

Offbeat

Cheese grader Diane Cox on her £5m nose and perks of the job



Diane Cox, cheese grader extraordinaire



by
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Diane Cox's nose is worth £5m. She knows this because her employers, Wyke Farms, insured it for that much when they promoted her to head cheese grader.

Ms Cox, who has been around dairy her entire life, steps in to replace Nigel Pooley, who is retiring after grading 520 million blocks of cheese in a long career.

Cheese-grading, as we recently learned, is the process of "sniffing out" – and tasting – lots of cheese, to separate the finest batches from the common or garden ones. Sounds like a pretty enjoyable job, on balance. We spoke to her to find out more.

How does one become a cheese grader?

Lots of practice! A Somerset girl born and bred, I have been working in the dairy industry for 30 years. For the last 10 years I have been working at Wyke Farms, based in the Mendip Hills. I like to think after all this time I know the business and the product well.

I have gained lots of valuable experience imparted from Nigel Pooley, who recently retired and who has 53 years' experience in the industry.

How much of it is God-given talent and how much is learning on the job?

There's a mix of both. When I grade I draw upon my 30 years' experience but I also have a natural sense of which cheeses will be graded through to make our finest Vintage Reserve cheddar.

Are there many in the UK?

As a female cheese-grader, I am one of only a handful of master female graders in what has always been a very male-dominated industry. There are lots of women working in technical and buying roles, but still very few on the cheese-making grading side.

I'm not the only female to grade cheese at Wyke Farms. Grandmother Ivy started the cheese-making business over 150 years ago and graded her cheeses every week to ensure they were maturing well. Grandmother Ivy was a very special lady, and I am honoured to be walking in her footsteps.

What does the process actually involve and what are you looking for?

I grade up to 100 cheeses per day 3 days per week. Grading is usually carried out in the morning when your taste buds are the most sensitive. Initial assessment of the cheese allows me to make subtle changes to the cheese-making process and determine how the cheese will mature with time.

Further assessment of cheese at the later stages of maturation allows me to select the appropriate flavour and texture profiles to allocate production batches to appropriate products in the Wyke Farms' cheddar range.

Once the cheese-grading and selection is completed, I spend the rest of the time working with the technical department to ensure quality standards are maintained.

Does a cheese grader ever get sick of cheese?

You would think that I would be completely sick of cheese, but I never get fed-up of it! After grading 100 cheeses a day, I still fancy having a cheesy dinner. I love cheese, and cheddar cheese in particular.

I sometimes practice my skills and train by using wines from different regions, trying to pick up the aromas and then verifying by tasting! It is something that many people can train themselves to start doing with just a little instruction – it just takes 20 years to perfect it.

Is free cheese a perk of the job?

It has been a family tradition for me to grade some cheddar that will carry the Wyke Farms' Ivy's Vintage Reserve name that we give as gifts to friends and milk suppliers for their Christmas dinner table. It is simply delicious – I always look forward to that as my main cheese perk.