

**ON THE GROUND FLOOR OF THE ENGINE SHED, TUCKED AWAY AT THE BACK, IS THE TOFU PRODUCTION UNIT. HERE STAFF AND TRAINEES TOIL AWAY AT WHAT IS A PHYSICALLY DEMANDING AND OFTEN MESSY PROCESS. LESS PUBLIC AND MORE PRODUCTION FOCUSED THAN THE OTHER PARTS OF THE BUILDING IT TURNS OUT A HIGH QUALITY PRODUCT**

## **A Day in the Life of the Tofu Maker**

Tofu is based on soya and is an important source of protein for a lot of vegetarians. The process of making tofu is similar to cheese-making. **Francis** explains.

“I don't like rushing in the morning so I like to get an early start at around 7.15am. I usually switch the radio on and turn the heaters on if it's winter, or open the windows if it's summer. We back onto the garden and that's one of the nicest things in the summer.

The first thing I do is to get the big cauldron on. This is a vacuum boiler, a very efficient way of heating: it sits on a gas ring and brings about 30 litres of water to the boil in 25 minutes. Then I'll strain the soya beans that have been soaking overnight and put them through a grinder. The grinder has water running through it to make the beans go through easier and what comes out the other end is a paste.

By the time the trainees come in at 8.30 I've enough ground beans to start on the first batch of tofu.

### **coming to the boil**

The ground beans are tipped into the cauldron and gradually brought to a simmer. One of the trainees has to stand by the boiler and spray it with cold water to make sure it doesn't boil over. That person will also usually gather together the various jugs, paddles and tubs needed for this stage.

Another trainee will wring out the special cloths we use, both muslin and various grades of nylon cloths, to filter the contents of the boiler. In many ways it is akin to making cheese.

### **water, water, everywhere**

Meanwhile the tofu blocks we made the day before have to be rinsed individually by hand; they are soaked overnight in salt water which helps with the preserving.

Also the tofu blocks that were in the smokehouse overnight – we make plain, smoked and marinated tofu – are brought in and cooled in big tanks of water.

There's a lot of water involved in making tofu and inevitably there is spillage. We use a water vacuum cleaner which is absolutely essential. All day long, off and on, someone has to Hoover up the water. Our aqua vacs typically last about a year; they live a dissolute life!

### **back to the boiler**

After the tofu has simmered for 15 minutes the person on the boiler turns off the heat and starts draining off the contents: this looks like a very thick white porridge and comes glugging out into tubs. We pour this into a press and what comes out the bottom is roughly strained soya milk.



The trainee with responsibility for the boiler will clean it out and get it ready to take the second batch of beans of the day. If we're very busy we'll make a third batch in the afternoon.

### **separating the curds from the whey**

The next stage of the process is critical and has to be done very carefully: each tub of the soya milk gets a fixed amount of a substance called 'nigan', which is a Japanese word. The nigan is a natural substance, magnesium chloride, derived from seawater, and is what we use to curdle the soya milk. After 10 –15 minutes the tofu curd has formed, with a clear liquid on the top, which is equivalent to the whey in cheese making.

We scoop off the whey and the curd is put into perforated metal trays lined with muslin and pressed to get more of the moisture out; in about an hour the whole lot has stuck together into one block. Later in the day these will be cut up roughly and pressed further overnight in a big stack.

### **a welcome break**

This usually takes us to about 10.00am and the trainees go next door for their break. Often the bakery crowd are there as well. I get a roll from the bakery and a coffee but have to go back to the workshop to keep an eye on things.

## order, order

In the mornings the priority is to fulfil the orders. The tofu blocks made the day before have to be cut to the correct size, trimmed, weighed, blast chilled and vacuum packed.

The tofu destined for the smokehouse has to be taken out and tended; I'll be rushing back and forward to the smokehouse to swap round the trays in the smoking cabinet to make sure they all get done evenly. That goes on all day typically. It's a pretty full-on process for everyone.

By 12.30 everything will be packed and ready to go out with the delivery van. The second batch of tofu will also be into the pressing machine. This is a turning point in the day and we can all have a lunch break.

Most of our stuff goes out in the second delivery run at 12.30. The vast majority is sold through Green City; they have a pick up on Mondays and Wednesdays and this is sold throughout the country. Our other wholesale customer collects on a Wednesday so it's pretty frenetic that day.

## afternoon prep

In the afternoon we make tofu burgers so there are vegetables to prep, and the marinade to make for the marinated tofu. The soya beans for the next day have to be washed and pre-soaked; we have a big hopper to store the beans.

By 4.00pm I want to have everything clean and all the trays in the smokehouse unit ready to come out the next day.

It is very routine work and can be a grind. The trainees work pretty damn hard; full marks to them!

I take a pride in the product and I know when it's good by the way the knife goes through it. When it is a homogenous product the knife will slip through it: not too dry, or soft. I do take pride in that. ”

