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May 9 ·

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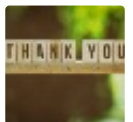
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Can a vegetarian navigate the milky way (of cheese)?



by C. Flisi

For many would-be vegetarians, the cheese conundrum is the big stumbling block. Cheese can be a protein-rich substitute for meat, but quality cheeses contain animal-based rennet (sliced from the stomachs of newborn calves and unweaned



piglets, to boot!) so they are not acceptable to serious vegetarians.

Most mass-market cheeses in the US today use Fermentation Produced Chymosin (FPC), an industrially-produced rennet that begins with an animal's DNA, which is then bio-synthesized and genetically altered. It's one step from pure animal-based rennet, but it still starts with the death of a baby animal. Plus, many cheese producers are reluctant to label their products as GMO-based, as it's so non-natural sounding.

There are only two truly vegetarian alternatives: microbial and vegetable. The former is one of the oldest methods of cheese processing, but it's tricky because it is essentially using mold to produce coagulants and some experts claim the resulting cheeses have an unpleasant aftertaste. However, several Scandinavian cheeses, including the widely praised Norwegian Pultost, are made with self-produced cultures of lactic

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bacteria, and have received international recognition. Some kosher cheeses are also made this way.

Vegetable rennet is not only an acceptable alternative to animal products, it has historic and gustatory appeal. Manuel Maia of Tradifoods, a distributor of Portuguese cheeses, notes that Pliny the Elder described cheese made with plant-based rennet in the first century AD. “Our cheeses are made with sheep and goat milk, not cow, and cardoon thistles have traditionally been used for the rennet,” he explains. The best-known cheese of this kind is Quejio Serra da Estrela, from the Estrela Mountains of northeast Portugal. It is made only with the milk of Merino sheep and the slight bitterness of the thistle is said to counter the inherent saltiness of the milk.

According to Massimo Antonini, owner of Aquaranda, a farm in Lazio, Italy, plants were used in

cheesemaking as early as 400 years before Christ. When Antonini was challenged to recreate a traditional sheep's milk cheese in 2002, Caciofiore della campagna romana, he and other producers in Lazio experimented with a number of plants — fig, safflower, gallium, and cardoon — before settling on the latter. “It took us two years to get the process right,” he confesses. “Working with raw milk is difficult, ensuring the right bacterial count is tricky, and we work only with wild-grown cardoon.”

Vegetable rennets confer a particular taste to the finished cheese that is not possible with any other coagulation method. So it's a way to distinguish one product from another, provided the producer has the necessary patience and artisanal skill. “Rennet from cardoon is more perfumed, works differently and better, and gives a more complex flavor than animal rennet,” claims Maia of Portugal. “It works better with sheep

milk than cow's milk, though it can work with both.”

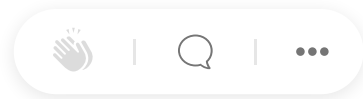
Spain's Torta de la Serenais similar to Portugal's Serra da Estrelain its use of Merino sheep milk and cardoon rennet, but the flavor is less assertive because the Spanish use less cardoon in their mix. Related to both is Spain's Torta del Casar: unlike Serena, its milk comes from a mixture of sheep breeds; and unlike Estrela, it uses slightly less rennet.

The irony of Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian cheeses being ideal for vegetarians is that there isn't to date much request for them BY vegetarians in these countries. Vegetarians in Spain and Portugal hover around two percent of the population. Although more than twice as many Italians claim to be vegetarians compared to Americans (seven percent vis-à-vis 3.3 percent), North American consumers are much more interested in vegetarian-friendly cheese, according to cheese producers. The

number of vegetarians in the UK may be as high as 12 percent, so it's no surprise that a wide variety of semi-soft, aged, and blue cheeses with vegetable rennet are produced there.

In the end, though, the quality of the cheese ultimately dictates its popularity. "Vegetable rennet doesn't attract customers as much as the taste of the cheese itself," emphasizes Maia.

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