

A Passion for Cheese

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I hate cheese. I do not like the taste or smell, and I will continue to not like it even if you put it on bread with nuts and jam. Many hypothesize that I do not care for it because I am lactose intolerant and somehow that has affected my taste buds. I, on the other hand, believe I am a part of a small population of people who do not favor cheese. As I have grown up over the years watching cheese eaters rave about virtually stale milk, I always wondered why they were so passionate about cheese. Was it because it just tasted good, or was there a deeper meaning behind the infatuation? I knew other foods tasted great, too, but the intense interest that surrounded cheese was undeniable, and thus, I went down the shockingly emotional rabbit hole of cheese.

Taste, as I suspected, does play a part in the passion for cheese. When I asked one cheese company worker from Blue Ridge Co. why he thinks people are so passionate about cheese, he plainly stated, "It's delicious. That's it." While the answer was blunt, I agreed with him due to the assumption that if cheese tasted terrible, the connection many experience to it would cease to exist. This connection to taste is further expressed by my three interviewees: Thalia Tossetti (student), Yasmin Assef (mother), and Justin Horwitz (President of the American University Cheese Club). When asked what their favorite cheese was, all interviewees referred to taste to determine their answer. Thalia voiced, "I like Havarti because it's creamy and goes perfect on any sandwich." Yasmin followed the theme of creaminess when she

answered, "I like Stilton Blue a lot, that's a really good cheese, and San Andre, it's like a brie, creamy and smooth." Justin may stray from the creamy cheeses, but he does factor in taste when explaining his favorite cheese. "My favorite cheese is called BellaVitano. It originates from Plymouth, Wisconsin, and is aged 10-12 months to create a semi-hard texture. While I don't drink, I respect wine as a way to enhance food, which it does for this cheese! Vitiano wine is infused into this cheese, and its taste is nutty and rich," he explained. These different flavors, such as "nutty," "smooth," and "creamy," come from different types of bacteria present in the cheese. As dairy scientist Michael Tunick explains, "It's because the bacteria breaks down the proteins and especially the fats into...quite a large number of molecules that have flavors" (Ramsey). While taste does initiate the love for cheese, the flavor is only one piece of the story.

Many cheese lovers describe cheese as addictive, and there is a biological reason behind the need for cheese. When I asked, "Why are people so passionate about cheese?" one of the owners of Spring Gap Mountain Creamery said, "Cheese is a comfort food. Whatever your craving, it satisfies that need, it can fill voids." This filling of voids occurs because cheese produces a chemical reaction in the body that makes one feel so ecstatic they become addicted to the feeling. The chemical casein causes this addictive quality of the cheese. When the cheese is digested, casein breaks down, releasing casomorphins. These opiates react to opioid receptors and dopamine receptors, which control pain, reward, and addiction in the brain. Since casomorphins affect opioid receptors and dopamine receptors, it releases the chemical dopamine, which makes someone feel happy. Cheese becomes addictive because

people become addicted to the high of happiness cheese creates (Danovich).

Although cheese may seem trivial, it is, in fact, crucial in terms of today's concern over economics. Cheese companies are aware of this phenomenon and view it as a bonus to the great taste. For instance, Kraft makes millions a year off their cheese and cheese products (Mueller and Marion 185). They have so much influence in the cheese market that they were able to manipulate the market to gain more money:

When Kraft increased its prices and gross profit margins, other cheese companies followed, albeit by smaller amounts. Not only did retailers pass on to consumers the higher prices, but added to them by widening their margins. The result was a large increase in the gross margin...In summary, the increase in the gross profit margins of Kraft, other cheese marketers, and food retailers resulted in higher prices to consumers, lower prices to bulk cheesemakers and their dairy farmer suppliers, and caused CCC to spend millions of dollars in cheese purchases. (Mueller and Marion 186 & 189).

Kraft manipulated their prices of making the cheese and then made consumers pay more for their products, influencing the cheese economy (Mueller and Marion 185). These large companies who monopolize the industry know how to target their consumers (Mueller and Marion 185) with the understanding that people do in fact have a passion for cheese and thus will pay to fulfill their needs.

The smaller creameries are aware of the addictive qualities of cheese but are not as cutthroat with their consumers. They understand

the passion for cheese in a more intimate way. Head cheesemaker from Keswick Creamery responded to my question of “why are people so passionate about cheese?” by touching upon the addictive qualities: “Cheese releases dopamine like chocolate. It makes you happy — that’s the biological response.” She then looked up and said, “But cheese also has an identity in a world of fast food like McDonalds. It’s one of the last foods with identity. You can trace it to childhood, it reminds someone of home like a memento cheese or places like Wisconsin. They try to mass-produce cheese, but it has become a thing of home.” This is where the story of cheese changes. It leaves behind its physical qualities that draw people in and enters the realm of history, culture, and memory. Cheese tastes fantastic (from what I hear) and is, in fact, addictive, but I have learned that it is so much more than just a food item.

