

How we made cheese



MILK NEEDS VERY LITTLE URGING TO BECOME CHEESE. Add heat and a bit of coagulant (vinegar or lemon juice, for instance), and curds separate from whey like magic. Tah-dah—cheese.

Like beer, wine, and vinegar—all of which we also made for our One-Block Feast (sunset.com/oneblockfeast)—cheese is produced by living bacteria. Skilled cheesemakers manipulate those organisms, along with temperature, humidity, and other environmental factors, to produce an amazing variety of wonderful cheeses from a handful of the same basic ingredients.

Here at Sunset, we made easy cheeses. They really couldn't have been more basic, since we restricted ourselves to what we could get from our garden: lemons for coagulation and herbs for flavoring, plus salt (which we made, from seawater) and milk (which we brought in, lacking cows, sheep, or goats).

Even with cheese this simple, the results changed depending on how we adjusted the variables—temperature, time, amounts, and technique. From the same four ingredients, we produced two very different cheeses, and a few rejects, too.

Not that we're stopping here. We're inspired by a recent trip to Cowgirl Creamery (www.cowgirlcreamery.com), one of this country's best cheesemakers, where we absorbed the kind and patient tutelage of cheesemaker Sue Conley. See our blog, http://oneblockdiet.sunset.com/team_cheese, for a report on our trip there, and how we'll try to duplicate what we learned.

After that, maybe we'll start dabbling in rennets and cultures, or bring in some goats' milk...all to better understand one of our favorite foods.

WHAT WE MADE

Fresh Cheese

After some futzing around in the test kitchen, we settled on cheeses that could be relied on to turn out more or less the same every time: a fresh, moist chive cheese and a crumbly, salty oregano cheese.

WHAT WE USED

Materials, Prices & Sources

Printed guide We relied, like so many amateur cheesemakers before us, on Ricki Carroll's *Home Cheesemaking: Recipes for 75 Homemade Cheeses*. First published in 1982, this little book has been reissued three times and has guided many a beginner to professional success. (Storey Books, 2002; \$16.95 paperback).

Milk Not being able to raise cows, goats, or sheep here at Sunset, we had to go outside our one-block parameters for milk. We wanted to stay local, but a) there are no dairies anywhere near Menlo Park, because real estate is so expensive; and b) in the state of California (and we suspect the country as a whole) it is not possible to buy directly from a dairy anyway. Milk

must be sold through stores. That's the law. The only way around this is if you have a friend who raises cows or sheep or goats who will give you milk, or if you own part of such an animal in a "share" (for information, see www.realmilk.com/cowfarmshare.html).

Luckily, here in Northern California many grocery stores carry what to our minds is the finest milk around: the rich, creamy, organic milk from Straus Dairy (www.strausfamilycreamery.com), on Tomales Bay in Marin County (it is, not coincidentally, where Cowgirl Creamery gets all its milk). Both the homogenized whole milk or the cream-top whole milk worked beautifully for us, giving our cheeses a sweet, creamy freshness no other milk could match.

That said, any whole milk will work, as long as it's not ultra-pasteurized. The high heat used in that process damages the proteins in the milk and makes it harder for curds to form. (Besides, it has an unpleasant "cooked" flavor.) *Straus organic whole milk, from \$4.50/gallon; yields about 1 lb. cheese.*

Lemons Just plain old Eureka lemons, squeezed and strained, from our garden. Meyer lemons would probably be wonderful. But you could also use vinegar or rennet (enzymes derived either from a calf's stomach or from microscopic fungi) to coagulate the milk. In fact, time itself is a coagulator: If you leave raw (not pasteurized) milk out at room temperature, the bacteria in the milk will start changing the sugars there to lactic acid, and when the right acid level is reached, the milk will coagulate. Starter cultures also help coagulate milk, and give it flavor and texture, too. We just used lemons.

Salt It's crucial for flavor development, it extracts moisture from the curd, and it helps preserve the cheese. We used salt obtained from ocean brine we hauled in from the cleanest possible waters we could find, on the Pacific coast near Pescadero. (If you're interested to learn how we made salt, see our step-by-step guide: oneblockdiet.sunset.com/team_salt).

Herbs You can use anything that appeals to you, from parsley to tarragon to mint.

We chose chives, because we love their sharp, oniony flavor and emerald color against the white cheese, and oregano, because it suited the corn soup that the cheese would be topping.

Large heavy stainless-steel soup pot for heating the milk. *From \$60 at cookware shops.*

Dairy thermometer Not essential for our ultra-basic cheeses, which only require that you bring the milk just to or below a boil; but for other, more exacting recipes that specify precise temperatures, this thermometer is great (candy thermometers measure too high to be useful). Get the kind with a bracket you can clip to the side of the pot. *About \$20 from a cheese-making supply house.*

Colander into which to pour your curds and whey for draining. *From \$5 at cookware shops.*

Cheesecloth for lining the colander. *About \$4.50 for 2 square yards at a hardware store or cookware shop.*

Dessert or salad plate small enough to fit inside the colander and on top of your curds.

