# CHEESE MATTERS

Cheese Beginnings

BY KRIS LLOYD

Simon Johnson is obsessed with food quality; his passion is uniqueness and his primary objective around food is flavour. He is also a self-confessed cheese addict, but admits he is no cheese expert. He now has eight Simon Johnson retail stores across Australia offering a range of high-end food products including the jewel in the crown: cheese!

New Zealand born, Johnson began his career in food as an apprentice chef and spent a number of years cooking in Sydney and Auckland restaurants before permanently moving to Sydney in 1987. In 1992 he opened a showroom for chefs in Pyrmont, Sydney, with Australia's first specialist in-store fromagerie or cheese room. It wasn't long before the showroom transformed into a retail store largely due to the increasing demand from Sydney's foodie public.

He explains part of his success was being in the right place at the right time. It was around 1989, when he was "looking for something to do" when Western Australian cheese maker Gabriella Kervalla (pioneer of goat milk cheese making in Australia) called him. She had no one to look after her product in NSW and asked Johnson if he would be interested in starting a small distribution company. Johnson explains: "Within a week of Gabriella's call, cheese maker Richard Thomas from Milawa Cheese Company in Victoria and master cheese maker Frank Marchand from Heidi Farm in Tasmania also knocked on my door with the same request. This was the birth of the business, which I literally started on the smell of an oily rag – with an unregistered Honda Civic and it was fundamentally all about cheese! Here I was with three amazing cheese makers we had in Australia at the time. I was indeed fortunate to be in that space at that time."

Celebrated chef Serge Dansereau, a great friend of Johnson's and the Executive Chef at the Regent Sydney in the late 1980s, was looking for foods with a point of difference. He didn't want to be serving cheeses that were available in supermarkets. Richard Thomas at Milawa Cheese Company had just started dabbling in washed rind cheese. These rather smelly cheeses were quite new in Australia at the time. Gabriella had her goat cheeses and Frank had a Pandora's box of pasteurised and unpasteurised Swiss styles. Johnson: "In order to get a specialty cheese industry here in Australia off the ground, I asked Serge to commit to taking at least 30 wheels of each per week."

Johnson assured him he would be getting something different. "We had found a big supporter who actually had the budget to support this venture, otherwise it would never have got off the ground. This was fundamental to the introduction of specialty cheese in Australia."

Fringe cheese making came of age, as did the introduction of goat and sheep milk cheese and yoghurts in Australia. "Frank Marchand, without a doubt, was making the best Comte we could get our hands on," Johnson explains. He would mature his large wheels of Gruyere on cedar slabs in a 40-foot shipping container; it was a time that was like no other. I feel very fortunate to have been part of that era – it was a really special time."

According to Johnson there was an amazing camaraderie between chefs across Australia in supporting the specialty cheese makers and their understanding of just how important it was to grow a specialty cheese industry in Australia. Through the chefs' demand, the industry grew irrespective of the fact that everyone was very green. He recalls cheese maker Richard Thomas calling him. "Simon, I've got these amazing blue cheeses, they taste fantastic but I can't call them a blue because there is no blue and they've kind of collapsed. I've called them the Uglies – we



need the money so can you just go out and sell them.”

Sure enough they did taste fantastic. There was not a trace of blue but when Johnson went to the chefs they said they couldn't use them. Even discounting didn't convince them. The following week he reintroduced them as the Richard Thomas Cheese Makers Selection and sold them all for \$30 a kilo. He would pull up at the Regent loading dock with his unregistered Honda Civic and do business. He described it as an amazing time in Australian food, which set the pace for things to come.

The introduction of his famous cheese rooms did not come without controversy. Four days before Christmas in 1989, a Victorian council confiscated all the cheese from the Simon Johnson cheese room in Toorak, claiming that Johnson was storing hazardous material above five degrees. This laughable conclusion is typical of the regulation the food industry must undergo at times. Many European towns have stores which are entire cheese rooms; at times the cheeses are outside the store in barrels or on tables. This hazardous material has been in existence for thousands of years stimulating both the palate and the economy – what an overreaction. Needless to say it all ended up in court and it's pleasing to write that Johnson and his hazardous material won.

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» **Kris Lloyd** is the Head Cheese Maker of **Woodside Cheese Wrights**

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