

Mountains of Cheese

Ancel Keys

in the fourteenth century, Giovanni Boccaccio, immortal for his writing "Decameron", described a place of the utmost gastronomic luxury. There, on the top of a mountain, were people whose only labor was to make macaroni and ravioli; the mountain itself was made of grated Parmesan cheese. Boccaccio's exaltation of cheese was not an expression of a new passion for cheese in Florence in the fourteenth century. By Boccaccio's time parmesan cheese (parmigiano in Italian) had been esteemed for several centuries and cheese in general had been a favored food in Italy and Greece for more than two thousand years.

Cato the Elder, who died in 149 B.C., mentioned many uses of cheese in his "De Agricultura", the first Latin prose work of any importance on any subject. Cheese was one of the three staples of life of the Roman Legions in the field and at home, the other two being bread and olive oil. The Romans who conquered the whole of the Mediterranean world -- and far beyond, from Britain to southern Russia--carried with them wherever they went, their technical skills and customs, including making and eating cheese.

In the great days of the Roman Empire, when the rich and mighty revelled in good living, cheese appeared in the simplest as well as in the most elaborate of meals. Cheese was invariably involved at the end of a feast; almost all Roman desserts were made of cheese, honey and flour, ricotta cheese being a favorite for that use.

Early Rome was nowhere near the start of the story of cheese in the Mediterranean. Homer told about Polyphemus of the one-eyed race of giants, the Cyclops, who was making cheese in his cave when Odysseus appeared on the scene. The poem does not say exactly what kind of cheese Polyphemus was making when he imprisoned Odysseus and his crew -- and ate most of the men. But the Greek text says Polyphemus had a herd of sheep and was using "half milk" so obviously he was making cheese from skimmed ewe's milk, very likely cottage or pot cheese. Since he had a fire going we surmise that he would make ricotta from the liquid whey remaining after the solid curds had formed.

In 1932 H.J. Matheson described, in 68 pages of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Bulletin 608, the varieties of cheese and their chemical composition. But we are more interested in the varieties of cheese to eat.

In Italy cheese is made from the milk of cows, goats, the Indian buffalo, and sheep, the latter being uncommon except on the island of Sardinia. Let us recall a few of the Italian cheeses. Parmesan (parmigiana) cheese, grated, is used everywhere in the western world to flavor pasta, soups and mixed dishes. In the solid form parmesan retains its flavor for many months; grated, the flavor diminishes quickly. Don't buy grated parmesan in cans! Romano is much like parmesan and is used in the same way. It costs less than parmesan but is as good for cooking. Two cheeses that compete for popularity in Italy are found in cheese shops in all western countries. Provolone is made in Italy in great cylinders, 4 or 5 feet long, over a foot in diameter. The Italian name means "big test" or "big try". It keeps for months if it is kept cool in big pieces wrapped up to prevent drying. Cacciocavallo comes in round balls with a neck at one end. It weighing from half a pound to two pounds. Normally it comes in two pieces tied together, convenient for hanging over a rod for ageing. At first I thought the name referred to being hung over the pommel of a saddle by men going hunting, mistaking "cacciar", the word for hunting, for the word "caccio" meaning cheese. The

Italian name means "horse cheese", but it has nothing to do with horses.

Fontina is a favored cheese made near the slopes of the Alps. Mascarpone is a very soft cheese made in the winter in the provinces of Lombardy and Tuscany. Cheese fanciers say it is best eaten with berries or sprinkled with cinnamon. We have an Italian book that lists 451 Italian cheeses. Actually there may be as many as 50 different cheeses; the number is swollen to 451 by giving different names to the same cheeses made in different places in Italy. Whatever the local name, we confess to liking almost all Italian and French cheeses. Swiss and English cheshire and cheddar sometimes grace our table at the end of dinner. So-called Swiss cheese, is made in many countries and some of those imitations are rather good but they cannot compete with the real Swiss Emmenthaler cheese. It is made only in one area of Switzerland and is identified by the name printed on the side of the round flat loaf. By law it must be aged two years before being honored by the name. I think real Swiss cheese may be recognized by shiny holes; the holes in the imitations lack the shine. That is my idea but I haven't tested it statistically.

Mozzarella is a wonderful soft cheese made from the milk of the Indian buffalo in a small area centered on Battipaglia, a small town in southern Italy. It is round, usually the size of a golf ball to that of a baseball. Alas! it keeps for only a few days and cannot stand shipping. There are imitations called mozzarella but they cannot compete in flavor.

A very good cheese is made on both the French and Spanish sides of the Pyrenees mountains. It is easily spotted in cheese shops by the black wrappers on the flat round loaves. One strictly American cheese has gone abroad. Philadelphia Cream Cheese is sold in Europe; it is too rich for our taste.

Big wine shops in the United States often have a cheese counter, catering to the fact that cheese and wine go well together. Cheese, biscuits or crackers, and a glass of sherry wine make a good preparation for our dinner. At the end of dinner cheese competes with fruit instead of sweets for our dessert.