



Biddy Fraser-Davies

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## THE ACCIDENTAL MILKMAID



ON HER TINY  
EKETAHUNA DAIRY  
FARM, BIDDY  
FRASER-DAVIES  
MAKES CHEESE FIT  
FOR A KING.

When Prince George joined the Plunket playdate at Government House in April 2014, there was a New Zealand delicacy among the finger food. The mousetraps were topped with Cwmelyn Farmhouse Cheese.

Days later, Ruth Pretty served Cwmelyn at Prime Minister John Key's family dinner with Prince William and Kate. Then, last year, Government House chef Simon Peacock served another royal, Prince Harry, some Cwmelyn.

Eketahuna cheesemaker and English expat Biddy Fraser-Davies isn't falsely modest about her artisan produce. "I've got nice cows, nice cheese," she says, all plummy Pommy vowels. "Why shouldn't the royals eat it?"

Pronounced Coom-glin, her traditional hard cheese ([www.cwmelyn.co.nz](http://www.cwmelyn.co.nz)) is among the ingredients at top restaurants, including Logan Brown and Shed 5 in Wellington, and is sold at specialty shops Canterbury Cheesemongers and The Dairy in Auckland.

At the 2014 World Cheese Awards in London, Cwmelyn was one of 62 cheeses to win a "Super Gold" award out of 2500-plus entries from 33 countries, following its silver award in 2013 (a bronze, silver, gold and

super gold are given to each table of 60 cheeses). Fraser-Davies, 73, didn't enter last year, happy to retire with a super gold and over organising export licences and chilled shipping.

So how did this English lass end up an Eketahuna milkmaid? In 1995, she and second husband Colin Fraser-Davies moved from the Kapiti Coast to a lifestyle block where the Wairarapa meets the Rangitikei. They planted trees but didn't plan to raise animals until the neighbour decided to kill a runty calf.

"His kids said, 'No! Biddy will take her!' So I did. Then I got another to keep her company. Twenty-six litres of milk a day proved a bit much for the cornflakes, so I taught myself to make cheese." Then 1200kg of cheese a year proved a bit much for sandwiches, too.

When Fraser-Davies talks about her cows – Holly, Isobel, Dizzy, Patsy and Lily – she could be talking about her three children or four grandchildren. "Their personalities are so different," she says. "Holly's the bossiest, and Dizzy's a charmer."

Visitors to Cwmelyn Farm's shop often pose for photos beside the cows while holding their cheese. Some come to see Colin's opus magnus, Middleton Model Railway, where 300-plus metres of tracks wind



Fraser-Davies and Dizzy (stealing the molasses spoon) at Cwmglyn Farm, where the cows graze on mixed-herb organic pastures.

through a miniature English village.

His wife far prefers New Zealand to England, though. At the age of 12, she read a novel set in 19th-century New Zealand and longed to move to the pioneer country. She did so in 1966, with first husband Ken and their toddler daughter, but Ken's work saw the family return to Britain, where Biddy took enamelling and metalsmithing classes.

Persuading Ken to move back in 1974, Biddy became a leading New Zealand enamellist (decorating metal, glass and ceramic objects with melted powdered glass). She still does the occasional commission and workshop.

Biddy's always been a great reader. As a 40-something divorcée, she devoured *New Scientist* magazine – which is how she got to know Colin, a chemist from Bristol. "I thought, 'What sort of nut puts a lonely-heart advertisement in *New Scientist*?' I wrote to find out and we had a two-year correspondence, then Colin flew out to meet me. I had three teenagers and he had many model trains, so he married me for my basement," she says, erupting with laughter.

Retirement isn't for her. "I'll play with my cows and Colin with his trains until we're carried out in boxes. Why should one stop?"

**SARAH LANG**