

The Artisanal Amateur

A rolling stone gathers no moss, but an aging cheese *does* grow some mold. Which ain't to say it isn't tasty. Mold is just one interesting and colorful component of making cheese.

Erich Miller is a food enthusiast. Specifically, this once-vegan-Midwestern-farm-boy-fluent-in-Thai-world-traveler is a cheese enthusiast. Though he didn't grow up making cheese, his background in local and homegrown encouraged this transplant to Manzanita to sample a different form of culture.

"Cheesemaking appeals to many different sides of me. I love to cook, eat, and I love science. It's like the twelve-year old boy with a chemistry set meets good food. And it's a wonderful local food; it ties me to this area and this climate."

Erich started making the most difficult cheeses that he could: camembert and cheddar. He made and put into the aging process several batches of cheddar before he was able to try one; they were all "a little bit off." Bacteria are the secret agents of cheese, and in a damp climate keeping the good bugs from the bad in the cheese is quite tricky. Camembert only ages for a month, so after the cheddar debacle Erich switched to a cheese he could slice into sooner. This allowed him more frequent adjustment to recipes and less waste of product. "It can be a pretty steep learning curve at first, but that's part of the process, and the fun of it. Seeing what works and what doesn't, what creates a certain flavor or texture."

Camembert is temperamental too, and needs very specific conditions that make it hard to do at home. Inoculated molds must out-compete the native molds to get a "clean" camembert. Never daunted, Erich took a class at OSU and learned that one of his favorite cheeses to eat were also one of the most foolproof to make by the amateur: Swiss-style cheese. The process involves heating the milk to 130°, "which means that most of the bacteria that's just floating around in my kitchen will be killed by the time the cheese is ready to be drained and formed."

Erich has a local source for raw cow's milk, and occasionally will make goat cheese from another local source. "I go and get the milk at milking time, and it's cheese within a few hours. Now that's fresh and local! I love that aspect of the process."

The basic soft cheeses, such as Mascarpone, Fromage Blanc, Paneer, crème fraîche, or cream cheese, are the easiest to make, involving milk heated to a certain temperature, an acid such as lemon juice or vinegar, and an eventual draining/straining of the curd to form a mild, usually spreadable product. They can be successfully made with milk from the store, but raw milk is fresher, and therefore preferable. It has its own unique bacteria and flavor that influence the cheese. Fresh mild cheeses, such as mozzarella, are best with raw milk. That being said, "No one

who has access to any milk should ever buy Mascarpone. Especially if you can get tartaric acid . . . it is simple to make and so delicious!”

Erich ultimately would love to sell his cheeses, but stepping from home cheesemaking to a small scale commercial venture is a enormous leap. Getting the animals and facility costs a minimum of \$150,000 (for goats). Even if you don’t plan to supply the milk yourself, there are many regulations and costs associated with buying milk from another source. At the moment Erich is interested in learning as much as he can and sharing his cheeses with friends.

Foodies and anti-corporate anarchists alike find the idea of DIY food exciting. From beer to pickles to cheese, making one’s own food is the new sign of both hip and sustainable. And why not? If making a good crème fraiche for your homegrown raspberries is as simple as lemon juice in cream left on the counter a few hours, what’s to lose? Homemade artisanal foods deliver not only taste but satisfaction of a job well done. Its not a new concept—our grandmothers and great-grandmothers were DIY by necessity.

“Anyone can make basic cheese,” Erich says. “It’s one of the easiest things to do, and just requires a little time and patience.”

Next weekend project? Say cheese!”

Sidebar:

Getting started

Basic equipment: a stainless steel pot, a big whisk, a large knife to cut curd, a colander, thermometer, cheesecloth, and a spare fridge for aging. Semi-hard and hard cheeses require a mold and press to facilitate the draining and create the form of the cheese.

Resources: Home Cheesemaking 3rd ed, Ricki Carroll, Storey Publishing 2002 This is the all purpose beginners book that includes the basic of home cheese making and a good array of recipes. www.cheesemaking.com/.

The Cheesemakers Manual 3rd Ed., Margaret Peters Morris, published by Glengarry Cheesemaking Inc.

Fun Fact: the bacteria *b.levins* is the same bacteria that creates body odor, and is the main bacteria present in the “stinky cheeses.” It makes the cheese more meaty and robust; the cheese itself doesn’t taste or smell like the rind.