Use and influence

As a country our creative use of cheese is actually quite limited. If we could develop a need in cooking to compliment table use, we would begin to move into the same volume and usage territory as our continental cousins. Moreover, countries that regard themselves as having a deep-rooted food heritage like France or Italy don't seem to have the celebrity chef phenomena that us Brits lap up, however this is something producers can play up to. The Heston and Delia effect was shown recently when British rhubarb sold out in hours – great news for the Leeds, Morley and Wakefield triangle – pity it took German produce to fill the gap. The signature cheeses some of these celebs like to feature could provide a substantial impact and anything they name will be eagerly sought – making it a real and regular possibility that deli owners can certainly tap into.

Sitting behind that is the steady evolution in eating habits. The classic standard meal with three courses is being supported, in many instances, by tapas-style eating and cheese could certainly feature strongly here. It's likely to be more exotic options that take centre stage such as Gruyere, Comte, Manchego or hard British varieties. Cheese platters also appear to be making a welcome come back on menus, with many British regional and speciality types featuring - surely this will advance their retail appeal? Blues have proven one of the most obvious of these and in recent months I have seen Cashel blue, Garstang blue, Yorkshire Blue, Cornish blue and Blacksticks featuring on cheese plates or as part of a dish description.

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A personal view

A candid observation will please some and offend others but, in any case, the final judge is the shopper. So, in my opinion Cheddar will grow largely at brand level with the mature and premium speciality sectors and mid-range products having to work hard to achieve market share. Also in hard territorials I see Red Leicester beginning to rise further, both for basic and traditional farmhouse types, although Double Gloucester may not do as well.

With the crumblies I anticipate some difficulties for progress with Cheshire and Lancashire, which struggle to find favour outside their heartlands and often see restricted distribution. There are exceptions such as Applebys. Lancashire also boasts several major fine cheese makers, but some areas do not respond to the regional type. Caerphilly suffers the same fate in mass-produced, with more specialist styles like Gorwydd carrying the flag for the territorial. Conversley, Wensleydale always appears to buck the trend, but it's the cranberry variety that has achieved the greatest exposure. In soft, I envisage British Brie will continue to grow and develop.

From the continent, hard varieties such as Gruyere and Emmental seem to be gaining ground and Comte, though small in volume, seems to be maintaining its foothold. Despite a massive surge in price, I expect Parmesan to grow strongly in the year ahead. All the usage signals are positive and we should expect a very substantial investment by the Consorzio this year.

Modern additives will slow as customers tire of the endless churn of varieties, while the big classic types will gain bigger total share, and newer successes may be more about savoury styles than sweet. Finally, there remains an appetite for local and regional types, but largely for established ones, rather than new innovations. The opportunities are in realistically-priced blues, especially those with a Continental style, and for authentic local types with provenance.

From a retail perspective, it's likely the supermarkets will continue to struggle with the deli proposition, hampered by high costs of labour and shelf-life, with more creating a grab and go concept. Of course, this will provide independents with a point of difference. However, I believe even they will demand less wasteful sizes, longer life assurance, more unique offerings and more profitable in-stock performances.

The cheese trade changes every year, sometimes more noticeably than others. But to summerise, I believe in 2010 independents can still make progress on a wide range of quality cheese and be the repository of knowledge for enthusiasts. Changing eating habits will bring a number of cheese types into recipe usage and the celebrity chef will add value to sales. All in all, it's business as usual and it's up to the retailer to make use of the opportunities available.

* Kantar Worldpanel data March 2010