

# A FAMILY AFFAIR

Set up as a small family business in the 1950s, cheese-maker Lye Cross Farm has grown into a global-reaching operation. But its founders' original values still live on

The Alvis family has been farming near the Mendip Hills, Somerset, for around 400 years, but it was in 1951 that brothers John and Sam joined forces to create Alvis Bros Ltd, a modest cheese-making business.

Fast-forward 62 years and Alvis Bros Ltd is now known as Lye Cross Farm, a company that produces over 4,500 tonnes of cheese each year and is the UK's leading maker of organic cheese. And at the heart of this forward-thinking business lies a close-knit family with a strong sense of heritage.

"We still use the traditional stacking and turning process known as 'cheddaring'," says Peter Alvis, managing director and grandson of the founder John. "And it's this process that allows the Lye Cross Farm brand to carry the West Country Farmhouse Cheddar PDO [protected destination of origin mark]."

As well as making its own dairy products, Lye Cross Farm also produces our own-label cheddar, which has its own specific flavour profile based on different levels of nuttiness, acidity and sweetness. One of Peter's enviable tasks is sampling every vat of cheese at least twice during maturation, to ensure these profiles are consistent.

But for those who fancy moving into the cheese-grading profession, this skill doesn't come easily. "You need years of practice and learning from others to taste the subtle differences between cheeses," Peter says.

Producing top-quality cheese isn't the only preoccupation at Lye Cross Farm. "Our strapline is 'profit with integrity,'" says Peter. "We're not afraid to say we want to be financially successful, but we want to do it in such a way that anyone can come and see what we're doing at any time." This integrity runs through every aspect of the business,

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**Johnny Alvis**

from installing state-of-the-art technology to improve energy efficiency, to working with local schools to educate children on the importance of farming.

The Alvises use milk from 26 farms in the area, including Regilbury Park Farm, the childhood home of Peter and his older brother Johnny, who is chairman of the business and still works at the site today.

"Peter does the clean side of things really. I do the dirty bit!" laughs Johnny. The 'dirty' side is his hands-on role at the farm. But as

he strides around the lush, green pastures, explaining the clever internal self-heating system of cows and pointing out his personal favourite, Joyce, it's clear that Johnny wouldn't have it any other way.

Animal welfare is also of prime importance to the Alvis family. Cows are kept in conditions that meet the RSPCA's 'Five Freedoms', ensuring that they are free from discomfort; pain, injury or disease; hunger and thirst; fear and distress, and have room to express normal behaviour.

When it comes to looking after the land, Johnny's sentiments echo Peter's entirely. "It's important to look after things as you go along," he says, as he points out the 12,000 trees planted by his family 20 years ago, to reduce the farm's carbon footprint and provide extra habitats for local wildlife. "It's only difficult to take care of the environment if you've already made a great big mess of it."

**Lye Cross Farm Salted Butter 250g £1.39 (56p per 100g) 76689011; Lye Cross Farm Organic Double Gloucester 245g £2.59 (£1.06 per 100g) 64477011; Ocado Mature Cheddar 240g £1.73 (72p per 100g) 57274011**



PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW MONTGOMERY; WORDS: CHERRY CASEY



Johnny Alvis, chairman, with one of the Regilbury Park Farm calves



Peter Alvis, managing director, with cheese ready for sampling

