

MAKING CHEESE WITH LAO TZU

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SIMONA CARINI

I grew up in Italy, where there are many kinds of cheese, each with its own personality and preferred use. But even so, I took cheese, and certainly cheese making, for granted. Cheese making was a kind of black box where the input was milk and the output cheese, a process with which I never thought I would become acquainted, as I was content to enjoy the results of other people's expertise. Then one day, I find myself arriving home from a shopping trip with some rennet tablets.

"A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step." —Lao Tzu

I am not an impulsive buyer, so this comes as a surprise. I guess it's time to try that online recipe for Neufchâtel (a type of soft cheese). I start with milk, to which I add store-bought cultured buttermilk. At the specified temperature, I add diluted rennet. As a result of this treatment, the milk will set into a firm gel, the curd. After the designated time, I probe the curd with a finger to verify that I have a so-called clean break, then congratulate myself. Following the recipe, I cut the curd and scoop the resulting cubes into a piece of cotton cloth, tie that into a bundle, hang it over a colander placed over a pot, and allow overnight draining in the cold climate of the fridge. The morning after, I flavor the drained cheese with salt, then add chopped fresh herbs from my garden to some of it and enjoy the fresh taste, which is enhanced by the pride of having made this cheese myself.

A byproduct of the process described in the previous paragraph is a batch of whey, which I then reheat to make my first little batch of ricotta. In texture and flavor, it's not quite what I eat when I am in Italy, but it is ricotta made according to tradition, using whey as the main ingredient.

What's the next step? The vision of hard cheese becomes too attractive to resist. The first steps of my journey have unleashed full-on wanderlust. I find myself at a crossroads of deciding whether to invest in a cheese press or try to build one at home. After a debate with my DIY inclination, I buy the press and step forward into the next adventure.

Following a recipe for basic hard cheese, I inoculate milk (a combination of three parts cow and one part goat) with yogurt and let it ripen. The recipe details at what temperature each step occurs. After the specified time, I add diluted rennet to the milk, wait until I obtain a clean break, then cut the curd. During a period of slow heating, additional whey is expelled and the curds shrink in size. When the established conditions are reached, I drain and salt the curds, and put them, wrapped in cloth, in the cheese press. The morning after, I hold in my hands my first little wheel of cheese.



My best ricotta so far. Read more about it here: briciole.typepad.com/blog/2009/02/ricotta-fatta-in-casa-2.html



Curds being drained



My first hard cheese (which I called caciotta)



Left: the Presidential cheese—I made it after the elections. Right: the Election cheese—I made it the day before the elections.

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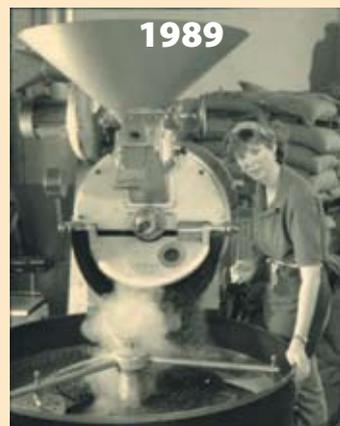


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At this point, I have to exercise restraint in the interest of aging, the resting period during which the flavor of the cheese develops.

I feel like a child counting down the days to Christmas and decide that a week is long enough to wait for a cheese that is mostly a proof of concept to age. I prepare myself for a wide range of outcomes—a brick, a piece of chalk, glue, or goo—and I'm rewarded with something that looks, smells, and tastes like cheese, of soft texture and mild flavor. I am happy. Pears from the new crop bought at the farmers market are the right companion for my little *caciotta*.

"A good traveler has no fixed plans, and is not intent on arriving." —Lao Tzu

My journey continues, guided by a home cheese-making book and information I obtain by reading related literature. I slowly expand my horizons, learning variations on the basic process outlined above. False steps and downright falls are inherent in all explorations, but the worst-case scenario may be the unfortunate loss of a gallon or two of milk—no need to call my agent for extra insurance on my home. Making cheese at home requires a fair amount of work. Many are the variables that play a part in what for me is no longer a black box, but a fascinating process.

I start wondering whether I have company in my newly discovered passion, and the answer comes from cyberspace, where a fellow food-blogger and *Edible East Bay* contributor sends an appeal for people interested in joining her in turning the kitchen into a practice creamery. Kirstin Jackson-Ellis introduces me to another book that provides recipes for making dairy products at home. She also puts forward the idea of a food-blogging event for which each month participants all make the same product, use it to prepare a dish of choice, and then write about their experience. We start with ricotta, the subject of several experiments on my part, then turn our attention to buttermilk, of which I make both the true version (buttermilk as byproduct of butter making) and the modern version (cultured buttermilk). Next, we are on to mozzarella, the making of which entails stretching the heated curds, a thoroughly fun process. My current result is a mozzarella good enough to cook with, but not ready to be the protagonist of an insalata caprese.

As I continue my journey, visiting different corners of the cheese planet, I realize that a few tools, a moderate investment of time, and the development of patience have so far brought enormous satisfaction. What am I exploring now? The addition to the curds, before they are pressed, of such ingredients as caraway seeds. On the cooking front, I'm making handmade lasagne with homemade béchamel sauce, a simple tomato sauce, and my own cheese. 🧀

A native of Italy, Simona Carini moved to California in 1993 to live with her (now) husband. She describes her cheese-making adventures in her audio blog (briciole.typepad.com).

Resources:

Prof. David Fankhauser's Cheese Page:
biology.clc.uc.edu/Fankhauser/Cheese/Cheese.html

Home Cheese Making: Recipes for 75 Homemade Cheeses, by Ricki Carroll (Storey Publishing 2002)

The Home Creamery, by Kathy Farrell-Kingsley (Storey Publishing 2008)

Kirstin Jackson-Ellis's blog:
vindelatatable.blogspot.com



First slice of my Montasio



Cooling mozzarella balls

