

What Makes Cheese Kosher?

National Historic Cheesemaking Center: Domestication of Milk-Producing Animals

Cheese may have been discovered accidentally by the practice of storing milk in containers made from the stomachs of animals. **Rennet, an enzyme found in a stomach of ruminant animals** [even-toed mammals that chews their cud], would cause the milk to coagulate, separating into curds and whey.

Kosher Cheese Rabbi Avrohom Gordimer

Of all dairy products, kosher certification of cheese is the most difficult. The Mishna* (Avodah Zarah 29b) states that *gevinas akum* – cheese made by a [non-Jew] – is non-kosher (This is a Rabbinic prohibition which means it's not as strict as a prohibition that came from the Torah). Many prominent [Rabbis] follow the rationale advanced by Shmuel, who states that the [concern about cheese made by a non-Jew] is due to the use of non-kosher animal rennet by [non-Jews] in their cheese-making.

Rennet is the enzyme which turns milk into cheese, and it originates in calf stomach lining. Shmuel held that the fear that non-Jewish cheese may contain such rennet, derived from *nevelah* [an animal that was not ritually slaughtered and is therefore not kosher to eat] flesh. Even though hard cheese normally contains only a very minute amount of rennet (far less than 1/60), nevertheless, since rennet is a *dovor ha-ma'amid* (a material which gives the product its form), it is not *botel* (nullified) even in very small ratios. (Shulchan Oruch YD 87:11.***) Thus, the fear that cheese may contain non-kosher rennet, which cannot be *botel* (nullified), was the motivation...to prohibit non-Jewish cheese.

In mainland Europe, the prevalent practice in cheesemaking is still to use animal rennet. In the United States and in England, microbial (artificial) rennet is typically utilized, and many varieties of Portuguese hard cheese are coagulated with thistle flower. However, even if the rennet is derived from kosher sources such as microbial rennet or thistles, halacha states that non-Jewish cheese remains forbidden (Shulchan Oruch YD 115:2*** based on Rambam Hil. Ma'achalos Asuros 3:14); only *gevinas Yisroel* ("Jewish cheese" aka cheese made by Jews) is permitted.

*The Mishna is the first written collection of the Jewish oral traditions that are known as the Oral Torah. It is also the first work of rabbinic literature, with the oldest surviving material dating to the 6th to 7th centuries CE.

***The Shulchan Aruch is the Code of Jewish Law. (Yoreh De'ah is one of four books in the Shulchan Aruch). The laws in the Shulchan Aruch document Sephardic law and customs, written by Rabbi Yosef Caro of Safed in the 16th century. This is paired with the Ashkenazi legal rulings of Rabbi Moshe Isserles, whose additions to the Shulchan Aruch (called the *Mapa*) note where the Sephardic and Ashkenazi customs differ.

Taste one cheese (and wine pairing) and discuss the following as a group or in pairs...

- How do you feel about the concerns regarding who makes Kosher cheese?
- What does this tell you about Jew's interactions with non-Jews in Rabbinic times? In the 16th century? Today?

How to Make Kosher Cheese

Mishneh Torah, Forbidden Foods 9:1

It is forbidden to cook meat and milk together and to partake of them according to Scriptural Law. It is forbidden to benefit from [such a mixture]. It must be buried. Its ashes are forbidden like the ashes of all substances that must be buried. Whenever a person cooks an olive-sized portion of the two substances together, he is worthy of lashes, as [Exodus 23:19] states: "Do not cook a kid in its mother's milk." Similarly, a person who partakes of an olive-sized portion of the meat and milk that were cooked together is worthy of lashes even though he was not the one who cooked them.

How is Cheese Made Kosher? By Rabbi Avrohom Gordimer

As with any food, all of the ingredients in the cheese as well as the equipment used during the manufacturing process must be kosher. However, a special rule in Jewish Law makes kosher certification of cheese a bit more challenging; cheese is only deemed kosher when made under continual, onsite rabbinic supervision [also known as a *mashgiach*].

