

How Cheese Is Made: A Step-by-Step Guide to Cheesemaking

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March 27, 2025



Cheese is a delicious and versatile dairy product that has been enjoyed for centuries. It is made by **transforming milk into a solid**, flavorful food through a careful process of curdling, draining, pressing, and ageing. From soft and creamy varieties like Brie to hard and aged cheeses like Parmesan, every type of cheese follows the same fundamental steps, with variations in ingredients, temperature, and ageing time influencing the final product.

The cheese-making process begins with **fresh milk**, which is heated and combined with cultures and rennet to form curds. These curds are then separated from the liquid whey, shaped, salted, and aged to develop their unique taste and texture.

This guide provides a **step-by-step overview of the cheesemaking process**, covering the essential tools, techniques, and stages involved.

Rather than focusing on a specific recipe, we'll explore how milk is turned into different types of cheese by adjusting factors like bacterial cultures, temperature, and ageing conditions.

Wikipedia's page on Cheese can provide a broad overview of the history, global varieties, and cultural significance of cheese.

Quick Overview: This infographic breaks down the 9 essential steps of cheesemaking, from milk preparation to ageing. Scroll down for a detailed guide on the process!"

How Cheese is Made

A 9-Step Breakdown



Preparing the Milk

Start with fresh milk (cow, goat, or sheep).



Acidification

Add bacterial cultures to the milk.



Coagulation

Add rennet to the milk.



Cutting the Curds

Cut the curds into smaller pieces.



Heating and Stirring

Gently heat the curds and stir them.



Draining the Whey

Remove the whey from the curds.



Shaping and Pressing

Shape the curds into molds and press them.



Aging and Ripening

Allow the cheese to age in controlled conditions.



Salting

Add salt to the curds.

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Watch the visual guide on How Cheese Is Made.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/q1VkfNyGV5c>

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Essential Ingredients and Their Roles

Creating high-quality cheese starts with selecting the right ingredients, as each component plays a crucial role in shaping the final flavour, texture, and consistency. Understanding these ingredients will help you appreciate how milk transforms into cheese through natural chemical and biological processes.

Below, we break down the key ingredients used in cheesemaking and their specific roles in the process.

1. Milk: The primary ingredient and base of all cheese. The type of milk used—whether from cows, goats, sheep, or buffalo—significantly impacts the cheese’s flavour and texture.

Key Considerations:

- Pasteurised milk ensures safety but may reduce some natural flavours.
- Raw milk provides a richer taste but must be handled carefully.
- Ultra-pasteurised milk should be avoided, as it doesn’t form proper curds.

2. Starter Culture: Contains beneficial bacteria that ferment lactose into lactic acid, acidifying the milk and aiding the curdling process. It also influences the cheese’s flavour, aroma, and texture.

Types of Cultures:

- **Mesophilic:** Works at lower temperatures, ideal for cheeses like cheddar and Gouda.
- **Thermophilic:** Thrives at higher temperatures, used for cheeses like Parmesan and Swiss.

3. Rennet: A coagulating enzyme that solidifies milk proteins, separating curds (solids) from whey (liquid), which is a crucial step in cheese formation.

Sources:

- **Animal-based:** Traditionally derived from calf stomachs.
- **Microbial or plant-based:** A vegetarian-friendly alternative.

4. Salt: Enhances flavour, helps preserve the cheese by reducing moisture, and prevents harmful bacterial growth.

Application Methods:

- Mixed directly into the curds.
- Applied to the surface of the cheese.
- Used as a brine soak for certain cheeses (e.g., feta).

By understanding the function of each ingredient, you can better grasp how cheesemaking works and how variations in ingredients influence the final product.

9 Steps of Cheesemaking: A Detailed Process

Cheesemaking is a fascinating process that transforms milk into a wide range of textures and flavours through carefully controlled steps. Each stage plays a crucial role in developing the final cheese, from curd formation to ageing.

Below, we explore the nine essential steps, highlighting the techniques and natural transformations that make this ancient craft so unique.

Step 1: Preparing the Milk



The first step in cheesemaking involves carefully heating fresh milk to the right temperature for proper curd formation.”

The foundation of cheesemaking starts with **selecting and properly preparing high-quality milk**. This step is crucial, as the **type of milk, its freshness, and how it is handled** significantly impact the final cheese's texture, flavour, and consistency. Whether using cow's, goat's, sheep's, or buffalo milk, each variety brings unique characteristics to the cheese.

Milk can be **raw or pasteurised**. Raw milk contains natural bacteria that can enhance flavour, but it must be handled carefully to prevent contamination. Pasteurised milk is safer and more widely available, but ultra-pasteurised **milk should be avoided**, as its proteins have been altered, making it unsuitable for curd formation.

