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Top cheese shows New Zealand's love affair with blue

New Zealand's top cheese shows that the country has a love affair with blue, says an international cheese expert.

Fonterra Brands NZ's Ferndale Maestro Blue cheese was last night named as the Taylor's Port Champion of Champions at the Cuisine Champions of Cheese Awards.

Awards Master Judge, Australian Neil Willman, said when he tasted Maestro Blue he thought "this is just so close to perfection".

And he said the dominance of blue cheeses – with more blue cheeses than cheddars entered in this year's Cuisine Champions of Cheese Awards – showed that New Zealanders "have got a love affair with blue".

The quality of New Zealand's blue cheeses reflected that love affair, he said. "The top blues produced here would be the equal of any in the world."

Maestro Blue is made in Fonterra Brands NZ's Eltham factory by Keven (crct) Saywell, who was named Hospitality Magazine Champion Cheesemaker.

Saywell has worked at the Eltham factory "in several departments" since 1988, but has been a cheesemaker for only six years. He was drawn to cheesemaking for the challenge and because "I really, really do like cheese – I really do ...If you tell someone that you make cheese, their eyes light up. It's always a talking point."

Judges said Maestro was an excellent example of a European style of cheese that had transitioned into a true Kiwi blue. Aged for six weeks, it has a rustic feel but a creamy palate.

Outside their class, blue cheeses this year won not only the Champion of Champions and Champion Cheesemaker awards, but also New Zealand Trade & Enterprise Champion Export Cheese Award (Kapiti Kikorangi – Fonterra Brands NZ) and the New World Champion Favourite Cheese Award (also Kapiti Kikorangi).

The overall quality of entries in this year's awards was outstanding, said Willman, with 62% of the 406 cheeses winning a gold, silver or bronze medal. "When I looked at the championship round and saw 60 or so products that were of gold medal status, or very close to it, I was just blown away," he said.

"New Zealand produces a great diversity of cheeses which is not seen in other countries," Willman said.

"And the overall standard of the industry is increasing at a rapid rate."

The fifth annual Cuisine Champions of Cheese Awards were presented at a gala dinner at Auckland's SKYCITY last night. The 20 awards were given in a range of categories, reflecting different styles of cheese and different milks used.

More than 400 entries for this year's awards were judged at Massey University's Albany campus by 26 judges on Sunday.

The other top prize, the Cuisine Champion Artisan Cheese Award, went to Parvenu, produced by Crescent Dairy Goats, of Albany, north of Auckland.

Head sponsor of the awards Taylor's Port Brand Manager Antica Soljan said the increased number of award entries this year was an encouraging sign for New Zealand.

"Taylor's Port is very proud to sponsor the Champions of Cheese Awards and congratulates all those involved in producing the Champion of Champions cheese," she said. "We are proud to honour producers that are dedicated to crafting top-quality unique products for lovers of fine food."