

SESSION 2: MILK, MAN, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

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The social role of cheese in Mexico

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Cattle was introduced first in continental America through the Gulf of Mexico by the Spanish conquerors with an estimated herd of 130 head, and the lack of competition for grasses enabled an explosive growth of livestock in most of the territory of New Spain (Aguilar, 2001).

Since then, and in a process that lasted for decades and even centuries, livestock production underwent a hybridisation between the European and the Pre-Hispanic cultures, and became an important economic activity, with characteristics that have been affected by the national geography. Most of the country is mountainous, with arid and semi-arid areas, temperate forest, tropical rainforest and flatlands; characteristics which gave rise to three types of dairy farming: large scale in the north and central areas of the country with access to resources as irrigation; dual purpose dairy farming both in mountain areas as well as near the coasts; and small scale dairy farming in the Central Highlands. The latter two are linked to the traditional manufacture of cheese.

Cattle production was in the beginning linked to power groups. It was till after the 1910 Mexican revolution that it was expanded to groups less endowed. Currently, cattle production is very specialized both in terms of produce as for the production regions. Large scale dairy systems are aimed at the fluid milk market and in a much lower proportion to cheese production. Therefore, most cheese in Mexico is produced in artisan based enterprises located in regions that are recognized at a national or local level, and where more than thirty traditional cheeses evolved, each one with distinctive signs (Cervantes, et al, 2008). It was the geography, the orography, availability of tracks and paths, and the proximity to consumption centres that through time slowly developed the characteristics of each of the cheese producing regions of the country and of the cheeses made in them; an evolution in time and space that resulted in a clear differentiation of fresh and matured cheeses.

The first cheeses have their origin in cattle enterprises aimed at producing beef, located in remote mountain areas with difficult access, based on local *criollo* cattle or crossbreds, and seasonal production since the productive cycle is intimately linked to the local environmental conditions. Cows calve during the rainy season when there is more forage available, when farmers milk cows and make cheese. The rains also have an effect on the access to the farms, since paths remain inaccessible for several months and cheese making areas remain isolated; so that cheese matures slowly till the dry season. This process enables producers to obtain benefits from a resource that would otherwise be lost. Given these characteristics, maybe these cheeses are the oldest in the country, since it has been mentioned that some of these cheeses have a tradition of more than four hundred years (Barragán et al., 2007). As an example there are the cheeses from Cotija in the mountain range between the states of Jalisco and Michoacán, the “Sierra de Durango” cheese from the mountains of this northern state, the *Tetilla* (“Nipple”) cheese from the state of Nayarit, the mature cheese from the mountains of the state of Zacatecas, or the “Refregado” (“Doubly grounded”) cheese from the south of the State of Mexico, just to mention some. The maturation time for these cheeses varies from three months up to two years.

The marketing of these products relied in a fundamental actor, the *arrieros* (muleteers) from the Spanish colony till the beginning of the 20th century, who crossed the country from north to south and from east to west driving carts and “trains” of between 40 to 50 mules, through the so called royal paths (Martínez, 2009).

This panorama is completely different for fresh cheeses that developed around urban centres in the country. These regions were more influenced by technological developments as was the introduction of specialised dairy breeds in farms usually located near cities. As part of this process, from 1930 cheese making is diversified and artisan made cheeses have a strong incentive, since being near to urban areas enabled these producers to market their produce in a short time, not only in terms of milk, but also cheese; therefore they did not evolve into cheese maturation. As example of these there is



the Oaxaca cheese from the periurban area around the city of Oaxaca, the large variety of “*ranchero*” (“farm” or “country”) cheeses in all the central area of the country, and some slightly matured cheeses as the Double Cream cheese of San Cristóbal de la Casas in Chiapas, the “Poro” cheese from Tabasco, or the “Ball” cheese from Ocozingo, also in Chiapas, among many more.

The characteristics of these urban markets enabled the introduction and sale of other dairy products as **cream, butter, and even “Jocoque” (fermented milk)** in the north central areas of the country.

As it is known, the food wealth existing before the arrival of the Spaniards was increased with the introduction of European and Asian products; specifically in terms of the liking for meat and dairy products. In the case of cheese, its manufacture became part of the “know how” of traditional knowledge, developing new forms of processing and adding native spices as chillies (*Capsicum*). Varieties are diverse, and depend of the region. For example, a paste is made of **dry chilly** which is applied in the outside of cheese as a way to enhance maturation, besides conferring a particular flavour to the cheese. Examples of these are the “*Refregado*” cheese from the south of the State of Mexico and the cheese from the Sierra in Durango. Fresh cheeses are added with chillies, fresh or dry, and may have **herbs added as “epazote”** (*Chenopodium ambrosioides*). This is how cheese is now a fundamental part in the Mexican food culture.

Artisan made cheeses in México represent **not only a cultural heritage, but also, income and employment opportunities** for a large number of families in rural areas.

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She is also rapporteur for several scientific journals. In 2009, the book she co-authored, *Los quesos mexicanos genuinos*, won the Gourmand World Cookbook Award 2009 as best book on cheese in the world, in Paris, France.