Process:

1. **Heat the milk to the correct temperature** based on the type of cheese being made:
 - **85–95°F (30–35°C)** for soft cheeses (e.g., Brie, Camembert, Ricotta).
 - **Up to 140°F (60°C)** for firmer, aged cheeses (e.g., Parmesan, Gruyère, Swiss).
2. **Use slow, even heating** to avoid scorching or uneven temperature distribution. A double boiler is recommended for precise control.
3. **Stir the milk gently** with a long-handled spoon to ensure even heat distribution without disrupting the natural fat structure.
4. **Monitor the temperature constantly** using a thermometer, as overheating can negatively affect the milk's proteins and curdling ability.

Key Points:

- **Milk Handling is Crucial:** Use fresh, high-quality milk, preferably from a trusted source, as it directly affects cheese flavour and texture.
- **Avoid Sudden Temperature Changes:** Heating milk too quickly can cause protein breakdown, leading to poor curd formation.

By properly preparing the milk, you set the stage for a successful cheesemaking process, ensuring that beneficial bacteria thrive and curds form correctly in the next steps.

Step 2: Acidification



A liquid starter culture is added to the milk, beginning the fermentation process essential for curd formation.

Acidification is a crucial step in cheesemaking, where beneficial **starter cultures** are added to the warmed milk. These bacterial cultures begin the **fermentation process** by converting lactose (milk sugar) into **lactic acid**, which gradually lowers the pH of the milk.

This controlled acidification **prepares the milk for curdling**, influences the final texture, and plays a key role in developing the cheese's **flavour and shelf life**.

Different cheeses require different cultures, and the choice of culture determines the cheese's final taste and structure.

Process:

1. Choose the right starter culture:

- **Mesophilic cultures:** Used for cheeses made at lower temperatures, such as Cheddar, Gouda, and Brie.
- **Thermophilic cultures:** Used for high-temperature cheeses like Parmesan, Swiss, and Mozzarella.

2. **Sprinkle the culture evenly over the milk's surface** and let it rehydrate for about a minute.

3. **Stir gently but thoroughly** to ensure even distribution of bacteria throughout the milk.

4. **Let the milk rest for 30–60 minutes** to allow the bacteria to multiply and ferment the lactose into lactic acid.

Key Points:

- **Acidification creates a tangy flavour** and affects moisture retention, which influences whether a cheese is creamy or crumbly.
- **pH level drops to around 6.0**, which is essential for proper curd formation in the next step.

This step marks the beginning of **natural chemical changes** that transform milk into curd, setting the foundation for the cheese's texture and taste.

Sure! Here's a concise two-line blurb you can use for that link in your article:

***Learn more about starter cultures and their essential role in cheesemaking** — from flavour development to curd formation — in this insightful [guide by The Courtyard Dairy](#).*

Step 3: Coagulation



Rennet is carefully added to acidified milk, triggering the process of curd formation for cheesemaking.

Coagulation is one of the most critical transformations in cheesemaking, where **liquid milk solidifies into curds**. This process is triggered by adding **rennet**, an enzyme that causes milk proteins (primarily casein) to bind together, forming a gel-like structure. As the curds develop, they trap fats and moisture, determining the cheese's texture, density, and final characteristics.

There are two primary types of coagulation:

- **Enzymatic Coagulation** (using rennet): Produces firmer cheeses like Cheddar, Gouda, and Parmesan.
- **Acid Coagulation** (from lactic acid buildup): Used for softer cheeses like Ricotta and Paneer.

In most cheeses, rennet is essential for achieving the ideal curd structure.

Process:

1. **Choose the right type of rennet:**
 - **Animal rennet:** Traditionally derived from calves, best for aged cheeses.
 - **Microbial rennet:** Sourced from fungi or bacteria, suitable for vegetarians.
 - **Plant-based rennet:** Extracted from fig leaves, thistles, or nettles.
2. **Dilute the rennet** in cool, non-chlorinated water (to ensure even distribution).
3. **Gently stir the diluted rennet into the acidified milk** using an up-and-down motion for 30 seconds.
4. **Let the milk sit undisturbed for 30–60 minutes** at an optimal temperature of **85–105°F (29–40°C)** to allow the curds to form.
5. **Check for a clean break:** Insert a knife into the curd and lift slightly—if the curd separates cleanly, the coagulation is complete.

Key Points:

- **Temperature control is crucial**—too high or too low can lead to improper curd formation.
- **The right amount of rennet is key**—too much can make the cheese bitter, while too little results in weak curds.

Coagulation sets the **structural foundation for the cheese**, turning liquid milk into solid curds, ready for the next step—cutting and whey separation.

Step 4: Cutting the Curds



Step 4: Cutting the Curds

Precise cutting ensures even whey release, controlling the final cheese texture and moisture content.

