

Cheese CULTURE Wedge Issue #2

News, lore and bite-sized reviews



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The Raw Facts

The phrase, “raw milk cheese”, typically generates excitement and strong opinions around the cheese counter. Unfortunately, there is plenty of confusion fuelling the conversation, and a lack of clarity regarding even basic definitions. This is no surprise, as cheese makers, importers, distributors and retailers describe and label cheese inconsistently from place to place, and sometimes mislead the cheese loving public. At the risk of adding to the perplexity of it all, here is a primer on the words in use and what they *likely* mean.

Raw vs. Pasteurized vs. Thermalized

After collection from the dairy animal, and before cheese making begins, there is a range of heat treatment processes milk can undergo.

1. The milk can go directly to the cheese vat, or be chilled then re-heated to no more than 40 degrees C (its “straight-from-the-source” temperature) before cheese making begins. By law in the European Union, and by cheese maker agreement in Québec, this milk is defined as “raw” (*lait cru*).

2. The milk can be heated to 72 to 74 degrees C for 8 to 12 seconds, or heated to 62 to 65 degrees C for 30 minutes, then chilled before re-heating at the start of cheese making. In all dairy jurisdictions, milk treated this way is called “pasteurized”.
3. The milk can be heated to 60 to 65 degrees C for 15 to 30 seconds then chilled before re-heating at the start of cheese making. Most accurately, this milk is called “thermalized” (*lait thermisé*). It can also be called “unpasteurized” although that is a much broader term as it also applies to raw milk. Sometimes marketing materials refer to thermalized milk cheeses as “gently pasteurized”, but this is incorrect, as milk either is or is not pasteurized, and thermalized milk is not pasteurized.

Whose Definition is on the Label

Even if cheese consumers take the time to understand the differences between various heat treatments, they’ll still be confused about what they’re eating as not all cheese producing regions agree on terminology for heat treatment of milk apart from “pasteurization”. Here are a few examples of the consequences:

- Raw milk on the ingredient list of Baluchon (Québec) means milk unheated beyond 40 degrees C, but raw milk on the ingredient list of Jensen cheddar (Ontario) means something different, as in Ontario “raw milk” implies only “not pasteurized”. Jensen cheddar is in fact made of thermalized milk.
- Riopelle, a thermalized milk cheese from Québec, is shipped out-of-province in packing boxes that say *non-pasteurisé* – technically accurate. Well-meaning Toronto cheese vendors often translate this to “raw milk” – something Riopelle would make no claim to in Québec.
- Classic French cheeses including Chabichou, Valencay and Camembert are traditionally made of raw milk and eaten before they reach 60 days of age (the time at which raw milk cheeses become legal for retail sale in Canada). Mysteriously, they appear in Toronto shops when only a few weeks old. Their boxes and paper labels may say nothing about milk treatment, or may proclaim *lait cru*, while the distributor’s label (stuck on the bottom or on the shipping package) reads *lait thermisé*. What’s going on? Apparently French industrial-scale cheese makers maintain a separate production line for thermalized versions of young cheeses that would be illegal in North America if made of raw milk. In some cases, they do not create distinctive labels and boxes to reflect this, but rely on the importer/distributor to provide labeling appropriate for the importer country.
- Finally, there are still many cheeses, particularly from Italy, Spain and Portugal that arrive at the *fromagerie* with a single ingredient label that reads: milk, rennet, salt. It’s often up to the distributor or retailer to guess what heat treatment the milk has sustained.

Why does it Matter?

Toronto cheese shops abound with tasty, well-crafted cheeses made from raw, thermalized and pasteurized milk. There are artisan and farmstead producers using

pasteurized milk, and large-scale industrial producers using raw milk. In rare cases when gastrointestinal illness has been linked to cheese consumption, raw, thermalized and pasteurized milk cheeses are equally likely to have been identified as the culprit.

Despite this, consumers deserve clarity on the label. Those who prefer traditional raw milk cheese will not be pleased to learn they have been consuming products whose milk has been thermalized to the extent that 95% of its micro-flora has been destroyed. Equally important, raw milk cheese makers deserve recognition that their products are distinct from those made with thermalized milk.

In My Fridge

The hot, humid summer deals a blow to most appetites. Cheese becomes a “just a tiny bite” treat during these salad days. This is the season to savour small morsels of full-flavoured *fromage* or modest portions of fresh cheese with a generous side of local fruits and vegetables.

Jensen Extra-Old Cheddar: This three-year-old thermalized cow’s milk cheddar from a family-owned Ontario heirloom company is our house cheese when school’s out and snacking kids are under foot. Fragrant of citrus and leather, the creamy smooth paste tastes of orange zest and browned butter. Melt thickly on sunflower rye, and cover with fresh sliced tomatoes, salt, pepper and fresh oregano.

Kefalograviera: An ancient cheese of cow, ewe, goat, or mixed milk, Kefalograviera hails from various regions in Greece. My wedge is from Crete and is of mixed sheep and goat milk – probably raw, but who knows? Extremely pungent, this grating cheese is initially sweet, and then attacks the palate with a quirky, potent, salty, acidic, biting quality. Toss shards over a salad of blanched asparagus and edamame with lemony green peppercorn vinaigrette.

Ewenity Feta: An Ontario version of Greece’s most famous cheese, this pasteurized 100% sheep milk offering from Ewenity Dairy – North America’s second largest sheep dairy co-op – is rich and flavourful, not simply salty. Cube into a fresh fig, cucumber and mint salad dressed with seasoned rice-wine vinegar.

On the Calendar

July 19 **Goat cheese in Prince Edward County:** Visit Capricorn View Farm to learn about goat dairying, and watch Petra Cooper show how goat cheese is made. <http://www.slowfoodthecounty.ca>

September **Night School for Cheese Fans:** Back to class at the Leslieville Cheese Market. <http://www.cheeseculture.ca/news.html>