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The Halloumi Scene

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By Laura Vincent

While discussing halloumi with friends, we wondered if it was going to be one of those definitive foodstuffs of the times. In the same way that we might look back with rueful, Kanye-shrugging fondness on heavily pesto-d dishes or dry paninis encasing cranberry and camembert. Just to step back a bit though, I'm no snob, just an observer. Food is food, we all need to eat it. That said, I never did like cranberry and camembert. I'm just not convinced it's a good combination. Pesto, now *that* I can chug down like some nouveau riche Popeye. We deduced that halloumi is booming for one simple reason: it's utterly delicious. Unfamiliar with this hallowed substance? Halloumi is a traditional Cypriot cheese, pale and firm, which holds its shape when sliced and fried. Just allow that image to undulate in your mind for a while. A pan-caramelised golden crust forms on your slice of cheese, yielding under your teeth with a slight firm squeak, its soft interior erupting in a buttery mass in your mouth. While it may be so hot right now, it's been known for generations in Europe, and I wouldn't be writing this at all were it not for the efforts of Zany Zeus. The company started in 2000 when Michael Matsis "set up on a shoestring just in case things didn't go well – just me and my mum basically." Matsis wanted to bring this cheese from his Cypriot heritage to the local market. There wasn't a breakthrough moment for them, just a lot of hard work and momentum-gathering along the way.

Of the cheese scene in New Zealand, Matsis says that 20-25 years ago all we knew was "predominantly cheddar and edam and so on, then there was the advent of feta and olives – they're now ubiquitous." With halloumi he was "trying to educate about a cheese that's really out of the comfort zone of a lot of people. " While it wasn't entirely foreign – some chefs had discovered it on their travels – it wasn't easily accessible and people didn't know what to do

with it. "I was pretty green back then too," admits Matsis, "I didn't have a marketing background...it was all about visiting the chefs, and putting the product through places like Moore Wilson in Wellington".

In Cyprus, halloumi was a way of preserving any unused goat milk, which would then go on to be a form of protein in peoples' day-to-day eating. It's a dry, heavily salted product stored in brine, however Matsis wanted to "adapt that for the market so the texture would be perfect for being fried. We knew if we came in producing a super traditional product there'd be no traction". So they reduced the salt and firmness, but maintained processes like folding the halloumi with mint in recognition of how it was made in Cyprus. Useful though the flat blocks now developed may be, according to Matsis the folding with mint is an important aspect to make it 'true' halloumi.

The power of suggestion being a strong thing, I decided to throw a small halloumi party with friends, to sample what's out there for New Zealanders. As I said, a few years ago Zany Zeus might've been your only hope of finding this glorious substance, whereas now it's quite easy to get hold of. My partner Tim and I chose seven brands - Zany Zeus, Blue River, Kingsmeade, Axelos, Lemnos, Mainland, and The Collective Dairy - and made "Halloumi Feelings Sheets" for everyone to jot down any adjectives that sprang to mind about the singular taste and texture of each sort.

Let me be blunt: it was hardly a scientific process, nor is ours the definitive voice on this product. However, we uncovered some distinct findings. Firstly, and most importantly, the existence of halloumi is better than nothing. That is, they all had a baseline level of deliciousness due to the very nature of what they are. A bit like chocolate. There's bad and good quality stuff, but unless your chocolate bar is accommodating spores, it's nice to have it at all. The brands that came out on top, once all ten participants' feelings had been collated, were Zany Zeus ("lemony and herbacious", "buttery" "so, so, so amazing") Blue River ("hearty", "boozy", "JOY") and The Collective Dairy ("squeaky", "hint of garlic" "really nommable"). Kudos also to Lemnos. It seems to be the most widely available brand, and its variety-lending comparative firmness of texture was appreciated. While our motto was 'don't hate, celebrate', it would be remiss not to note that the Axelos halloumi was particularly, mouth-puckeringly salty ("like making out with the ocean") and Mainland's had a mildly bland, eggy flavour profile ("not as halloumi-y as the others".) However, such elements might appear amplified in contrast to other brands we ate that night.

Eager to do something similar? I suggest an electric frypan to make the intermittent cooking and serving process a lot easier. Ideally only use a tiny bit of a good plain oil, if anything, so the flavour of each cheese isn't sullied in any way. It's good to have plenty of water for people to cleanse their palates inbetween tastings, and consider some bread, crackers, or apple slices alongside too. Look out for the bounciness and distinctive 'squeakiness' of the texture, and consider the flavour - is it buttery? Like a good olive oil? Lemony? Mushroom-esque? Write down the very first thing that springs to mind - well, you can tell that we did - and remember, your tastebuds can't be wrong. Unless you like cranberry and camembert panini. Kidding! I'm kidding.

Numerous awards under their belts, Zany Zeus have now opened a shop in Moera, near Petone in Wellington, to showcase the goods. Here they sell their entire range, including some new products - glorious handmade ice cream, milkshakes and thickshakes, and fittingly zany smoked yoghurt. Matsis is justifiably coy about the exact way it's done, but concedes that their yoghurt, already spreadably thick, "goes through a smoked process, increasing the viscosity, with the manuka shavings producing a crust on the surface which runs deep into the yoghurt." Having purchased and eaten some I assure you it's intensely good - tangy, smooth, deeply smoky - and has inspired me to immediately brainstorm fun recipes to use it in. Back to halloumi though, Matsis acknowledges that he "can't compete with the big boys...so we have

to be different. There's no need for me to go make a cheddar or a camembert. There's no market for me. I could make them, but what for?" Instead, what he sees as setting Zany Zeus apart is that they "fit into market niches where you can bring an element of difference for the hospitality trade and the consumers." I'd also add 'making freakishly good products from organic milk' gives them considerable edge too. However, says Matsis, "it's good for the consumer" that so many companies are making halloumi now. Especially when that consumer can access, without too much trouble, seven different kinds of halloumi to eat entirely in one evening.

Apart from jotting down your feelings about small fried cubes of it, there's much to be done with halloumi. Matsis recommends to "just lightly panfry it, either on a nonstick pan or with a very little bit of oil, then serve the slices on fresh crusty bread with a squeeze of lemon. That to me is the way we'll eat haloumi if we've got guests round or if we're at mum and dad's for a barbeque." He also speaks highly of eating it uncooked, unusual though it might sound. "Leave it out at room temperature for a while, it really brings forward the mint and the full fat flavour – that's how I love to eat it." Finally for something involving a little more assembly, he also suggests serving it with watermelon, which is a traditional combination. It makes sense – the salty cheese against the refreshing sweet crisp watermelon, getting your electrolytes and hydration in a somewhat more elegant fashion than reaching for a bright blue sports drink. I personally feel that halloumi's uncanny deliciousness allows it to transcend mere trend. If you've ever wondered whether or not it's for you, there's no better time to take the plunge. Long may this compelling cheese continue to reign supreme on café menus, in our frying pans, and frankly, in our hearts.

Laura Vincent is the author of food blog Hungry and Frozen.