

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT CHEESE

## Can cheese be frozen?

Freezing is not the best method for storing cheese but it can be done. The flavor of aged cheeses is generally not affected by freezing, but the body and texture can be negatively affected. Hard cheeses freeze better than other types. To freeze, cut into small pieces (less than a half-pound and less than one inch thick) and wrap tightly in plastic wrap. To thaw, leave in refrigerator for several hours and use soon afterwards.

## Can I eat cheese if I'm lactose intolerant?

Yes, if you are careful to select certain types of natural cheeses. This is because during the process of making natural cheese, when the whey (the liquid portion of milk) is separated from the curds (the solid components), most of the remaining lactose is removed with the whey. The small amount remaining is utilized by the good bacteria already present in the cheese. Natural hard cheeses such as Cheddar, Jack and Gouda, as well as soft-ripened cheeses such as Brie and Camembert, contain little or no lactose. Fresh cheeses and processed cheese products contain lactose because of the way they are manufactured.

## Can I eat the rind of cheese?

You can usually eat all parts of cheese except the wax coating and the bandage wrap found on some types. However, the rind of some cheeses can be quite strong and, to many people, unpleasant tasting. To get a clear idea of how a cheese tastes, start with a section of the paste (the inside of the cheese), then follow with a taste that includes a bit of the rind – or, if the rind looks unappealing, the part of the cheese closest to the rind – to appreciate how the rind can influence the flavor of the cheese. Some very hard cheeses such as aged Cheddar and Dry Jack can have chewy, pungent rinds that may overwhelm the cheese. Some very aged natural rind cheeses have rinds that are earthy or even moldy tasting. But again, it's a matter of personal preference.

## What role does rennet play in cheesemaking?

Rennet is a traditional word for the coagulant used in cheesemaking. At the start of the cheesemaking process, enzymes in the form of rennet or other coagulants are added to the vat and cause the milk to thicken so it can be separated into solids (curds) and liquid (whey). Some of the rennet used in cheesemaking remains entrapped in the cheese and helps break down the cheese structure as the cheese ages. Although the coagulant does not contribute much to the flavor of the cheese, too much rennet may cause a cheese to taste bitter. It is easy to become confused differentiating between starter culture and coagulant, since both are typically added to the cheesemaking vat at about the same time. The culture greatly influences the flavor of the cheese.

### **Is raw milk better than pasteurized for making cheese?**

It would be nice if there was a simple answer, but the best answer is, “sometimes, but not always.” That is because many more factors than if the milk is pasteurized influence cheese flavor. For example, if raw milk is held for more than five hours in a tank, or is of poor quality, you often will be able to make better cheese from pasteurized milk by skillful selection and management of the culture. The most important factor that influences flavor is the quality and freshness of the milk. But if all things are equal – if you control the milk, obtain milk from cows that graze on pastures rich with the right regional vegetation, and make the cheese immediately after milking – then using raw milk will give a cheesemaker more complexity to work with, and a skilled cheesemaker will be able to creatively express that complexity in the flavor of the cheese.

### **Is high fat milk the best for cheesemaking?**

It depends on the type of cheese you are making. Certain cheeses, like Gouda, require milk lower in fat. Parmesan is made with partially skimmed milk.

### **How does terroir influence the flavor of cheese?**

Terroir in the U.S. is defined as “a sense of place,” referring to subtle local influences in the flavor of food or wine. However, just because a cheese is made in a place doesn’t mean the place is in the cheese. In the European sense of the term, terroir is not magic but a formal, well-defined tradition that is the result of clear choices, hard work and cooperation between regulatory authorities and local growers and producers over time. In France, the idea that you can create terroir began in the 14th century. That tradition continues today and takes into account both environmental and cultural influences.

U.S. cheesemakers can create terroir by skillfully managing a number of practices. These include choosing the right animal breed for their climate, feeding them on pasture that includes local vegetation, allowing indigenous microbes into their starter culture, and letting as much environmental influence into their aging room as regulations will allow.

### **Should cheese always taste the same every time you eat it?**

Good natural cheese should taste consistently good, but it may not always taste exactly the same. This is true for two reasons. First, natural cheese is a living food and will continue to change over its life. And second, a cheesemaker may encourage variations in a cheese’s flavor during the year based on milk selection and other managed environmental differences – a practice called “terroir.”

It is up to the cheesemaker to decide the degree of flavor consistency in his or her cheese, and that is determined by the market for the cheese. Some cheeses are sold to end users who demand a high degree of flavor consistency, and other cheeses – often specialty or artisan cheeses – are sold to end users who prize flavor diversity, especially when it is produced seasonally. The one thing that has to be consistent is the quality of the cheese.

### **Is sharp cheese the same as aged cheese?**

“Sharp,” while commonly used, is not a good synonym for “aged” when it comes to cheese. For example, properly aged Cheddar is not sharp – it doesn’t bite the mouth with acidity – nor is it bitter. Though some aged cheeses may have acid in their flavor profile, the acid is usually balanced by other flavors and perhaps a creamy texture. Some cheeses actually become sweeter with age or acquire a “nutty” flavor.

### **Do creamy, soft-ripened cheeses have more fat than harder types?**

Actually, the opposite is most often true – the creamy, soft-ripened cheeses frequently have less fat content based on weight than very hard or aged cheeses. This is because the creamy cheeses have a higher water content that dilutes the fat, while the aged cheeses are hard because they contain less water and this concentrates the fat.