Although various opinions are offered in the Talmud (Jewish Law) for this special stringency, the opinion adopted by the consensus of Jewish legal codes is the concern of cheese being made with non-kosher, animal-derived rennet.

Traditionally, cheese was made with calf rennet – the enzyme that lines the abomasum (fourth stomach section) of ruminants. In order to make cheese, the rennet-rich stomach flesh of a calf would be used to curdle the milk. In some countries, specific types of cheese are still produced from animal rennet, made from milled calf stomachs that are processed into a paste, powder or liquid.

Although most (but far from all) cheeses in our times are made with microbial (synthetic) rennet rather than with calf rennet, the rule that cheese can be deemed kosher only when made under continual, onsite rabbinic supervision still applies.

Taste one cheese (and wine pairing) and discuss the following as a group or in pairs...

- Why do you think a key pillar of keeping kosher is not cooking a kid in its mother's milk? And how do you think this applies (if at all) to the making of cheese?
- Why do you think a *mashgiach* [the Jew(s) who supervises the kashrut status of a kosher establishment] is necessary on a logistical level and a spiritual level?

The Role of Cheese in Jewish Ritual

Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De'ah 89:1

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Prohibition of Eating Cheese After Eating Meat:

[RABBI YOSEF CARO:] After eating meat, even from a wild animal or poultry, one should not eat cheese before an interval of six hours; and even after this interval, one must clean the teeth if there are meat remnants in the gaps. [RABBI MOSHE ISSERLES:] After cleaning the teeth, one must rinse the mouth before eating the cheese. Some opine that the six-hour interval is not necessary, and one can eat the cheese after removing the dishes, reciting the blessing at the end of the meal, and cleaning and washing the mouth. In our countries, it is customary to wait one hour after the meat meal before eating the cheese; but the mentioned blessing must be recited; because only then are the two meals distinct, otherwise not. It makes no difference if the hour serving as an interval is observed before or after the blessing. Meat remnants found in the gaps must be removed, even after the interval.

Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 670:2

Orach Chayim, meaning "Way of Life," is the first of four sections of the Shulchan Aruch. It discusses daily ritual observance, like prayer, Tefillin, Tzitzit, Shabbat, and holidays.

[RABBI MOSHE ISSERLES:] ...Some say that cheese should be eaten during Hanukkah, because a miracle was done though milk which Yehudit** fed the enemy. (Kol Bo and Nissim of Gerona).

***The Book of Yehudit which is read on Hanukkah Includes the story of Yehudit—the daughter of Yohanan the Kohen Gadol who is upset with her Jewish countrymen for not trusting Gd to deliver them from their foreign conquerors. She goes with her loyal maid to the camp of the enemy general, Holofernes, to whom she slowly ingratiates herself, promising him information on the Israelites. Gaining his trust, she is allowed access to his tent one night and feeds him salty cheese. To quench his thirst she plies him with wine, and as he lies in a drunken stupor, she decapitates him, then takes his head back to her fearful countrymen. The Assyrians, having lost their leader, disperse, and Israel is saved. So in her merit, we too eat cheese. (Chabad.org)*

Why Dairy on Shavuot? By Lesli Koppelman Ross

Some derive the practice [of eating dairy on Shavuot—the holiday celebrating the giving of the Torah] directly from scripture, saying we eat dairy to symbolize the "land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8) promised to the Israelites, or that "milk and honey are under your tongue" (Song of Songs 4:11). Others look to [Mt. Sinai] itself, which is termed in Psalms mount of *gavnunim* (68:15), meaning many peaks. They connect that description with the Hebrew word *gevinah*, meaning cheese.

Taste one cheese (and wine pairing) and discuss the following as a group or in pairs...

- What role does symbolic food play in Jewish practice? What about in your own life?
- What do you think about the separation of meat and milk and the use of dairy for special occasions?