

The birth of cheese ... a long History



The **birth of Cheese** mingles with the origin of man and primitive societies. When primitive man decided to settle down and practise agriculture, he learnt how to tame animals such as cattle, sheep and goats which were useful, apart from for their meat, also for producing **milk**, a food which was precious because of its high nutritional qualities. However, to make the first cheese out of milk can't have been that easy... some ingenuity and, certainly, some distraction must have been used to get curd from milk which wasn't fresh – or perhaps well-preserved – any more, and thus cheese. Unfortunately the origin of the cheese is lost in legend but we can always try to imagine it...

...a slightly distracted **shepherd** forgot to drink his freshly milked milk, or to keep it in a fresh spot. With the heat, the milk became acid and formed plenty of **curd**. Or, even more likely, our shepherd wanted to take some provisions with him, in view of a long journey, and put the milk in a flask, usually a leather bag made with the intestine of a goat. However, he couldn't have known that in the stomach of ruminants there are enzymes which help the digestion of milk, and must have been very surprised, therefore, when he tried to quench his thirst and instead of milk found that he was drinking a yellowish and acid liquid: curd, which he would then use to make cheese..

The most ancient testimony of the milking of animals goes back to 2500 years ago: it is a polychromatic **Sumerian** bas-relief which shows some cows being milked.



Greeks thought that cheese had been discovered by Nymphs, who allegedly taught Aristeus, son of Apollo, the art of curdling and of transforming milk. It is Homer, however, in his *Odyssey*, who is the first to describe, in more details, the technique used to make cheese - what today we would call Pecorino cheese. In fact, he describes the Cyclops Poliphemus inside his cave, bent on operations such as milking bleating sheep. To this Poliphemus then added rennet and, having waited a while, placed the freshly coagulated curd into wicker baskets.

Again in Greece, **Hippocrates**, the first doctor in the history of mankind, talks of cheese describing it as "strong, warming and nourishing" while Aristotle describes the technique of coagulating milk with the juice of figs.

The art of making cheese and the curdling techniques, especially those which used vegetable rennet, were known by **Etruscans** too.

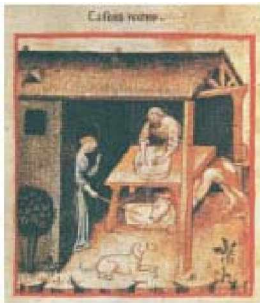
However, it was really the **Romans**, ingenious as they were, to perfect the dairy technique and to spread it throughout the empire. The importance of milk, on the other hand, is already present in the myth on the foundation of Rome. This describes how Romulus and Remus, when they were abandoned, were suckled by a she-wolf and so saved from certain death.



Latin authors have left us important descriptions of Roman dairy techniques. Marcus Terentius Varro describes the main types of cheeses eaten in the 1st century BC (cow-milk, goat-milk and sheep-milk ones, both fresh and matured) and shows us how people preferred, at that time, cheeses made with hare or goat rennet, rather than with lamb's. However, even more trustworthy information is found in the treaty on economy by Columella, a Spaniard who moved to Rome in the

1st century AD. His work is for us, today, an irreplaceable source of information and allows us to draw comparisons between ancient cheeses and those which we eat today.

The surprising thing is that the cheeses produced in the Roman countryside today, although less aromatic and salty than those of the ancient Romans, still have clear connections with their past, as they have preserved, intact, characteristics such as genuineness, deliciousness, quality and food safety.



During the Middle Ages cheeses, especially matured ones, became very common as they were both very nourishing and easily preserved for a long time: thus they could be eaten year-round.

It was especially monastic orders such as Cistercians and Benedictines who practised cheese making and who thus allowed these cheeses, and their production techniques, to be handed down through the ages and to reach us today.

From Milk
... to Cheese



The word "cheese" (formaggio, in Italian) comes from the Greek formos, which was the wicker basket used specifically in the production of cheeses.

Romans, on the other hand, called cheese caseus: this led, through the late Latin and the Middle Ages, to the widespread transformation, and use, of cacio.

The main element needed to make cheese is milk, which could be cow's, goat's or sheep's. These animals were farm-raised and were milked daily (milk was taken from their udders. A cow, sheep or goat could be hand-milked by the farmer, or with specific

machinery, used in big farms, called milking machines.

Milk, as soon as it is milked, is taken to cheese factories, where it is turned into cheese.

Here, milk is **warmed**, then it is left to solidify, by adding an acid substance called rennet.

A gelatinous substance is formed, called **curd**. If this is separated from the serum, the liquid part, **ricotta** can be made.

La cagliata, invece, viene messa in una **fuscella** cioè un contenitore forato e, aggiungendo vari e diversi ingredienti per dare sapore, si ottiene **il formaggio**.

For mozzarella and soft-paste cheeses, curd is hand-moulded and solidified quickly, as it is immediately placed in cold water.

Cheeses from yesterday ... and today

Among the many cheeses produced today in the Roman countryside, there are two which have been taken straight from ancient Rome's past, or rather from the description given by Columella, in his "de Re Rustica": the **hand-pressed cheese** and the **caciofiore**.

