



THE OXFORD COMPANION TO
CHEESE

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and the maple/fenugreek aroma of sotolon, typical of Comté, Parmigiano Reggiano, and other long-aged, hard cheeses. See **COMTÉ** and **PARMIGIANO REGGIANO**.

The characteristic sharp/sweet aroma of blue cheeses appears to derive primarily from so-called methyl ketones: carbon chains substituted with an oxygen at the second carbon, most typically 2-heptanone and 2-nonanone. See **BLUE CHEESES** and **METHYL KETONES**.

Perhaps the most famously aromatic cheeses are the washed-rind group. These cheeses are often described as “pungent.” The colonies of *Brevibacterium linens* and related microflora on their brine-washed rinds produce a characteristic orange color and an initially off-putting, strong aroma reminiscent of “gym socks,” “armpits,” or even protein decay. This makes sense, given that the compounds identified in their aromas so far include decay products containing nitrogen and sulfur, such as sulfides, indole, and volatile phenolic compounds. Interestingly, despite their intense aromas, these cheeses tend to taste comparatively mild, although usually quite savory—further evidence of the complex relationship between aroma and flavor. See **BREVIBACTERIUM LINENS** and **WASHED-RIND CHEESES**.

See also **FAMILIES OF CHEESE**; **FLAVOR**; **ODOR-ACTIVE COMPOUNDS**; and **TASTE**.

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aroma wheel

See **FLAVOR WHEEL**.

Cheese in and as **art**—visual and sculptural—has a long genealogy, from its early depictions in medieval primers on food and health, to representations in still life paintings, to the use of cheese itself as a material in “bioart” today.

Start in the late Middle Ages: the fourteenth-century *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, a Latin adaptation of an eleventh-century Arabic manual on well-being by physician Ibn Butlan, presented cheese, a food



Vincenzo Campi's oil painting *The Ricotta Eaters* (ca. 1585) posed a thick gobbet of ricotta as a symbol of lusty indulgence. COURTESY OF MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS DE LYON

crafted by feudal farmers, as part of a healthy diet for nobles. By the sixteenth century, cheese—or, better, *some* kinds of cheeses—came to suggest less salutary associations. Vincenzo Campi's *The Ricotta Eaters* (ca. 1585) posed a thick gobbet of ricotta as a symbol of lusty indulgence. Three debauched male peasants, joined by a rouged lady of the evening, dig into a mound of ricotta, a cheese that in its allegorical association with semen had by the time of this painting's production come to be linked with sex (cheese and cheesemaking long providing a repertoire of analogies for sex and procreation, as Sandra Ott [1993] has shown). Three of the characters in this painting clutch ladles, suggesting that an illicit sexual mixing is in progress (Simons, 2011, pp. 267–269). See **CURDLING**, **CULTURAL THEORIES OF**

Later portrayals of cheese shift the moral valence of cheese back toward the positive, even toward the chaste (Janaczewska, 2013). In her 1625 *Still Life with Cheeses, Artichoke, and Cherries*, Dutch artist Clara Peeters “painted cheese and butter to represent motherhood and purity” (Dangler, 2014). It may be no accident that the cheese in Peeters's painting is Dutch, while the artichoke and cherries, representing unwholesome desire, hail from the southern, less temperate, lands of the Mediterranean. American painter Raphaelle Peale's 1813 *Cheese with Three Crackers* offers a later, less charged cheese portrait. Peale sought not to enlist cheese as an emblem of wrong or right morals (nor as a vehicle for communicating regionalist prejudices), but rather hoped, as in his other still lifes of food, to show the ordinariness of this food (Frederick, 2006). Later cheese



Synthetic biologist Christina Agapakis (left, facing) and smell artist Sissel Tolaas (right) pose with the cheese they made from starter cultures isolated from the human body. The project, called *Selfmade*, suggests how humans—individually and collectively—are tied to the microbial worlds they consume and embody. © SCIENCE GALLERY, DUBLIN

still lifes—of the sort created in the early twenty-first century by Mike Genó—turn cheeses into charismatic subjects, worthy of celebratory portraiture.

One of the stranger evocations of cheese in painting comes with Salvador Dalí's 1931 *Persistence of Memory*, an oil painting famous for its melting pocket watches, which Dalí claimed were inspired by watching rounds of Camembert deliquesce.

Cheese moves from the documented to the symbolically freighted, from the domain of sensible portraiture to that of the phantasmagorical and inspiring. In today's art world, cheese manifests as all of these—and more. Contemporary artists have lately turned their attention to the materiality of media, and cheese has arrived as a potent substance with which to work through the politics of bodies, food, farming, and much else. Such art goes beyond folk traditions of cheese sculpture (usually done in Cheddar), which have fixed on the *form* of cheese (Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board, 2012), such as the work of cheese sculptor Sarah Kaufmann. This art has delved instead into cheese's *substance*, which, artists suggest, evocatively materializes politics of relations among humans, animals, and microbes.

For example, *Selfmade*, by synthetic biologist Christina Agapakis and smell artist Sissel Tolaas asks what it is about bacterially produced smells that repel or attract people. Agapakis and Tolaas set out "to make cheeses with starter cultures isolated from the human body." After "swabs from hands, feet, noses, and armpits were inoculated into fresh, pasteurized, organic whole milk and incubated overnight" (Agapakis, 2011, pp. 141–142), Agapakis and Tolaas pressed the resulting curds into cheese. Giving their cheeses the names of the individual people whose microbes served as starter cultures, they hoped to prompt thinking about how humans—individually and collectively—are tied to the microbial worlds we consume and embody.

Bio artist Miriam Simun, undertaking a related project, in 2011 made cheese with human breast milk. Deadpanning in her description of this art project, she wrote,

Human Cheese is a socio-technical and economic system for sourcing, making and distributing human cheese, positioned as a real commodity. Sourcing human milk via the internet, making cheese in my kitchen, and adopting the storytelling practices of small-scale artisanal food brands, Human Cheese

culminates in *The Lady Cheese Shop*: an installation that presents ethically sourced, locally made cheeses made from "the original natural food"—human milk. (Simun, 2011)

Simun invited people to taste the cheese as a way of confronting questions about the commoditization of bodies—human and nonhuman.

In all of these art works, cheese is a symbolic substance, inviting rumination on what will count as proper moral relations among bodies and foods, whether in the realm of the sacred or the secular, or in the domain of the Christian-cosmological, or the contemporary capitalist. The long history of cheese in and as art tells the story of shifting sensibilities about the relations between food and morality, and between the material and the political world.

See also CHILDREN'S LITERATURE and LITERATURE.

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artisanal is a term used to describe production systems that are relatively small-scale and where handworking and the skilled, intuitive judgment of the maker takes precedence over mechanized and automated methods. Common synonyms include



A panel from the fourteenth-century text *Tacuinum Sanitatis* (1474), a Latin adaptation of an eleventh-century Arabic manual on well-being. The text presented cheese, a food crafted by feudal farmers, as part of a healthy diet for nobles.

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