

This and That from the Food Cultures of the World

Part 11: Cheese, Mankind's Oldest Fermented Food

Although their origins are not clear, drawings that appear to be of cheese production have been found on 4000 B.C. Egyptian murals and 3500 B.C. Mesopotamian lithographs. Established theory states that cheese production probably began around this time, originating in West Asia or the Middle East, making cheese mankind's oldest fermented food.

Don Quixote's Cheese

Arabian folklore says that in ancient times, a merchant was traveling by camel with goat milk in a bag made from a sheep's stomach. One evening, when he opened the bag for a drink, he discovered that the milk had separated into clear liquid and white curd. He cautiously tasted the curd and found it to be quite good. This white curd is believed to be the origin of cheese.

In scientific terms, an enzyme known as rennin in the sheep's stomach performed its natural job of separating milk, while the strong desert sun and the motion of the camel dehydrated the curd, producing the lump of cheese. These principles are the basis of modern cheese production.

This method for producing cheese was later introduced to Europe. The Second Book of Samuel in the Old Testament includes the verse, "And honey, and butter, and sheep, and cheese of kine, for David," indicating that cheese had already found its way to ancient Greece by around 1000B.C. As the Roman Empire

expanded, cheese production spread throughout Europe.

At the beginning of the 17th century, the Spanish writer Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote*. Cervantes-character always had cheese with him. One passage describes Don Quixote joining goatherds for an evening meal in the wilderness of La Mancha and removing a block of hard cheese from the bag tied to his horse's saddle. It is thought that this cheese was Manchego cheese, made from sheep's milk. Today, the label of Spain's most famous cheese is illustrated with pictures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

"Supreme Flavor" Transported to the Far East with Buddhism

Cheese production then found its way to India. In India, a fermented product somewhere between butter and cheese was developed. The Indian word for this product can be translated as "supreme taste" and is mentioned in Buddhist scriptures. When Buddhism was introduced to Japan from India via Baekja in Korea, a product known as *yayu* with

similarities to the original cheese was also introduced. *Yayu* production in Japan began around the Asuka period (ca. 592–645), and this food was much prized among aristocrats for its health benefits. The ancient book *Ukan Shiki* even makes reference to a request for *yayu* made by the Emperor Monmu (683–707) in 700 A.D. As the Emperor's strength began to weaken, *yayu* also disappeared from Japanese history. It was under the rule of the Edo period's 8th shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune, (ruled 1716–1745) that dairy products found their way back into the Japanese diet. History has it that Yoshimune had *hakugyuraku* (similar to butter) made from the milk of three white cows received as a gift from India. This *hakugyuraku* was highly valued for its medicinal and nutritional benefits. *Hakugyuraku* was made from eighteen liters of white cows' milk placed in a pot to which sugar was added. This mixture was then cooked until hardened to the consistency of a bar of soap. *Hakugyuraku* was thought to relieve pulmonary tuberculosis and was sold throughout the city of Edo, though the volume was small.

Full-scale cheese production began in Japan with the introduction of dairy processing from Denmark to Hokkaido. However, the mass production of cheese did not begin until the Showa period (1926–1989), and cheese did not become common in Japanese households until after WWII. Consumption only began to increase during the 1980s. The Cheese Demand Table published by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries shows an increase in Japan's cheese consumption from 109,000 tons in 1985 to 266,000 tons in 2004.

References

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White cows presented to Tokugawa Yoshimune initiated dairy farming in Japan (from the Dairy Farm Museum at Rakuno no Sato, Chiba prefecture)