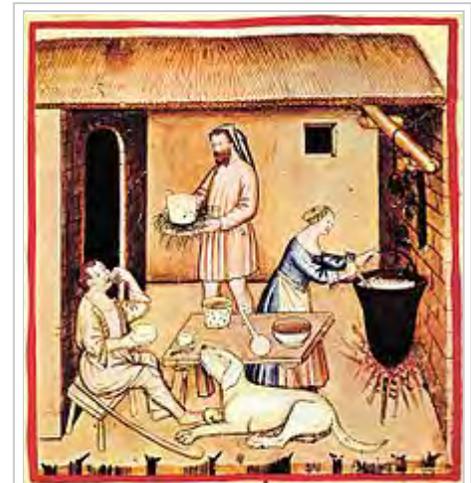


History of cheese

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The production of cheese predates recorded history. Its origin is assumed to lie in the practice of transporting milk in bladders made of ruminants' stomachs, with their inherent supply of rennet. There is no conclusive evidence indicating where cheese-making originated, either in Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East, or Sahara. Cheese-making was known in Europe at the earliest level of Hellenic myth^[1] and, according to Pliny the Elder, had become a sophisticated enterprise by the time ancient Rome came into being,^[2] when valued foreign cheeses were transported to Rome to satisfy the tastes of the social elite.



Cheese-making, *Tacuinum sanitatis Casanatensis* (14th century)

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Earliest origins

Though shards of pottery pierced with holes found in pile-dwellings of the Urnfield culture on Lake Neuchatel—dated at 6,000 BCE—are hypothesized to be cheese-strainers,^[3] the earliest secure evidence of cheese making dates back to 5,500 BCE in Kujawy, Poland.^{[4][5]} Dairying seemingly existed around 4,000 BCE in the grasslands of the Sahara.^[6] Hard salted cheese, the only form in which milk can be kept in a hot climate, is likely to have accompanied dairying from the outset. Since animal skins and inflated internal organs have provided storage vessels since ancient times for a range of foodstuffs, it is probable that the process of cheese making was discovered accidentally by storing milk in a container made from the stomach of a ruminant, resulting in the milk being turned to curd and whey by the rennet remaining in the stomach. Though an Arab legend attributes the discovery of cheese to an Arab trader who used this method of storing milk,^{[7][8]} cheese was already well-known among the Sumerians.^[9]

Cheesemaking may have begun independently by the pressing and salting of curdled milk in order to better preserve it. Observation that the effect of curdling milk in an animal stomach gave more solid and better-textured curds may have led to the deliberate addition of rennet.

The evidence for cheese (GA.UAR) are the Sumerian cuneiform texts of Third Dynasty of Ur, dated at the early second millennium BCE.^[10] Visual evidence of Egyptian cheesemaking has been found in Egyptian tomb murals, dating to about 2000 BCE.^[11] The earliest cheeses were likely to have been quite sour and salty, similar in texture either to rustic cottage cheese or to present-day feta. In Late Bronze Age Minoan-Mycenaean Crete, Linear B tablets record the inventorying of cheese (Mycenaean Greek in Linear B: 𐀀𐀀, *tu-ro*; later Greek: τυρός),^{[12][13]} as well as flocks and shepherds.^[14]

The earliest ever discovered preserved cheese was found in the Taklamakan Desert in Xinjiang, China, and it dates back as early as 1615 BCE.^[15]

Cheese produced in Europe, where climates are cooler than in the Middle East, required less salt for preservation. With less salt and acidity, the cheese became a suitable environment for useful microbes and molds, giving aged cheeses their pronounced and interesting flavors.

Ancient Greece and Rome

Ancient Greek mythology credited Aristaeus with the discovery of cheese. Homer's *Odyssey* (late 8th century BCE) describes the Cyclops making and storing sheep's and goats' milk cheese:

“ We soon reached his cave, but he was out shepherding, so we went inside and took stock of all that we could see. His cheese-racks were loaded with cheeses, and he had more lambs and kids than his pens could hold...

When he had so done he sat down and milked his ewes and goats, all in due course, and then let each of them have her own young. He curdled half the milk and set it aside in wicker strainers.

