

About Cheese
by Aelianora de Wintringham

Title: Epistola de caseis et operibus lactariis et modo quo in Rheticiis regionibus et alpinis parantur, 1556
(Letter on cheese and dairy products and how they are made in Switzerland)

Source: <http://staff-www.uni-marburg.de/~gloning/bifrun/bifrun.htm> and <http://staff-www.uni-marburg.de/~gloning/bifrun/decaseis.htm> for a scan of the original pages

This is a letter sent from Jacob Bifrons to Conrad Gessner in 1556. Apparently Gessner had asked Bifrons, through an intermediary, to tell him about cheesemaking and dairy products in the Alps and Rhaetia (Switzerland). Gessner lived in Germany. Bifrons lived in the Upper Engadine Valley in Switzerland, near Italy.

From a cheesemaking aspect the letter is quite interesting. It also talks about butter making, and compares both to dairy production in parts of Italy.

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Rikke has an MA in Roman Archaeology and is currently a PhD candidate concentrating on Roman and Medieval Europe. She has taken six years of Classical and Medieval Latin, however she would honestly rate her knowledge of Latin as 'average'. She can translate easily, at least, if not create original works.

THE LETTER:

My son, returning to Curia in Pontissella, told me you suggested that I should write to you about the ways of cheesemaking and the types of cheese of our region. This I now do most willingly, and I hope that this will be pleasing to you.

There are two types of cheese which concern us; one lean and called 'domestic' since it is made both in the house and in the Alps and its use goes back before the memory of man. The other type is called 'fat' cheese and it was brought from Italy into our region in the last 30 years.

Let's start with the lean:

When the milk has been milked it is poured by sprinkling into a low wooden vessel. The vessels are called 'mottas' in our country. For reference, in Italy they use a bronze vessel which they call 'concha'. One of these vessels can contain 60 pounds of milk; and out of which, each day, the 'foam' of the milk, which is the condensing of the fat of the milk, is separated. This foam can be called by two names, 'Grama' or cream.

They put the foam into a round and oblong vessel which they call the 'Pneulia'. It is covered with a cover which has small holes in it, into which a long stick is inserted. The stick has a board on its end around which a ball or sphere is fastened, and this stick is alternately lifted out and put back <into the Pneulia> so that the foam is agitated without interruption until butter is created.

They call the butter 'Paing' in this country <the marginal note in the original says Pingue, or fat>. When it has been separated and removed, the liquid that remains is called 'Pen'.

The milk which remains in the mottas, the foam having been taken away, is put into a cooking-pot and a small fire is lit underneath it. The milk is left there until it is tepid. It is then removed from the fire and a small portion of the rennet of a calf (the size of a chestnut) is mixed into the tepid milk. And thus, within half an hour, and oftentimes less, the milk is curdled and made firm.

Then this material, which they call Ponna, is stirred with a long rod, until it settles. Then it is removed and transferred into a mould while the whey is pressed out. Then the curds are taken out and put on a little board and sprinkled with salt and surrounded by a 'skin' [1], so that it doesn't expand <ie fall apart>. Every day for 8 days it is turned over and rubbed with salt until the cheese is made solid and dry.

The milk which remains in the cooking dish after the Ponna has been removed is whey, and to this is added the Pen <buttermilk>. Then a hot fire is placed under the cooking-pot, and the whey is warmed until it boils. The matter which is floating on the top after boiling is made into Serotium. To us it is zicronum, in Italy they call it Puina or Mascarpa, and you call it Ziger [2].

The Serotium is taken from the cooking-pot into a wooden vessel so that the whey remaining in it drains away. Then it is taken out and put on a board in a dry place, and exposed to smoke and put into the wind. Salt is sprinkled upon it until it is dry.

From the rest of the liquid remaining in the cooking-pot nothing can be made, and it is given to pigs.

Butter, which we nearly forgot, needs no more care than this: It should be taken from the Pnulia and the remaining Pen should be expressed from it, then salt added. It is put into a circular or oblong form, and it is rendered and pressed.