Once the milk has coagulated into a solid mass, the next step is **cutting the curds**, which helps release whey and determine the cheese's final texture and moisture content. The size and uniformity of the curds directly impact the consistency of the cheese—**smaller curds produce firmer cheeses**, while **larger curds retain more moisture**, resulting in softer cheeses.

Process:

1. **Select the right cutting tool:** Use a **long-bladed knife** for home cheesemaking or a **curd cutter (harp)** for professional batches.
2. **Make the first cuts vertically** in a grid-like pattern, spacing them evenly (typically **½ inch for firm cheeses** and **larger for softer cheeses**).
3. **Make horizontal cuts** to create uniform cubes, ensuring an even whey release.
4. **Stir gently** with a spoon or ladle, if required, to separate the curds further without breaking them into tiny fragments.
5. **Allow the curds to rest** after cutting so they can firm up before the next stage.

Key Points:

- **Smaller curds expel more whey**, making cheeses like Parmesan and Cheddar firm and dense.
- **Larger curds retain more moisture**, ideal for softer cheeses like Brie and Camembert.
- **Even cutting ensures uniform texture**, preventing some curds from becoming too dry while others remain too moist.

Properly cutting the curds is essential for **controlling moisture levels and ensuring consistent texture**, setting the stage for the next steps in the cheesemaking process.

Step 5: Heating and Stirring



Controlled heating firms up the curds, expelling whey and shaping the cheese's final texture.

After cutting the curds, the next step is **heating and stirring**, which further expels whey and helps develop the cheese's final **texture and firmness**.

By gradually increasing the temperature, the curds shrink and firm up, influencing moisture content and overall consistency. **Harder cheeses require higher temperatures, while softer cheeses retain more moisture with lower heat.**

Process:

1. **Slowly heat the curds** to the appropriate temperature:
 - **100–125°F (38–52°C)**, depending on the type of cheese.
 - Softer cheeses, like Gouda, require lower temperatures.
 - Hard cheeses, like Parmesan, are heated to higher temperatures for a firmer texture.
2. **Stir gently but continuously** to prevent curds from clumping together.
3. **Maintain a slow, steady heat increase** over 20–40 minutes, ensuring even temperature distribution.
4. **Monitor curd texture carefully**—as they heat, they become firmer and more defined.

Key Points:

- **Gentle stirring prevents clumping** and ensures the whey is evenly expelled.
- **Higher temperatures create firmer, drier cheeses**, while lower temperatures preserve moisture for softer textures.
- **Overheating can make the curds rubbery** and affect the cheese's final quality.

This step **directly influences the texture and structure** of the final cheese, ensuring it has the right balance of moisture and firmness before moving on to draining and moulding.

Step 6: Draining the Whey



Separating whey from curds determines moisture content, essential for shaping and pressing the cheese.

Draining is a crucial step in cheesemaking that **separates the solid curds from the liquid whey**, determining the final cheese's **moisture content and texture**. The whey removal process varies depending on the type of cheese—soft cheeses retain more moisture, while hard cheeses require thorough draining for a firmer texture.

Process:

1. **Transfer the curds** to a **colander lined with cheesecloth** for easy drainage.
2. **Allow the whey to drain naturally** for soft cheeses or apply light pressure for firmer varieties.
3. **For very soft cheeses**, tie the cheesecloth into a bag and **hang it** to drip out excess whey gradually.
4. **For firmer cheeses**, some whey is expelled during pressing (Step 7).

Key Points:

- **Excessive draining can dry out the cheese**, so monitor moisture levels carefully.
- **Whey can be repurposed** for making ricotta, baking, fermenting, or feeding livestock.
- **Proper draining ensures a uniform curd structure**, setting the stage for shaping and pressing.

This step **concentrates the curds into a cohesive mass**, preparing them for pressing and moulding in the next stage of the cheesemaking process.

Step 7: Salting



Enhancing flavour and moisture control by adding salt to freshly drained cheese curds before shaping.”

Salting is a vital step in cheesemaking that **enhances flavour, preserves the cheese, and regulates moisture content**. Beyond taste, salt plays a crucial role in **controlling bacterial activity**, preventing spoilage, and aiding in the development of the cheese's rind and texture.

Methods of Salting:

1. **Direct Salting (Dry Salt Method)** – Used for fresh and semi-soft cheeses like Feta and Ricotta. Salt is **mixed directly into the curds** before shaping.
2. **Surface Salting** – Common for aged cheeses like Cheddar. **Salt is rubbed onto the cheese exterior**, drawing out moisture and forming a protective rind.
3. **Brining (Saltwater Solution)** – Hard cheeses like Parmesan and Gouda are **soaked in a brine solution (16–18% salt content)** for several hours or days, depending on size and type.