[16]

”



Cheese in a market in Italy

A letter of Epicurus to his patron requests a wheel of hard cheese, so that he may make a feast whenever he wishes. Pliny recorded the tradition at Rome that Zoroaster had lived on cheese.^[17]

By Roman times, cheese was an everyday food and cheese making a mature art. Columella's *De Re Rustica* (circa 65 CE) details a cheesemaking process involving rennet coagulation, pressing of the curd, salting, and aging. Pliny's *Natural History* (77 CE) devotes two chapters (XI, 96-97) to describing the diversity of cheeses enjoyed by Romans of the early Empire. He stated that the best cheeses came from *pagi* near Nîmes, identifiable as Lozère and Gévaudan, but did not keep long and had to be eaten fresh.

Post-Roman Europe

As Romanized populations encountered unfamiliar newly settled neighbors, bringing their own cheese-making traditions, their own flocks and their own unrelated words for *cheese*, cheeses in Europe diversified further, with various locales developing their own distinctive traditions and products. As long-distance trade collapsed, only travelers would encounter unfamiliar cheeses: Charlemagne's first encounter with a white cheese that had an edible rind forms one of the constructed anecdotes of Notker's *Life of the Emperor*.^[18] Cheese-making in manor and monastery intensified local characteristics imparted by local bacterial flora; the identification of monks with cheese is perpetuated in modern marketing labels.^[19] This led to a large diversity of cheese types and variants. Today Britain has 15 protected cheeses, from approximately 40 distinct types listed by the British Cheese Board, which claims a total number of about 700 different products (including similar cheeses produced by different companies).^[20] France has 50 protected cheeses, Italy 46, and Spain 26, but this again is only the exposed part of the iceberg: France alone has at least 1,800 raw milk cheese products,^[21] and probably more than 2,000 when including pasteurized cheese.^[22] A French proverb holds there is a different French cheese for every day of the year, and Charles de Gaulle once asked "how can you govern a country in which there are 246 kinds of cheese?"^[23] Still, the advancement of the cheese art in Europe was slow during the centuries after Rome's fall, for cheese, though it became a staple of long-distance commerce,^[24] was disregarded as peasant fare,^[25] inappropriate on a noble table and even injurious to gentle health through much of the Middle Ages.^[26] Langland's *Piers Plowman* (ca 1360-87) and his fellow peasants faced the allegorical figure of Hunger, saying "All I've got is a couple of fresh cheeses, a little curds and cream, an oat-cake and two loaves of beans and bran which I baked for my children."



A traditional thatched *buron*, or cheese-making barn, in the Mont-Dore, Puy-de-Dôme, France

Many cheeses today were first recorded in the late Middle Ages or after—cheeses like Cheddar around 1500 CE, Parmesan in 1597, Gouda in 1697, and Camembert in 1791,^[27] but there is no way to judge what recognizable relation to modern products the cheeses made in those locations bore.

In 1546, *The Proverbs of John Heywood* claimed "the moon is made of a greene cheese." (*Greene* may refer here not to the color, as many now think, but to being new or

unaged.)^[28] Variations on this sentiment were long repeated and NASA exploited this myth for an April Fools' Day spoof announcement in 2006.^[29]



A disused stone cheese-press at the farm Auchabrack, in Aberdeenshire, Scotland

Modern

Until its modern spread along with European culture, cheese was nearly unheard of in oriental cultures, in the pre-Columbian Americas, and only had limited use in sub-Mediterranean Africa, mainly being widespread and popular only in Europe and areas influenced strongly by its cultures. But with the

spread, first of European imperialism, and later of Euro-American culture and food, cheese has gradually become known and increasingly popular worldwide, though still rarely considered a part of local ethnic cuisines outside Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas.

The first factory for the industrial production of cheese opened in Switzerland in 1815, but it was in the United States where large-scale production first found real success. Credit usually goes to Jesse Williams, a dairy farmer from Rome, New York, who in 1851 started making cheese in an assembly-line fashion using the milk from neighboring farms. Within decades hundreds of such dairy associations existed.

The 1860s saw the beginnings of mass-produced rennet, and by the turn of the century scientists were producing pure microbial cultures. Before then, bacteria in cheese making had come from the environment or from recycling an earlier batch's whey; the pure cultures meant a more standardized cheese could be produced. With the mass production of cheese making it more readily available to the poorer classes, simple cost-effective storage solutions for cheese gained popularity. Ceramic cheese dishes, or cheese bells, became one of the most common ways to prolong the life of cheese in the home, and remained the most popular in most households until the introduction of the home refrigerator in 1913.^[30]

Factory-made cheese overtook traditional cheese making in the World War II era, and factories have been the source of most cheese in America and Europe ever since. Today, Americans buy more processed cheese than "real", factory-made or not.^[31]

See also

- Food history
- List of ancient dishes and foods

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