From 60 pounds of milk, 3 pounds of butter, four of cheese and two of serotium are produced. Three pounds of butter are worth here 7 crucifers of Athesini <some kind of coin?>. Six pounds of cheese and serotij, taken together and sold, would be worth 6 crucifers. [3]

And thus, of lean cheese.

Fat cheese is only made in the 'cottage' of the Alps, where most of the cows are. This is how it is made:

When the first day's milk is taken, that milk is put straight into the cooking-pot from the milk-pail. It is put over a fire, and, as we explained earlier, rennet is introduced into it. After half an hour it is condensed and then it is stirred with a long stick or paddle.

When it has settled it is removed, and put into moulds of wood, which because they are similar to bands are called Fasceras. These are bandaged with a sheet; and then covered with a clean cloth of linen. Right after that they

put a weight on top to express the whey. On the next day the cheese is turned upside down and put back under the weight.

On the following day the weight is removed and the mould is very tightly bound, and placed into a closed and warm location, one not very damp. This place should not allow winds from fissures to strike it, or it <the cheese> will swell from excessive dryness or be made full of hollows because of excessive humidity, and if this happens, the cheese will not be fit <to eat> for a long time.

Next it is laid out on a clean board, and salt is sprinkled upon it. For the following 8 days it is turned, removed from its bindings and rubbed with salt. It is returned to its tight bindings and this is done until the cheese becomes solid and dry.

When that happens it is put into a dry place and smeared with oil so that it won't be infested with any rottenness.

Care must be taken in cheesemaking, as those who prepare it will tell you, when the rennet is added to the milk, that the milk be neither too hot nor too cold, and not too great an amount of rennet put into it, and care must be taken to expel the whey and only add a moderate amount of salt. This is so the cheese won't be full of holes but solid, nor bitter, nor bland, nor too salty or insipid or retain the taste of rennet.

Also, a fire left under the whey in the cooking-pot will create serotij <plural of serotium>, in the same manner as that from the lean preparation. The difference between serotij, fat and lean, is the same as that between cheese, fat and lean. And in general, the same amount in pounds of cheese and serotij is produced from milk as that from the lean production I explained above.

And so great is the fame of our cheese and butter that great quantities are sent away to Comum, and the bordering regions of Italy and Germany. And the smallest of our cheeses, if they are aged, are esteemed as much as the cheese of Placentini. These most highly praised cheeses are now in Italy and sell for quite a bit, since a single pound of fresh cheese costs two crucifers, and aged cheese costs twice that. It is amazing to say that so much cheese and butter is made in our jurisdiction (which is the area above the valley Engedina, and which consists of 1000 homes) that in many years more than 15 thousand florens worth are sent downstream. This number would be more, but because of domestic use, some product isn't included.

And this was about the milk of cows. It is natural <to write> about the milk of goats, but I think I should end up writing a huge work. Goodbye.

At Samadenus in the valley of Engedina [4]

the 27th of January, the year of the Lord 1556

[1] I doubt this means an animal skin, but more likely the salt is making a skin on the cheese. An animal skin would surely contaminate the cheese unfavorably.

[2] Ziger is whey cheese, often called Ricotta in the USA. Some places in Switzerland still make it, but I am not sure if it is the same cheese as that

referred to above. Mascarpa gives rise to Mascarpone, which is also a whey cheese, although enriched with cream. Puina is now a 'butter-milk' cheese from Lombardy.

[3] In modern times it's possible to get about 14 pounds of soft cheese, and 7 pounds of hard cheese from 60 pounds of milk. However, this is milk from which no butter has been made. (the general yield, in my experience, is 2.2 pounds of soft cheese or 1 pound of hard cheese per gallon of milk. A gallon is 8.62 pounds).

[4] Samadenus is Samaden, and is a town in the Upper Engadine valley in Switzerland. The area is separated by a range of the Alps from Italy, and is still considered quite remote.

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