Key Points:

- **Salt balances flavour** while inhibiting unwanted bacterial growth.
- **Over-salting can slow down beneficial bacteria**, affecting proper ageing.
- **Brining time varies**—longer brining results in saltier, firmer cheese.
- **Salt impacts cheese texture** by drawing out moisture, leading to a firmer structure.

Salting is essential for **flavour development, preservation, and texture formation**, ensuring the cheese matures correctly and remains safe for consumption.

Step 8: Shaping and Pressing



Using a cheese mold and press to form the curds into a uniform shape for proper aging.

Shaping and pressing are crucial steps that **define the cheese's final form, texture, and consistency** while expelling any remaining whey. Proper pressing ensures a uniform shape, removes excess moisture, and eliminates air pockets that could lead to spoilage during ageing.

The amount of pressure applied varies depending on the cheese type—**soft cheeses require gentle pressing, while hard cheeses need more intense pressure.**

Process:

1. **Prepare the mould:** Line a cheese mould with **cheesecloth** to help shape the curds and allow whey drainage.
2. **Transfer the curds** into the mould, pressing them lightly to remove large air pockets.
3. **Apply pressure gradually** using a cheese press or hand weights:
 - **Soft cheeses (e.g., Brie, Camembert):** Light pressing (1–5 lbs).
 - **Semi-hard cheeses (e.g., Gouda, Cheddar):** Moderate pressure (5–20 lbs).
 - **Hard cheeses (e.g., Parmesan, Manchego):** Heavy pressing (10–50 lbs) over several hours.
4. **Increase pressure gradually** over time, allowing whey to drain slowly without compacting the curds too quickly.
5. **Leave the cheese under pressure** for the required duration—some cheeses need only a few hours, while others may require pressing overnight.

Key Points:

- **Even pressure prevents air pockets**, which can cause defects in aged cheese.
- **The shape and consistency of pressing affect the final texture and rind formation.**
- **Proper pressing ensures uniform moisture content**, helping the cheese age correctly.

This step **finalises the cheese's structure**, ensuring it is firm and ready for the final stage—**aging or immediate consumption**.

Step 9: Ageing and Ripening



Cheese wheels are stored on wooden shelves in a controlled environment for proper flavour and texture development.

The final step in cheesemaking, **ageing** (affinage) and ripening, is where cheese develops its flavour, **texture, aroma, and complexity**. Controlled temperature, humidity, and microbial activity work together to transform fresh cheese into a mature, well-balanced product.

During this stage, **enzymes and beneficial bacteria break down proteins and fats**, creating the cheese's signature taste and consistency.

Process:

1. **Store the cheese** in an ageing room, cellar, or fridge at **50–60°F (10–15°C)** with **75–90% humidity** to prevent excessive drying.
2. **Turn the cheese regularly** (daily or weekly, depending on the type) to ensure even moisture distribution and prevent uneven ageing.

3. **Monitor humidity levels**—too much moisture can encourage unwanted mould, while too little can cause excessive drying and cracking.
4. **Allow proper ageing time**, based on the cheese type:
 - **Fresh cheeses (e.g., Ricotta, Mozzarella)**: No ageing required; consumed immediately.
 - **Semi-hard cheeses (e.g., Gouda, Cheddar)**: Aged for **1–6 months**.
 - **Hard cheeses (e.g., Parmesan, Gruyère)**: Aged for **6–24+ months** for deep flavour development.
5. **Apply surface treatments** (for aged cheeses), such as:
 - **Waxing or bandaging** (e.g., Cheddar) to protect from contamination.
 - **Brushing and washing** (e.g., Washed-rind cheeses like Limburger) to develop a unique flavour.

Key Points:

- **Humidity control prevents excessive drying** and encourages proper rind development.
- **Regular flipping and monitoring ensure even ripening** and prevent defects.
- **Longer ageing enhances flavour complexity**, creating sharper, nuttier, or earthier profiles.

Ageing and ripening **complete the cheesemaking process**, allowing each cheese to develop its **distinct taste, texture, and character** before it's ready to be enjoyed!

Of course! Here's a two-line summary for that post:

Discover how ageing transforms cheese — deepening flavour, texture, and character — in this detailed [article from Wisconsin Cheese](#).

Conclusion

Cheesemaking is a fascinating blend of **science, tradition, and craftsmanship**, transforming simple milk into a variety of delicious cheeses. Each step—from **preparing the milk and curdling to pressing and aging**—plays a crucial role in defining the cheese's **flavour**, texture, and aroma. Whether making a fresh cheese to enjoy immediately or ageing a hard cheese for months, mastering this process allows for endless creativity and customisation.

By understanding the fundamentals of cheesemaking, you can **experiment with different milk types, cultures, and techniques** to create unique, high-quality cheeses. With patience and practice, the art of cheesemaking becomes not just a skill but a truly rewarding experience!

Also Read:

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- Classification of Beverages: Alcoholic and Non-Alcoholic Explained

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