COLUMELLA'S HAND-PRESSED CHEESE

The "hand-pressed" cheese is a sheep-milk cheese, pressed and then smoked over apple-wood. Its consistency is similar to today's soft-paste cheeses.

This is how Columella describes it: "The way of producing cacio in the 'pressato a mano' way is a very well known method. When the milk has slightly clotted in the milking bucket, and it is still warm, it separates from the serum and, by pouring boiling water over it, it can be hand-moulded or pressed into wooden forms. It also has a pleasant taste if it is left to harden in the brine-salted water, and later it picks up a specific colour (smoked) thanks to the apple wood or straw smoke." (Lucio Giunio Moderato Columella, "De Re Rustica", 50 d.C.).

In other words, it is the ancestor of the "pasta filata" cheese (curd plunged in boiling water, then pulled or spun into various shapes) as it was hand-worked and plunged into cold water and thus distinguished itself from other types of cheeses, the curd



of which was put into forms.

Further, this tradition, which continues to exist in the Roman countryside, is also maintained in Poland, on the Tatra mountains - which was on the border of the Roman Empire - where the Oscypek is produced, a cheese which is hand-pressed in boiling water.

HOW IS IT PRODUCED?

The sheep milk is kept, in a large container, at a constant temperature of 38°C; lamb rennet is added to this, and left to coagulate for about 1 hr. The curd is then split to let the serum out, and cut into pieces of the size of a grain of rice. After the cheese paste has rested for about 20 minutes it is transferred, while warm, with a ladle with holes, into a container with boiling water where it is pressed to get all the serum out. Once it has been pressed, the paste is placed in brine at 18°C for 7-8 hours and smoked over apple-wood.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Sight: it looks like a small hat.

Feel: it has a soft, slightly grainy, consistency.

When cut: its consistency is similar to that of soft string cheeses.

Smell: it smells of fresh milk.

Taste: it has a sweet taste, slightly salty.

COLUMELLA'S CACIOFIORE



"The "cacio fiore" is an ancestor of Roman pecorino cheese, and is made with the curd of wild artichokes

(*Cynara cardunculus*).

This is how Columella spoke of it:

"It is best to coagulate the milk with lamb or kid rennet, although it can also be clotted with the flowers of wild cardoons,

safflower seeds or the milk of figs. In any case, the best cacio is that which undergoes the least treatment". (Lucio Giunio Moderato Columella, "De Re Rustica", 50 d.C.).

HOW IS IT PRODUCED?

Vegetable rennet is the key-element, which characterises Columella's cheese. Thanks to a flower's enzymes (cardoons'), a unique cheese is made: its yellowish crust encloses a nearly liquid heart which is surprisingly creamy and has an intense taste, not salty and slightly bitter.

The blue-purple flowers of wild cardoons are picked during the summer and are dried, in the dark, for 4-5 days. The dried petals are left to macerate for a day in water. Everything is then filtered with a synthetic cloth, and rennet is made. This vegetable rennet is then added to a container with sheep's milk, kept at 38°C, and left for about 1 hour.

Then, with a long smooth blade, the curd is cut a first time and, after twenty minutes, a second time, so as to get large and irregular pieces. This curd is then placed, for 24 hours, into containers which the serum can drain out of. Once it is dry

it is salted and left to season for 35-40 days, between 7°-10°C

HOW DOES IT LOOK LIKE

Sight: it looks like a brick.

Feel: the texture is soft, sometimes creamy.

When cut: soft and deformable.

Smell: a pungent, vegetable smell.

Taste: sweet, slightly acidulous.

How to taste a Cheese

The tasting technique for a cheese is carried out in various phases, during which tasters must pick up, thanks to three of their senses, all the characteristics of a product.

One basic rule is that cheeses must not be tasted when they are cold, but at room temperature.

1. **Sight:** the cheese's overall appearance must be examined, both on the outside and, when it is cut, on the inside. This first exam enables tasters to establish many characteristics of the product, whether it has been seasoned in a cave or in a storeroom, if it is made from cow's milk or from stable animals' milk.
2. **Smell:** this inspection is the most fascinating of all, as well as the most elusive. The scent must be judged by sniffing the cheese for a few seconds and trying to disassemble its elements. First of all, tasters focus on the overall scent of the cheese (intense or weak), then you try to identify the lactic aromas and, finally, you focus on other kinds of aromas, such as scents from vegetables, dried fruit, spices, or flowers.
3. **Taste:** when the cheese is in your mouth, you must try to judge the intensity of the product, by sampling small portions of it and, if necessary, trying another piece. Tastes can be: sweet, salty, acid, bitter and are easy to identify. However, apart from the intensity of the taste, the consistency of the cheese is examined too: this can be hard, deformable, rubbery, sticky, grainy etc.

Cheese tasting is a complex operation. However, remember that nobody is a born taster, but anyone can become one! So, to become experts, we have no choice left but to try many good and tasty cheeses!