

# Made in Britain

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Words by Maria McCarthy. Photograph by Stuart Wood



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## Feta cheese in Sussex

Sharp, fresh, and instantly reminiscent of sun-kissed holidays in Greece, this feta cheese is a world away from the dull, plastic-tasting stuff usually sold in supermarkets. Better still, if you happen to live near Mark and Sarah Hardy's farm in Sussex, it's made on your doorstep.

Mark, 45, learned about milking sheep whilst a student at Cirencester Agricultural College. When he returned home to help his parents on their farm in Ashdown Forest, he encouraged them to acquire a flock of Friesland ewes, and make yoghurt and soft cheese from the milk.

“But we had a friend who was Greek-Cypriot,” says Mark, “and that gave me the idea of making feta and halloumi cheese to sell to his community in London. It went well, and so we branched out into selling it in health shops and delicatessens.”

Four years ago Mark and Sarah moved to their current location, where cheese is made at an on-site dairy. The Frieslands that produce the organic milk are not like your average sheep. For a start, they're a lot bigger. They're also much friendlier, coming up and nudging you. Being milking sheep, they're more familiar with being handled than those bred for meat and wool. “Friesland sheep are excellent for milking because they're docile, produce lots of milk and lambs and take to the milking process very easily,” Mark explains. “They're happy to come in for milking at 7am and 4pm, and usually we play them Radio 2.”

Back at the dairy Sarah, 42, works with the cheesemakers Colin and Michael. “At the moment we're producing about half a ton of feta and halloumi each week,” she explains. “It's made traditionally, and that creates a unique product. We even notice that character changes slightly throughout the year, depending on the milk that the ewes are producing. It even changes depending on which of our cheesemakers made it. And one of the advantages of milking and selling the cheese locally is that we don't have to add as much salt to preserve it, so the true flavour comes through. And of course it reduces 'food miles' to have it made in the UK rather than Greece.”

The feta and halloumi is now sold through local shops and at nearby Farmers' Markets such as Lewes, Guildford and Tunbridge Wells.

“We offer samples to shoppers,” says Sarah. “Most people have already tried feta. Halloumi isn't as well known, but it's really delicious. It can be grilled or dry-fried and has a texture similar to a grilled marshmallow with a crusty outside, soft centre and a taste similar to that of bacon. We describe it as the vegetarian alternative to the rasher, and lightly dry-fry it to a golden brown and give it to people to try. Most of them love it and getting those instant positive reactions is very rewarding.”

“I think that people are becoming increasingly aware of the power of the consumer,” says Mark. “By supporting farms with a commitment to animal welfare and growing organic they can help bring in better practices. And by going for local rather than overseas producers when possible, there's the chance to reduce the pollution caused by transporting food as well.”

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