

THE ART OF CHEESEMAKING

Cheese had been a dietary staple for thousands of years. Although drawings of what appears to be cheese were found on stone tablets dated to 4000 BC. Legend attributes its discovery to an early traveler who put some milk into a leather pouch made from the stomach of a calf before setting off on a journey across the desert. When at last the traveler stopped for a meal, he found that the milk has become cheese. Apparently rennet, an enzyme in the pouch (found in a sheep's stomach), when heated by the sun, caused the milk to separate into whey and soft white curds of cheese. Milk had made its leap to mortality.

The story of the cheese runs like a thread throughout the records of mankind. A Greek historian named Xenophon, born in 349 BC, wrote about a goat cheese that had been known for centuries in Peloponnesus. From the fuzzy shadows of antiquity, Homer speaks of it, and David was carrying cheeses among his possessions when he first heard of Goliath. As the center of civilization moved westward to Rome, the art of cheesemaking was carried along. Early cheese factories had a fire pit in the corner, with a copper kettle hanging over it on a crane, so they could swing the kettle over and away from the fire. From these early beginnings, the production of cheese has grown to big business. People have many questions about cheese, but the biggest question is probably whether or not it can really be made in the kitchen. Remember, that until recently cheeses were made on farms. Modern cheese factories have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on the most advanced scientific equipment so that they can faithfully copy the cheeses turned out in the primitive farm kitchens of yesteryear.

Utensils and Equipment

As a cheesemaker, before you begin making your first batch of cheese, some basic equipment will be necessary. You will probably be pleasantly surprised to find out that you already have almost everything needed in your kitchen right now!

Thermometer: There are special dairy thermometers but a bulb type that registers 50 to 115 degrees Fahrenheit is fine. Remember that mercury is poisonous, so if you use a mercury thermometer, don't break it

Pan: Stainless steel or enamel pan. Steel or aluminum pans will affect the cheese adversely. We use our canning pan.

Long-bladed Knife: The knife should be sharp and have a blade long enough to cut through the curd on the bottom.

Colander: You will need it to strain the curds from the whey.

Cheese Mold: A cheese mold can be easily made from a clean tin can having smooth sides. The bottom and sides will have to be perforated with holes to allow the whey to drain from the curds. Punch the holes from the inside or else the sharp, pointed metal edges of the holes will catch on the cheese or cheesecloth preventing its removal.

Cheesecloth: Enough to line the colander and/or the mold.

The Basics of Cheesemaking

The cheesemaking process is not complicated, as evidenced by the fact that cheese has often been produced by accident. A good quality should be used. Remember, although there is no set amount of milk to use, the bigger the cheese, up to a point, the better the cheese. The amount of cheese derived from a gallon of milk varies, but this is usually around a pound.

Starter: The first step in the process of cheese making is adding a starter to the milk to sour or ripen it. This will add flavor to your cheese. The basic cheese recipe uses active buttermilk culture for this purpose. Be sure to rummage around in the back of the display case at your grocers to get one from the very back. The fresher the buttermilk, the better!

Coloring: Color has nothing to do with the quality of the cheese and its use is entirely optional. It is added for eye appeal. It should be added before the rennet is added to the milk. Use cheese coloring dye only.

Rennet: Rennet (available in liquid or tablet form, at your grocery store) is added to the ripened milk, causing it to coagulate. The tablet should be crushed in a spoon, stirred into cool water before added to the milk (follow the instructions in the Basic Cheese Recipe).

Follow the steps in the Basic Cheese Recipe carefully and don't be discouraged by a few setbacks, especially when trying to make your own cheese for the first time. There are those of us who remember our first attempts at breadmaking and look back smiling at the defiant dough that we finally beat into submission. The art of breadmaking left the factory king left the factory of our own homes. Now it is time to bring the art of cheesemaking back home in your kitchen too. Just as there is a trick to handling bread dough, there are tricks to turning milk into cheese. If you follow the directions carefully (especially the ones about cleanliness), we can almost promise you smooth sailing, and the undeniable thrill of watching your family and friends smacking their lips over a slice of your very own cheese, and saying to them, smugly, "I made it myself!"

Let's get started.