Cheese was first created in the Neolithic Period (9000 BCE) when hunter-gatherer communities started to make permanent residences, farming and herding goats and sheep. Since its appearance in the Fertile Crescent, cheese has integrated itself into many cultures (Kindstedt 6-7). I first heard about cheese being a cultural item from one of the owners of Spring Gap Mountain Creamery. After his partner talked about how cheese “fills voids,” he took a breath and said, “The culture. It’s a cultural item with many deep cultural ties. If someone cannot travel to a place where the culture originated or is present, then cheese serves as a gateway into that new experience.” This societal bond can be identified in many cultures, such as Italian heritage and more prominently French culture.

The study “Le Fromage As Life: French Attitudes and Behavior Toward Cheese,” conducted by researchers Scott D. Roberts and

Kathleen S. Micken, investigates the cultural ties the French have to cheese. For the French, cheese is a part of their identity. It is a symbol of the French people and must be kept pure. This idea of purity can be seen in the utter refusal to put processed or foreign cheeses on a cheese board in one's house. To do this would be insulting to one's family and the people who have come to the home. Furthermore, for one to genuinely be considered French, they must like cheese and must be educated on the various types of cheeses: "the French attitude toward cheese includes strong agreement that it is a person's 'duty' to be educated about cheese and to understand the proper ways of consuming cheese" (Roberts and Micken). This education of cheese also indicates the social class structure in France. For instance, "pink collar" workers expressed that

the texture of the cheese was important (there were no other differences among the occupation groups). They also expressed more disagreement than self-employed professionals in that they would eat the cheese they want without regard to price...Self-employed professionals, on the other hand, expressed more agreement than pink-collar workers that they could 'describe in detail ten different kinds of cheeses'

(Roberts and Micken)

The difference in social classes enables one to see cheese differently and have different opinions on what cheese is the best and why. Cheese transcends the meaning of identity because for the French cheese is an active part of life and dictates who one truly is regardless of who one wants to be. French cheese is a crucial aspect of life, and as one person interviewed in the study fervently stated: "wine provides for

enjoyment in life (*savoir vivre*), but cheese is life (*la vie*)” (Roberts and Micken). France may take a passion for cheese to another level, but cheese is embedded in people’s everyday lives all over the world.

Cheese has cultural meaning, but the passion for cheese also arises from memory. The memory of cheese, especially memories of when one was growing up, also creates a love for cheese. Justin, when asked what fostered his intensity for cheese, recalled his childhood: “During Thanksgiving dinners, my family made a separate pot of mac & cheese for me to eat since I didn’t want any other food at the time. Now I like a lot more food but that love for all forms of cheese has always remained. Some of my best memories growing up through now involves going to sample fancy cheese platters at restaurants, and explore all sorts of cheese from all around the world.” Thalia agreed with Justin: “Cooking and childhood definitely fostered my passion for cheese. I grew up in an Italian house that put cheese on everything.” Cheese is not only a food, but an item of nostalgia. For Thalia and Justin, it brings them back to happy times and reminds them of home.

They are not the only ones who hold cheese as an item of nostalgia. In the 1980s, America went through an economic recession because the workforce shifted from “heavy industry . . . to more knowledge and service-based work . . .” (Lucas and Buzanell 96). The “Rust Belt” of America (the Northeast to the Upper Midwest) was one of the regions hit hardest by the downturn. The government, to help families whose parents lost their jobs or suffered wage reductions, gave out “begging boxes” to the children for lunch and dinner. In these boxes were processed, bright orange cheese blocks (Lucas and Buzanell 106). Kristen Lucas and Patrice M. Buzanell interviewed adults who

were children aged 8-17 from 62 families from “Irontown” (a fake name given to the town out of respect by Lucas and Buzzanell). For the children going through that time, the one thing that stood out to them was the cheese: “Nearly 30 years later, these kids, who are now midlife adults, spontaneously and consistently brought up ‘the cheese’ during interviews about life during the 1980 recession” (Lucas and Buzzanell 96). Cheese for the children became a “symbol of a daily struggle” (103) “that parents were out of work and unable to provide for the same lifestyle as they had in the past. The children used the cheese as a type of shorthand to identify that there were significant financial struggles at home without having to describe them in-depth” (110). The cheese also was a “symbol of camaraderie” (105); “it normalized the experience of family job loss for the kids. Rather than feeling like a stigmatized ‘Other,’ they felt normal because they were not alone” (110). The cheese given to the children during one of the hardest times for their families became a collective memory. It shielded them from the hardships and enabled them to fit into their community. Cheese is a comfort food, and it may taste unbelievable to some, but the head cheesemaker from Keswick Creamery was sincere when she said, “It has become a thing of home.” Cheese in “Irontown,” for Justin, Thalia, and many more, is not just a dairy product. Cheese is loved by many because it reminds people of where they come from.

The passion for cheese is a complex and individual journey. Every person’s relationship to cheese is different, but the origins of the passion have four consistent characteristics: taste, addictive quality, cultural identity, and memory. As a person who has successfully avoided cheese my whole life, I was unaware of the impact cheese

would have on me. I now respect cheese and understand why people have a deep connection. Cheese is not just a food to me anymore; it is a symbol of people and history. So next time you're at a restaurant, and they ask, "Do you want cheese on that?" say yes and remember the importance that cheese has for humanity.

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