

Jan Craens varies endlessly with cheese

Dairy factory in Veenhuizen

Cheese from a peat barn, cheese containing beer, sheep cheese and cheese with hops. Jan Craens never grows tired of this living product which he produces by traditional methods in the former dairy factory in Veenhuizen, in the Dutch province of Drenthe.

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Dutch original by Margreet Weunk/translation by Rosa Bellekom

Photography: Lode Greven

Jan? Oh, he's round the back." Maallust Brewery's brewer points to a bright white building with high, narrow doors. The building, formerly Veenhuizen's dairy factory, now houses Kaaslust, cheese dairy and shop run by Jan Craens.

Behind the shop counter, a glass wall affords a great view of the space behind it where cheeses are maturing on long wooden shelves. "This one's a trial," say Jan, pointing to a few small cheeses in which hop leaves have been incorporated. "Combined with the



beer in the cheese, it might result in another unusual flavour."

Beer? In cheese? Jan nods. "Have a taste." He cuts a slice from what at first sight appears to be an ordinary young cheese, matured for six weeks and light yellow in colour. Briefly, there is only the robust, creamy sensation of a traditionally made product. But then, suddenly, like a jack-in-the-box, the flavour of beer jumps out at you. Subtle but unmistakable. And subsequently irresistible. "It's the best-selling cheese at the moment," Jan says. And that's hardly surprising. But his other cheeses are also well worth tasting. The Gouda is full-flavoured and creamy, a bit buttery. And then there's his personal favourite, the Torba Casa. Another delight. There's a



story behind the name. “I wanted to name a cheese after the village, but Veenhuizen sounds so ordinary. So I translated it into Italian. Torba is peat (veen) and casa is house. So it became Torba Casa.” He grins. “It cost me a bottle of wine to come up with it, but it was worth it.”

While Jan talks about his cheeses, it’s as though the room lights up. He beams as he talks about rennet and starter cultures, various kinds of milk and maturing processes, only to add almost apologetically, “I just love cheese.”

Old factory

He’s been involved in cheese-making almost his whole working life. For years, he milked his own cows at his farm in the Frisian village of Oudega, half an hour away from here, and made Hoodammer cheese. But demand increased and Jan did not want to produce on a large scale. So he changed direction, sold the cows and the dairy and went to work as an advisor for farmers wanting to switch to organic production.



The kegs of beer come from the neighbouring Maallust Brewery



Along the way, he got involved in the re-designation of vacant buildings in rural areas. That brought him to Veenhuizen, where several buildings from

the former farming community lay abandoned and neglected. They included the former dairy factory. The building, dating from 1903, was drab with flaking paint but Jan saw potential.

He started making plans to refurbish the grounds of Maallust, named after the old mill. A cheese dairy would fit nicely in the old dairy factory. “When the restoration was completed, the Government Buildings Agency was looking for people to operate it. To my surprise, they were quite hard to find. People liked the idea but they weren’t enthusiastic about actually running a business there. So I thought, why not rent it myself?”

And that's what happened. Jan went back to his old craft of cheese-making. He doesn't use only cows' milk. He also buys sheep, goat and sometimes buffalo milk. There are differences between the types of milk, and the consistency varies too. "It depends on the season and the feed the cows are being given. Sometimes the milk is yellowish. Then it's high in fat. Every now and then, drops of oil and even tiny specks of butter are floating in it. You see those drops of oil later in the cheese, it's really funny."

"You see drops of oil in the milk later in the cheese"

Beer cheese

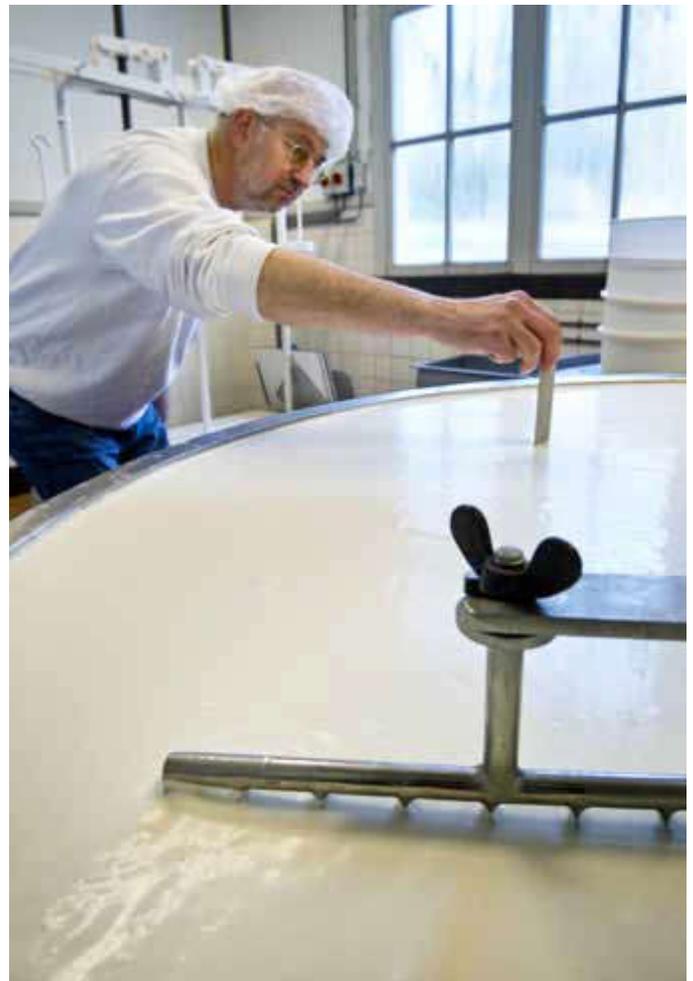
Jan doesn't stick to office hours. At six in the morning, when it's still quiet outside, the milk is already flowing into the large tub. It holds thirteen hundred litres and takes around an hour to fill. "Add rennet, cut the curdled milk into squares, drain off the whey, add water... By 11 o'clock, the container is empty, and the first cheeses are in the press."

