

# Chapter 7

## Cheese Chronicles: A Global Odyssey Through History, Culture, and Time

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter traces the beginnings of cheese-making from ancient civilisations to contemporary practices, delving into the rich history and varied customs of cheese-making throughout many countries. It starts with the development of cheese-making in ancient Mesopotamia and its role in religious rites. Then, it looks at how the skills migrated to Europe, focusing on the feta cheese of Greece, the regional cheeses of France, and the persistence of Britain. Cheese producing methods across Asia, particularly China, Tibet, and Mongolia, are addressed together with Italy's culinary legacy. It then moves on to see how the Roman Empire had an impact on Europe and the Middle East. In the United States, the renaissance of artisanal cheese manufacturing and the history of cheese-making is explored in depth. The particular highlights include the Wisconsin's dairy sector, which is dedicated to quality, its notable share of the domestic cheese market, and the state's thriving cheese tourist business. It also looks into the historical significance of Monroe as “The Swiss Cheese Capital of the USA”.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is mandatory to fully understand and comprehend the history behind cheese-making before looking into the idea of cheese tourism. Although being known as one of the oldest culinary creations to exist in the human history, the exact time and place of its origin still remain unknown. Cheese-making is believed to have a formidable link with the milch animal domestication, which is assumed to have started about 8,000 to 10,000 years ago. Cheese production assisted in milk processing, and this was described as a significant milestone in cheese history. It did not only help with preserving milk in a non-perishable and easily transformable state but also rendered milk into an easily digestible commodity for the early

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prehistoric farmers. Some of the theories that have been debated on the history of cheese include the following.

The first theory, which dates back to around 700 BCE, originated in the Fertile Crescent, which is a region between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers of present day Iraq. This theory talks about the story of a nomad who was travelling in the dessert with his camel. Before embarking on this journey, he put some milk in his saddlebag, which was prepared from dried sheep's stomach. After many hours of travel and him wanting to quench his thirst, he decided to rest for a while and have some of the milk. The milk after been kept for a period of time, had coagulated, and he noticed that there was a thick curd like substance, which was later named as cheese, and a watery substance, that was named as whey. The combination of the rocking motion, which was induced by the camel's walk, the heat from the scorching sun, and the presence of rennin, which is a digestive enzyme present in the stomach of the sheep, all together led to the separation of milk into curd and whey (The History of Cheese - an Ancient Tradition - Today an Artisan Industry..., 2011).

Another theory proposes that, when the early humans were offering milk to the gods during their rituals, noticed the thickening of the milk when it was exposed to the warmth. The reason for this thickening could be due to the presence of renin in the containers in which they poured the milk during the rituals, as they were mostly made of dried sheep's stomach. Draining the liquid from the curdled milk resulted in the creation of soft cheese (The History of Cheese - an Ancient Tradition - Today an Artisan Industry..., 2011). This relationship between cheese and religion, has been documented throughout history. In various cultures, cheese has been offered as a gift to deities or gods. This served as a symbol of reverence and devotion. References of cheese being used in religious contexts can be found in ancient texts, including the Bible, where it is mentioned as a sacred offering (Farhat Holzman, 2014). In polytheistic societies (belief in many gods), cheese may have been presented to multiple gods as part of rituals or ceremonies. Additionally, alternative scenarios regarding the origin of cheese include salting the curdled milk for preservation and curdling milk with fruit juices by utilising the acid content of the fruit for cheese creation. (National Historic Cheesemaking Center, 2018).

The archaeological findings from Mesopotamia, dating back to around 3000 BC, provide one of the earliest evidence of cheese-making. It was also one of the first pictorial evidence, which was found on a frieze at the temple of the great goddess of life, Ninhursag (The History of Cheese - an Ancient Tradition - Today an Artisan Industry..., 2011). This provided valuable understandings of the early practices of dairy production in ancient civilizations. According to this pictorial evidence, early cheese-making likely involved simple techniques like allowing milk to naturally sour and coagulate, followed by draining the whey to produce curds. These curds would have been pressed and then aged, resulting in a cheese with a slightly sour and salty taste, which is similar to that of modern feta or cottage cheeses. The depiction on the frieze also suggests that cheese-making was an integral part of daily life and religious practices in ancient Mesopotamia.

Another piece of archaeological evidence from Central Anatolia suggests that humans began domesticating animals like sheep and goats as far back as the Neolithic period, which started around 10000 BC (Stiner et al., 2022). Initially, domestication likely involved capturing and raising wild animals primarily for their meat and hides. Around 7000 BC or later, humans began to selectively breed animals to produce more milk than what was needed for their offspring. This involved identifying and favouring animals with higher milk production, as well as devising techniques for milking them. And as a result, humans gradually started domesticating these animals for their milk, which eventually became essential for cheese-making. But a hard thing was that most of the early farmers were lactose intolerant. The

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