5-lb. weight Anything that fits on top of the plate will do, from a barbell to heavy cans. We used round kitchen weights.

HOW WE DID IT A Step-by-Step Guide

Experiment We tried several of the easiest recipes in Ricki Carroll's book, but because we weren't adept at precisely controlling the temperatures (and the several stovetops in our test kitchen heat very differently from one another), we kept getting different results. In the end, we veered away from anything that yielded tough, bouncy curds and toward the recipes that seemed impervious to failure. These are the cheeses we could reliably replicate, tasted good, and served their purpose in the dishes for which they were intended.

Fresh Chive Cheese

MAKES 18 oz. fresh cheese (7-in. log; 28 servings) **TIME** About 2½ hours, plus about 2 hours draining and chilling time

Making this cheese involves kneading the curds into a satiny, moist "dough." Roll it into a log shape, chill it, and then slice it

into rounds. The method is based on one for the Indian cheese called chenna, in Carroll's book. We used it in a tomato herb salad, as a substitute for mozzarella (*for the recipe, see sunset.com/oneblockfeast*).

1 gallon whole milk

½ cup freshly squeezed lemon juice (4-5 large lemons)

½ tsp. salt

2 tbsp. coarsely chopped chives

1. In a large heavy-bottomed pot, heat milk to a gentle boil over medium-high heat, stirring often to prevent scorching (this will take about 30 minutes, so bring a book). As soon as it boils, remove from heat and drizzle in lemon juice, stirring slowly and gently. Keep stirring until solid white curds separate from greenish-white, translucent liquid whey. Let sit until curds have settled below whey, about 10 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, line a large fine-mesh metal colander with a quadruple thickness of cheesecloth and set in sink. Pour curds into colander and rinse gently with lukewarm water 5 seconds. Tie two opposite corners of cheesecloth into a knot over curds and repeat with other two corners, forming curds into a ball. Carefully holding by knot to avoid scalding yourself, twist ball while pressing down to gently squeeze out most of liquid.

3. Put a plate on cheesecloth-wrapped curds and top with a 5-lb. weight. Let drain 45 minutes. (At this point it may still be dripping a bit; this is okay.)

4. Unwrap cheese and put in bowl of standing mixer with dough hook attachment. (You can also knead it by hand; see Notes.) Beat or knead cheese until silky-looking and no longer grainy, 7 to 10 mins. Add salt and chives and beat to incorporate.

5. Roll cheese into a 2-in.-thick log and wrap in waxed paper. Refrigerate until cold and firm, at least 1 hour. Cheese keeps, covered and chilled, 3 days.

PER ¼-IN. SLICE 86 CAL., 49% (42 CAL.) FROM FAT; 4.6 G PROTEIN; 4.7 G FAT (2.9 G SAT.); 6.9 G CARBO (0 G FIBER); 103 MG SODIUM; 20 MG CHOL.

Oregano Queso Blanco

MAKES 10.5 oz. (about 2 cups)

TIME About 2 hours

Crumbly and mild, this cheese reminds us of fresh Mexican queso blanco. It's

based on Carroll's recipe for lemon cheese—but we ended up more than doubling the lemon juice, heating the milk all the way up to boiling (instead of to 175°, which, lacking a proper thermometer, we couldn't detect), and whisking the new curds into tiny particles before draining. We've used it to sprinkle on our fresh corn soup (*for the recipe, see sunset.com/oneblockfeast*)

½ gallon whole milk

9 tbsp. fresh lemon juice (from 4 to 5 large lemons)

1 tsp. salt

1½ tbsp. minced fresh oregano leaves

1. In a large heavy-bottomed pot, heat milk just to the point of boiling over medium-high heat, stirring often to prevent scorching. As soon as it looks as though it's about to boil (small bubbles are beginning to break the surface), remove from heat and drizzle in lemon juice, whisking briskly. Reduce heat to low, return pot to burner, and whisk for another 2 minutes (do not let boil). Cover and let sit 10 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, line a large medium-mesh metal colander with a quadruple thickness of cheesecloth and set in sink. Pour in curds. Tie two opposite corners of cheesecloth into a knot over curds and repeat with other two corners. Hang cheesecloth sack from sink faucet for 1-2 hours, or until curds have stopped draining.

3. Pour curds into a bowl and add salt and herbs. Rub between your fingers to mix and to break curds up into small grains. Cheese keeps, covered and chilled, up to 1 week.

PER TBSP. 38 CAL., 47% (18 CAL.) FROM FAT; 2 G PROTEIN; 2 G FAT (1.3 G SAT.); 3.2 G CARBO (0 G FIBER); 91 MG SODIUM; 8.5 MG CHOL.

HELPFUL INFO

Websites

The Pacific Northwest Cheese Project: <http://pnwcheese.typepad.com/>

Cheesemaking supplies

New England Cheesemaking Supply (Ricki Carroll's company): www.cheesemaking.com or 413/628-3808

The Beverage People (wine, beer, and cheesemaking supplies): www.thebeveragepeople.com or 800/544-1867