A Cultural History of Raw-Milk Cheese

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Raw-Milk Cheese Today: How Did We Get Here?
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Is raw-milk cheese...?

Inherently dangerous and a public health disaster waiting to happen...

“... one of the most beautiful and romantic links between human beings and the earth that we will ever know...”

— Steve Jenkins, to *NY Times* reporter in 2000.
Cheesemongers report:

- some customers will eat only *pasteurized*-milk cheese, believing it’s the only guarantee of safety
- some customers demand *raw*-milk cheese, regardless of variety, believing it’s the only guarantee of quality
pasteurized milk is the only guarantee of safety

raw milk is the only guarantee of quality

The disagreement is rooted in historical, cultural ideas about “Nature” and our relationship as humans to the organic agencies of microorganisms.
Outline:

1) History (brief!) of American cheesemaking, culminating in routine pasteurization.
2) Contrast artisan and industrial technoscientific approaches to microbes.
3) Consumer demand.
4) Focus on artisan *practice* to get beyond binary, oppositional rhetoric.
“Raw-milk cheese” is a modern invention.
raw-milk cheese *vs.* pasteurized-milk cheese

19th Century dairy pasteurizer
Puritan farmers, 1600s
Pastoral depiction of a dairy maid in *Gleason’s Pictorial*, May 1854, Boston
Dairy maids churning butter
Gleason’s Pictorial, August 1854
The “art” of crafting cheese

developing “a feel” for the curd and thus the ability to respond to natural, contingent variability
engravings of a creamery, by Howard Pyle from *Harper’s Weekly*, 1882
“An occasional expert may be found in family dairying, but it is not possible to find one in every family.”

— Laura Briggs Arnold, 1878 manual for farmhouse butter and cheesemaking
The Pasteur Institute
Salting cheeses in the Kraft-Phenix cheese factory, 1933.
Harvard University’s Baker Library.
Cheese = (pasteurized-milk) cheese
Widmer’s Cheese
Theresa, WI
est. 1922

Crowley Cheese
Healdville, VT
est. 1824 (factory in 1882)
from a *Pasteurian* perspective:

+ modern progress

- obsolete, risky
the artisan “Renaissance”

In countercultural opposition to industrial homogenization of food — and culture.
the artisan “renaissance”

Vermont Shepherd,
Westminster West, VT
parallel cultures

**industrial technoscience**

**artisan technique**

**NATURE** is unruly, dangerous
microbes can (should!) be controlled

working to **overcome** organic variability by **dominating**
organic processes of fermentation, ripening
parallel cultures

**industrial technoscience**

*NATURE* is unruly, dangerous; microbes can (should!) be controlled

working to **overcome** organic variability by **dominating**

organic processes of fermentation, ripening

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**artisan technique**

*NATURE* is beneficent, pristine; “friendly” microbes are our allies

working to **express** organic variability by **collaborating with** microbial agents of fermentation, ripening
Post-Pasteurian cheesemaking

Cultivating the microbial environment through humidity & temperature control, salt brine, brushing, etc.

... and cleaning, sanitizing, hygienic practice.

[and could include verification]
raw-milk “Renaissance”

1) 1980s strong $ and weak European currency = more Americans travel to Europe and exposed to European cheeses

— back home: “no lait cru Camembert for you!”

raw-milk cheese = “real” cheese:

authentic, traditional, European — flavorful!
raw-milk “Renaissance”

2) interest in “natural” foods is no longer countercultural but mainstream (now also “organic” and “pro-biotic”)
raw-milk “Renaissance”

3) growth of farmers’ markets and direct-to-consumer sales means producers can market an inconsistent commodity (sampling)
raw-milk “Renaissance”

4) anti-regulatory political climate

**affecting consumption**: notion that “regulation impedes consumer choice”

“personal risk is my rightful choice as an individual consumer” — *but how are these decisions informed?*

**affecting production**: exponential rise in # of artisan cheese enterprises in 2000’s coincided with underfunding of state and federal safety inspection
raw-milk “Renaissance”

5) in last decade, more *producers* of artisan cheese came to it as former *consumers* of it

— bring to its production a set of quality values established through consumption
raw-milk “Renaissance”

1) raw-milk cheese = “real” cheese in light of European traditions, tastes
2) Interest in “natural” food is mainstream
3) farmers’ markets offer direct sales
4) anti-regulatory political climate
5) more *producers* of artisan cheese bring to it quality values established by consumption
Cheese making is regulated for safety in dualistic terms:

- **Pasteurized-milk**
  - No aging requirement

- **Raw-milk**
  - 60-day aging
Raw-milk cheese CAN be made safely...

BUT safety is not inherent to raw-milk cheesemaking – just as quality is not inherent to artisan food making.

“Safety is relative; it is not an inherent biological characteristic of a food.”

— Marion Nestle, Safe Food (2003: 16)

In artisanship, “the quality of the result is not predetermined, but depends on the judgment, dexterity, and care which the maker exercises as he works.”

Post-Pasteurian cheesemaking

Selectively cultivating the microbial environment through humidity & temperature control, salt brine, brushing, etc.

... and cleaning, sanitizing, hygienic practice.

[and could include verification]
“80% of cheesemaking is cleaning”
If this is how we got here, where are we heading?

1) How can we regulate safety in a way that respects quality, e.g., cheese’s diversity, including raw-milk varieties?
If this is how we got here, where are we heading?

2) Can we promote shared practical knowledge?

• Knowledge of pathogens and risk management can be incorporated into standard artisan methods (VIAC).

• Knowledge of artisan methods would aid safety officials and inspectors — “best practice” may not be what is done, and needs to be done, in automated factory.

• What should a consuming public learn or understand about raw-milk cheese?
If this is how we got here, where are we heading?

3) as scientists learn more about the microbial environments within and around us, how will we come to think about living with bacteria, yeasts, and molds?
Thank you!