

THE CHEESE INDUSTRY.

General Position.

As the result of the steady and increasing demand for additional supplies of cheddar cheese on the British markets, together with the highly remunerative prices procurable, a further extension of this branch of the dairy industry in the Dominion has to be recorded. This development is in no sense due to the unprofitable nature of the kindred butter industry, for the manufacture of first-class butter has of late been bringing in higher returns than ever before. It is due entirely to the phenomenally high values obtainable for cheese as compared even with the good prices returnable for butter; and just as long as dairy companies engaged in the production of cheese can pay out to their milk-suppliers a price for butter-fat which is from 2d. to 3d. per pound above that paid to those who dispose of their supplies for the making of butter, this rapid expansion of the cheese industry may be expected to continue. This alone is the reason why so many of the dairy companies during the last five or six years have turned their attention to the making of cheese instead of butter. Actuated by the same influence, the settlers in new districts where the nature of the country is favourable have preferred to make cheese. The registration of fifty-eight new cheese-factories has been effected for the year. Of this number, thirty have been provided by dairy companies formerly producing butter, and the remainder have been made up by the organization of new dairy companies especially for cheese-manufacture, also from the enterprise of proprietary owners. This brings the total number of cheese-factories which have been in actual operation during the year to 379. The Auckland Province heads the list with the establishment of twenty-seven new cheese-factories within the last twelve months.

With few exceptions the buildings and equipment provided for the increased business of cheesemaking has been entirely satisfactory, and only in a few instances has the registration of the premises had to be withheld pending alterations or additions required to comply with the regulations governing this factor of the industry. Many of the buildings erected have been of concrete or brick in place of the wooden structure which was so common a few years ago, the settlers now recognizing the wisdom of providing factories on which the minimum of depreciation has to be allowed for, and also the additional advantage of making it easier to maintain buildings of this class in good sanitary condition.

Taking it altogether the cheese industry of New Zealand is established on a sound commercial basis. The profits now being made are most encouraging to those concerned, and the outlook for the future can at the least be accepted as hopeful. At the moment there is only one serious menace to future success, and that is the falling-off in quality of this product, a matter which is dealt with under the heading that follows.

Quality of Cheese.

Of the total quantity of cheese exported for the past year a large percentage was found to be of good quality, sound in flavour, and showing first-class workmanship in its manufacture. But compared with the product of the preceding year it has to be admitted, however reluctantly, that the average quality of our cheese for the past season has considerably declined. The main fault has been under the heading of flavour. Ill-flavoured cheese were altogether too numerous in many consignments, more especially in the product made in the North Island. Nothing would be gained by naming any particular province as being on the lowest rung of the ladder in this respect, for many cheese defective in flavour were produced in all districts where the industry has been established. Even the South Island cheese districts have not been altogether free from depreciation in quality as compared with the previous season.

Another detrimental feature noticed in many of the cheese shipments was that of irregularity in body and texture, a fault which is almost as damaging to the sale of the product as that of an objectionable flavour. What is known as openness in the body of cheese was extremely prevalent in the product of a large number of the factories, and reached its worst stage during the height of the season, when the largest quantity was being made. Weakness in body, a blemish which was almost unknown in New Zealand cheese when the industry was of smaller dimensions, made its appearance in quite a number of the consignments from certain factories. One would like to believe that in all cases this lack of the necessary firmness was not due to an attempt to obtain a higher yield on the part of the maker by retaining a larger amount of moisture in the cheese, but the evidence available does not permit the acceptance of this view.

All the faults enumerated above, and many others of minor importance, have been brought under the notice of those directly interested through the usual channel of the grade-notes representing the individual consignments. That, together with the prompt assistance given by the instructors as far as time and the number of men available would permit, has been the means of checking the downward tendency in many cases, and also in materially raising the standard of quality in many others.

As would naturally be expected, the opinion formed regarding the quality of the season's cheese by officers of the Division at the time of grading bears a close relation to the views expressed by the Inspector of New Zealand Dairy-produce in London in his weekly reports of all the produce he has examined.

In offering some criticism on the season's make of cheese it has been borne in mind that the exceptionally high atmospheric temperatures prevailing from December to March, the delay in shipping, and the shortage of labour, both on the farms and in the dairy factories, must be allowed for.