

Price, Age Of Hook's 20-Year Cheddar Present Challenges To Consumers, Chefs

Madison—Chefs and cheese enthusiasts spared no expense getting the last few pounds of Hook's 20-Year Cheddar, with the remaining 20 pounds sold within a few hours last Saturday at local farmers' markets for \$209 per pound.

The cheese, made by Hook's Cheese Company of Mineral Point, WI, was celebrated here last week with a special tasting event at L'Etoile Restaurant.

Hook's Cheese started with 450 pounds of 20-year Cheddar, and donated half of its sales proceeds – \$40,000 – to the University of Wisconsin-Madison Babcock Hall Building Fund.

Even though most of our cheese...would easily age to eight or 10 years, most of it is sold by the time it's five years old."

—Tony Hook,
Hook's Cheese

While there's no reserve on the 20-year Cheddar, owner Tony Hook said the company will still put out its 15-year Cheddar every fall – typically released around Nov. 1.

"At this point, we haven't set any aside for the 20-year," Hook said. "If we were to decide this fall that everything we have set aside for 15 wasn't going to sell, we could put some away for 20, but it would be another five years."

"At this point, though, there's

nothing in the works planned," he said.

When we first put cheese away for the 20-year in 2010, we used some extra 15-year and didn't expect it would sell for this high a price, Hook said.

"At that point, I thought \$50 was quite high for the 15-year," he said. "I thought if we doubled that and asked \$100, we'd really be asking a lot."

As we got closer, I knew that if it only sold it for \$100 once we put it out there, "it would be gone within a matter of days," Hook said. "So we tried to set it at a price that the market will buy, knowing half the money would be donated."

"I do feel bad that some people can't afford things like this – at one point in my life, I certainly couldn't," he said.

Our retailers and distributors got it for a little less, Hook added.

The company sets aside about 95 percent of its total Cheddar production to age at least one year and beyond.

"Saying that, we check it at least a couple times a year to make sure it's developing the way we want," he said. "Within two to three years, I can tell if it's going to age properly to 10 years and beyond, but sales are better between two-year and five-year."

"Even though most of our cheese – over 70 percent – would easily age to eight or 10 years, most of it is sold by the time it's five years old," Hook said. "That's where the biggest sales are."

"We have a decent price up to five years, and then it goes up a bit more after that because there isn't as much supply, and the demand isn't quite as high," he said. "For

the ones that really want it, they're willing to pay the price."

One of the biggest challenges of cooking with aged Cheddar is trying not to outshine the cheese, according to Tory Miller, one of the James Beard chefs behind the Hook's 20-year Cheddar tasting event at L'Etoile.

"You need to be confident enough to put in on a plate and pretty much let it speak for itself," he said.

Aged cheese is also difficult to use because it just crumbles, Miller said. As soon as you open it, it's ready to break apart. That makes portioning kind of difficult.

"With this cheese, you shouldn't even try to cook it. If you had a warm bowl of buttery pasta, you could shave a bit of it on top like you would a truffle," he said.

"I've never worked with such a delicate product before. To be honest, a 20-year Cheddar is something I never would have imagined," Miller said.

It only crumbles when you cut it, Miller said. We tempered this cheese for three or four hours in the kitchen before serving it – that's the best way to get that cool, creamy flavor.

"I try to temper all my cheeses for at least an hour," he added. "That's the only way to enjoy it – especially this cheese."

Twelve years ago when he first came to L'Etoile, the cheese board the restaurant had featured just three cheeses – Pleasant Ridge Reserve from Upland Hills Cheese, Roth Kase Buttermilk Blue, and the Hook's 7-Year Cheddar.

"At the time, a seven-year Cheddar was a blow-your-mind cheese," he said. "Three years later, we were serving 10-year Cheddar."

I've been waiting for the 20-year since Hook's released its 15-year Cheddar, Miller said.

As a chef, you really need to pay attention to how a cheese changes over the years, according to Miller.

At about 10 years, it spikes in bitterness, gets super strong at 15, and by the time it gets to 20, it's mellow with a strong finish – like a good cognac that just hangs out with you after you drink it, he said.

Sourcing really old Cheddar like Hook's 20-year is another chal-



Tony Hook holding a pound of 20-year old Cheddar in front of the company award case.

photo courtesy of Marianne Crowley

lenge. Miller bought as much as he could – 10 pounds in all.

Miller, along with chefs Justin Carlisle of Ardent and Justin Aprahamian, Sanford, created a tasting menu featuring Hook's cheese from fresh curd through 20 years.

The six-course meal started with a two-year Cheddar "nacho" with chorizo, pickled jalapeno and cilantro, followed by a first course of charred asparagus, rhubarb-hickory nut salmuera and shaved five-year Cheddar.

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The second course was a 10-year Cheddar soup with pepper, beer vinegar, popcorn and chive, followed with a 15-year Cheddar boereg, roasted veal breast, apricot and Hakurei turnip.

Guests were treated to the 20-year Cheddar for the cheese course, and dessert was a curd cheesecake with rhubarb, meringue and Thai basil.

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