In between work, he takes ample time for a cup of coffee. An absolute necessity: cow's milk must be allowed to stand before further processing, if you want delicious cheese. "No good cheese without coffee." In this way, Jan processes two tubs of milk a day. And how much beer? Jan bursts out laughing. "That's a secret. But let's say, one keg of beer to every tub of milk." That's all he's willing to divulge of the recipe.

He makes the beer cheese once every three weeks. The combination sounds bizarre, but according to Jan, it's not actually so strange. "Monks used to make their own monastery beers and their own cheese. The flavours complement each other." This gave him the idea of approaching his neighbours, Maallust Brewery. "I buy a triple from them, a fairly heavy beer which is really suitable for using in cheese."

NAMES WITH A STORY

On the façades of the old farm cottages and commercial buildings of the former Veenhuizen community, you can still see the original names. They are often edifying, such as 'Pray and work' or 'Knowledge is power'. The teacher lived in 'Education' and the doctor in 'Devotion'. 'Bitter and Sweet', now a restaurant (Bitter en Zoet), was originally (appropriately enough) the pharmacy. The mill was called 'Maallust' (joy of milling). So Jan Craens' cheese dairy 'Kaaslust' fits in perfectly.



Jan processes two tubs of milk a day

"No good cheese without coffee"



Monitoring the maturing process in the peat barn

cheese and never hear any more about it. You might say that no news is good news, but I prefer to get that feedback.”

That’s only possible if you work on a small scale. “Here, I have the chance to try out new things. A new flavour, a different bacteria culture or another way of maturing. That’s not so easy for a large company to do, because if it doesn’t work out, ten thousand kilograms of cheese is spoiled.”

In a peat barn

That small scale is exactly where the strength of Kaaslust lies. “I chose a traditional set-up and started making things which don’t suit large companies. That means I can’t make cheap cheese for Aldi supermarkets, but I can make more unusual kinds of cheese very well.”

His experiments have led not only to the beer cheese, but also to other successes. “I was looking for a space in which to let some of the cheeses mature. By coincidence, I found a peat barn nearby. A barn with walls made of peat. It was cool and damp and there were some mushrooms growing in it.

I thought that if mushrooms could grow there, then cheese could mature there. And I was right. In fact, the maturing process there is special in itself. The crust turns dark brown with a thick layer of mould on it. We don’t wash that off until the cheese is ready, after six months. What that gives you is really a treat for the gourmets.”

Jan makes twelve different kinds of cheese and enjoys the whole process. Not only the fact that he makes the cheeses himself, but also the contacts along the way. He knows the farmers who deliver the milk, the pig farmer who comes to collect the whey from the cheese and he knows his customers. He sells some cheese in the shop, but most of it goes to the hospitality sector, such as the local restaurant Bitter en Zoet. “They share their opinions and help me find new ideas for cheeses they can use in their restaurant. I like that. I used to just sell my

KAASLUST LOGO



The bust of a general is an unexpected logo for a traditional cheese dairy such as Kaaslust. The general is Johannes van den Bosch. In 1818, he founded the Maatschappij van Weldadigheid (charitable society) which set up farming communities in the province of Drenthe, where disadvantaged people could make a new start as farmers. Cheese maker Jan Craens wanted to honour the social ideals of the founder and so the general became the face of the logo.

One of the cheeses that Jan makes in that way is his Brebis des Pays Bas, a robust sheep cheese. “One of my favourites, just like the Torba Casa.”

The cheeses taste good on their own, but according to Jan, the flavour can be enriched when accompanied by a nice glass of beer. “Everyone knows that cheese and wine go well together,” he says. “But that’s true of cheese and beer too.” If asked for advice, he would recommend a fenu-greek cheese with a light Spring Bock. And his Torba Casa with a strong beer. “That’s a great combination.”

His head is full of countless ideas for new recipes. He’s not finished experimenting by a long chalk. “That’s the wonderful thing about cheese. It’s a living product which you can vary endlessly. Making cheese continues to fascinate me.”



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