Cheese : as I know it

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IT is probable that cheese was made accidentally in the first instance, by the carrying of milk in the stomachs of animals, when the milk clotting enzymes of the stomach converted the liquid milk into a junket or a solid mass.

Though cheese was crudely made in the early centuries, it possessed much better keeping qualities than the original milk, and provided food for journeys. It was thus early recognised that cheese making is a convenient method of converting a considerable part of the constituents of milk into a product that will keep well, is less bulky as it contains much less water, is of high nutritive value, and is both palatable and readily digestible.

England, the home of many fine cheeses, practically all of which have geographical names, produced most of her cheese on the farm, until about 1850. Farmhouse cheesemaking continued to flourish until the last war, after which it steadily declined and the growth of systematic factory methods, brought about more standardised day to day production to the industry.

The practice of cheese-making embraces a systematic series of mechanical operations, which have been gradually developed by experience and observation. In its widest application, it includes the production and care of milk, the conversion of milk into cheese, and the care of the manufactured product until it is ready to be used as a food.

Of cheese in general, it is surprising how few people who really like it realise how many different cheeses are made in Australia; unfortunately not so many different kinds are made in Western Australia.

In brief, cheesemaking consists in clotting milk by rennet, cutting the resultant junket or curd into small pieces and driving some of the whey out from the pieces of curd by the combined effect of heating and acid development, the finished material being packed into a metal or wooden container which determines the shape of the finished cheese.

Very slight treatments will result in a soft, moist cheese of short keeping quality, and intensive application of heat, and acidity development will yield a hard, dry cheese that will keep for many months or even years. Thus we may consider ordinary junket, which is really a stillborn cheese, as one, and Parmeson cheese as the other extreme of a theoretically infinite number of varieties of cheese.

How to buy good cheese is a question that may well be asked.

The first thing to do is to go to a reliable storekeeper or retailer, or if possible to one that specialises in sales of various types of cheese.

In most of the large towns there will be found a shopkeeper who is sufficiently cheese minded to pride himself in his stock, and there one should find the best cheese. You can only learn about good cheese by tasting it, and there will be, no doubt, many trials and errors before you have arrived at the criterion you desire.

One last word about how to keep cheese.

Undoubtedly, the best way to look after cheese is to consume it quickly, but modern authorities on the subject offer the following advice, on its conservation.

It should be stored either in a covered plastic, china or glass dish with ventilation holes in the lid. Alternatively, it should be kept tightly wrapped in the film wrapping in which most cheese is packed today, or in greaseproof paper in a polythene bag.

It should be kept in a cool dry airy place at temperature around 50°-60°F. Refrigerator keeping is useful today for a short time only and the cheese should be removed from the refrigerator some time before eating so that its full flavour will be restored.

But the best advice I can offer, is to eat up quickly, and return to your shopkeeper for more.
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