



The history of cheese

These original historical perspectives are provided by Piers Feilden, pioneer of UK traditionally ripened soft cheese manufacture, and founder of Lubborn Cheese Ltd.

Origins

No-one knows exactly where and when cheesemaking originated, however it is very likely that it followed closely on the adoption of dairy husbandry in the Middle East/Caucasus region. The Bible refers to "cheese of the herd" being given to King David and there is archaeological evidence of cheesemaking by about 1000BC. The ancient Greeks and Romans knew and valued cheese as did early people in Northern Europe.

The two basic components of cheesemaking, acidification and coagulation are likely to have been stumbled upon fairly readily:

- Acidification occurs naturally as a result of bacteria normally present in raw milk
- Coagulation might well have been observed while milk was being carried in containers made of cattle stomachs which retained quantities of naturally present rennin, the enzyme most widely used in traditional cheese manufacture.

Cheese almost certainly served an important function in the diet of primitive or subsistence farming societies. Before pasteurisation was introduced in the 19th Century, raw milk was an unsafe product: it was a major cause of transmission of tuberculosis as well as a variety of food poisoning bacteria. However these organisms are greatly inhibited by the acidity of cheese and the age of cheese often allowed numbers of pathogens to dwindle to harmless quantities. Hence unsafe milk could be safely consumed in the form of relatively stable cheese.

In addition, cheese performed two other useful functions. Firstly it enabled the nutritional value of milk to be available throughout the year. Cows that normally calved in spring would be dry over the winter, a period in any case when fodder might have been restricted, but cheeses could be made from summer milk and stored to provide a welcome balance to a winter diet.

Secondly, cheese was more transportable than milk. Cheeses could be produced, say, in upland pastures and transported to centres of population much more readily than milk: a cheese weighs between one eighth and one tenth of the equivalent quantity of milk - relevant if you are carrying it on the back of a pack animal!

The Industrial Revolution

First the canals and then the railways were massive agents for the development and sophistication of cheese. The urbanisation of many European countries provided a ready market for cheap and nutritious foods. For agricultural communities with access to these new forms of transport, it provided a cash crop that they had never had before and a share of the new prosperity that transformed their lives.

At the rear of the house I was brought up in here in Somerset (Lubborn House, which gave its name to the Company) there is a large building from the 1880's which was the home of the local cheese factor: he bought Cheddar cheeses from local farms, sometimes in tiny quantities, matured them in his 'cheesehouse' and sent them from the local railway station (West Pennard - opened in 1855) to his brother-in-law who had an office in Tooley Street SE1, the heart of the Victorian provisions trade. Much correspondence survives from the brother-in-laws' daily letters to each other, which indicates that one of their main business preoccupations was the price of bread: this was because cheese and bread were directly competitive for the disposable income of the urban working class.

Another trade that was pursued by many Somerset dairy farms was the manufacture of Caerphilly specifically for sale in the mining valleys of South Wales: sadly from the point of view of tradition, this trade came to an abrupt halt in the Second World War as all cheese was standardised (in the form of Cheddar) in order to facilitate the

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administration of the cheese ration, and the production of farmhouse Caerphilly never really got going again after the war.

In France and other industrialising countries the same process was under way. Indeed the rise of Brie cheese owed much to economic history. The Plaine de la Brie is located about 50 miles east of Paris and the cheeses of the region were transportable to the Paris conurbation at a time when it was impractical and unsafe to transport the milk: hence cheeses provided a cash crop to an area that had hitherto been relatively impoverished.

The 20th Century - Specialisation and Marketing

Before 1900 most cheese was made on farms and commercialised by factors who pooled this production and brought the cheese to market, as described above. The same kind of structure operated in France (where it is known as the 'affineur' system) and elsewhere. However standards of quality and hygiene were extremely variable (the best was wonderful and the worst was ghastly). In addition, developments in processing technology and equipment made the economics of specialisation increasingly attractive. The farmer could milk more cows if he didn't have to carry out his own dairying and the processor could achieve better standards and costs with centralised production. Furthermore the advent of motorised transport (initially flatbed lorries to carry milkchurns and then insulated tankers for bulk transfer) greatly improved the economics of centralised processing.

The industrialisation of cheese manufacture was a change that took place inexorably in the first half of the century. In the second half the feature was concentration.

There are many who rue the passing of the traditional farmhouse system of manufacture.

Some feel that industrial manufacture of cheese has necessitated the loss of quality attributes. However the villains in this story (if villains there be) are not necessarily the obvious suspects. The low point for cheese quality in the UK was the years of the 2nd World War and after. Under the cheese rationing regime, manufacturers were paid the same whatever the quality, provided that it met a minimum standard, and they were guaranteed an outlet for their production. In the years that followed, quality struggled to reap its reward as the market adjusted to a new environment of emerging supermarkets and the relentless price promotion of known value items. It would also be fair to say that some traditional products were 'dumbed down' as new standards of food safety were insisted upon.

However when properly harnessed, modern production methods increase the range of possibilities and provide a consistency of quality only dreamt of by our cheesemaking forerunners. As consumers and market mechanisms become more sophisticated, there is an increasing incentive for cheesemakers to offer genuine quality and variety.

And still the essence of cheese is a natural, simple food that has not been messed about with. The technology and means of getting cheese to market may have changed, but the honesty of the product remains and is in tune with the aspirations of the modern consumer.

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