

Strathdon Blue

olive meets Highlands' cheesemaker Ruaraidh Stone whose award-winning Scottish blue is a hit with everyone from Alex James to HRH The Prince of Wales

Words EMILY KERRIGAN Photograph MARTIN HUNTER

'My father first made cheese in the bath. He was a dairy farmer and often wondered why he never saw crowdie (a traditional Scottish soft cheese) anymore. One day he got a milk churn, filled the bath with hot water and had a go at making it – with pretty authentic results. It was his eureka moment. Before long, he'd started a successful new business, Highland Fine Cheeses.

'As a boy I'd show visitors around the dairy. I started working for the family firm just before Dad died, but ended up bickering with my mother and walking away. By the time I came back, it was 1994 and delis were selling interesting new cheeses, but she was stuck in 70s soft-cheese hell. We threw out the naff plastic pots and tartan and started over with a blue.

'Strathdon Blue is spicy but it won't rip your head off. It's brilliant when people who don't normally like blue cheese love ours. It's handmade by nine of us using creamy cow's milk and took years to

perfect. Initially it tasted of old socks, then I compared notes with Judy Bell [of award-winning Yorkshire dairy Shepherds Purse]. Everything clicked and suddenly we were winning British Cheese Awards.

'Now we make cheese with Alex James (Blur bassist turned cheese maker). Blue Monday, named after New Order's biggest hit, is a variant of Strathdon, set in square molds. And we couldn't believe it when Prince Charles said he wanted to sponsor us to help support the Highlands' economy. The result is Highland Blue, which features on menus at Clarence House.

'We'll only ever make our cheese by hand. Anything else would sell it short. Our royalty/rockstar backing has taken us further than we ever dreamed (you can find Highland Blue in Australia and Strathdon Blue at restaurants such as Fergus Henderson's St John) but we'll always be loyal to the small delis that first backed us.'

FIND STRATHDON BLUE at Neal's Yard Dairy (nealsyarddairy.co.uk) and Waitrose (waitrosedeliver.com). Highland Fine Cheeses; hf-cheeses.com

HOW ETHICAL IS STRATHDON BLUE?
SMALL SCALE Yes There are just nine employees and everything is made by hand.

RECYCLING Good The whey is re-used in pigs' feed at a neighbouring farm.

ORGANIC No But milk is fully traceable and comes from grass-fed dairy herds in Caithness.

