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Book Review

The art of natural cheesemaking

David Asher

Chelsea Green Publishing, 2015, 298 pages

Review by Christopher Yap (Coventry University, UK)

Cheese wasn't designed. Cheeses were, and are, products of specific geographical, economic, ecological, and cultural circumstances. And so in the history of cheesemaking we see the history of agriculture, of trade, of places, and people. The countless cheeses—each made with only milk, rennet, bacterial cultures, and salt—reflect the diversity of the contexts in which they were first produced. Cheese therefore offers a rich, “living” connection to the past and, as Asher's *The Art of Natural Cheesemaking* implies, a lens for engaging with the political, ethical and ecological issues that affect our futures.

This book is positioned in the context of a broader “fermentation revival” in North America, most visible in craft beer, sourdough bread, sauerkraut, and artisan cheese. Whilst the revival is much celebrated, and does reflect a growing public interest in the provenance and production of food, it has had little material impact on the organisation of global agriculture or agribusiness-dominated food systems. Artisan cheesemaking remains a fringe activity. And it is here, at the fringe of the fringe, that we find dedicated natural cheesemakers like David Asher.

The transformation from milk into cheese is straightforward, based on natural processes: raw milk sours; curds form in calves' stomachs; yeasts, moulds and bacteria grow wherever conditions are right. Natural cheesemaking means working with, rather than against nature. In practice this also means avoiding industrially produced ingredients, where possible, sourcing

high quality raw milk, where possible, and cultivating bacteria, yeasts and moulds at home to replace the arbitrarily selected and lab-grown bacterial cultures—known as DVI (Direct Vat Inoculation) starters—that have come to dominate large- and small-scale cheese industries around the world.

In many ways this is an important and ambitious book, far more than a collection of recipes. In his impassioned Manifesto, Asher declares that, “if eating is a political act, then cheesemaking is even more so” (10). Asher wants to challenge and transform the way that we think about cheese and food more generally, and to recognise that the integrity of food (and the quality of cheese) is inseparable from every aspect of land use, agricultural practice and policy, and animal husbandry.

Through the practice of cheesemaking Asher links decisions taken in the farmstead kitchen to the macro politics of globalisation and industrialisation. Every cheese inoculated with *penicilium roqueforti*—blue cheese mould—grown on rye bread at home, represents an alternative to the prevailing, reductive conceptions of food, farming and cheesemaking. The structural politics of global agribusiness are painted with broad strokes, but in the tactile descriptions of the cheesemaking process, the political and ethical considerations come sharply into focus; which materials—plastic, wood, or metal—should we use to cut the curd, and why?

Asher, a small-scale farmer himself, wrote this book on the island of Lasqueti off the west coast of British Columbia, where improvisation is part of the culture and, “DIY is a way of life” (xi). Similarly, when it comes to natural cheesemaking at home, Asher eschews both the “traditional” and “industrial” approaches to sourcing tools and materials; “a sushi mat, placed atop a steel cooling rack balanced on a casserole dish” (63) makes a perfectly workable draining rack for the natural cheesemaker who is more interested in cultivating a *penicillium geotrichum* rind than uniform cheeses.

Cheese has few ingredients, and so it is only right that this book takes a thorough and critical look at each in turn. Asher outlines in some detail the distinction between animal rennet—the collection of enzymes, of which the most important is chymosin, derived from the fourth stomach of an unweaned calf that cause milk to coagulate—and artificial alternatives. Not only does he explain the distinctions between animal and non-animal rennet and their effects on the cheese, he also explains why these distinctions matter. In doing so, Asher unpacks misconceptions about “vegetarian” cheese and explains why fermentation-produced-chymosin, a widely used animal rennet substitute, does not require a GM label, despite the use of genetic modification (GM) technology in its production. Instructions on how to prepare rennet from a freshly-slaughtered calf are further evidence of Asher’s thorough and committed approach.

Asher’s use of kefir grains as a universal starter culture is resourceful, innovative, and consistent with his broader principles. Kefir grains are symbiotic communities of bacteria and yeasts that form discrete solid structures that, if “fed” milk and cared for (much like a sour dough starter), will propagate indefinitely. Kefir grains have naturally diverse and resilient ecologies. They contain both mesophilic and thermophilic bacteria that are necessary to sour milk for making any cheese, from the softest white chèvre to the grandest Alpine wheels. Asher notes

with humility and evident delight that his kefir grains, and all others, are direct descendants of the kefir brewed in yurts by Central Asian nomads thousands of years ago.

Two-thirds of *The Art of Natural Cheesemaking* is dedicated to recipes, which become increasingly more complex, from fresh cheeses, via softs such as the intriguing “Mason Jar Marcellin”, blues, and washed-rinds, to hard cheeses. Recipes are written with little science but with a keen critical eye. It is a beautifully presented book, written in a bold, engaging style that inspires tactile cheesemaking—where touching, handling, testing and tasting become the primary modes of learning. Discussion of biochemistry is approachable and intuitive, and there is palpable sense of wonder and excitement when Asher writes about the diverse ecologies of raw milk and its possibilities for raw cheeses.

Asher is rightly outraged by the manner in which large-scale, industrial producers have come to dominate the dairy industry in North America. Small-scale, family farms and small-holders are seemingly never far from precariousness. Consequently a large number of small-scale farmers in North America and Europe have diversified into artisan cheesemaking and other activities in order to spread risk, add value to raw products, and ultimately remain viable.

Many of these producers make raw milk cheeses by hand for local markets. However, many will also often use industrially-produced, single strain DVI starters, firstly because they allow farmers to avoid time-consuming regulatory processes that accompany the use of homemade starter cultures and rennet (if they are legal at all—Asher is not permitted to sell his cheeses), and secondly because DVIs give a consistency of product which many small, family businesses rely upon. And so it feels that while Asher is taking worthy aim at corporations and companies looking to control and homogenise the dairy industry, many conscientious small-scale cheesemakers are caught in the crossfire.

In the context of natural cheesemaking it is also important to mention PDOs (Protected Designation of Origin status), which define many of the world’s most celebrated cheeses such as Brie de Meaux, West Country Cheddar, and Parmigiano Reggiano. For many reasons PDOs should be understood as political constructions—referring to invented traditions—that reflect contemporary conceptions of hygiene and accountability amongst other things, rather than the historical reality of dynamic, adaptive, and heterogeneous processes, which are actually far closer to David Asher’s contemporary cheesemaking practices. And so an argument can be made that Asher limits himself by attempting to emulate recognised cheeses with established recipes, rather than allowing his own conditions, ingredients, and climate to determine his cheesemaking outcomes. In a way, the most authentic form of cheesemaking is without recipes at all.

The phrase “counter cultures” is useful for summarising the contribution of this book. David Asher rejects the prevailing, industrial cheesemaking culture. He also rejects the arbitrarily selected and lab-grown bacterial cultures used by large- and small-scale cheesemakers around the world. Through quiet acts of food sovereignty, growing his own “counter-top cultures”, Asher makes natural cheesemaking relevant, important, and possible.

Overall this is a valuable and engaging book for would-be cheesemakers that, used correctly, should soon be mottled with brine and whey, and its pages marked by salted fingertips.

David Asher wants you to reclaim some power in your food systems, starting with homemade cheese, butter and yoghurt. Farming, cheesemaking, and eating are all political acts, and we can take comfort in the fact that, by looking critically at every day practices, we can spot myriad small opportunities to contribute towards more socially just and sustainable food systems.

Christopher Yap is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience at Coventry University, UK. Through participatory video-making his research explores the relationships between urban agriculture, food sovereignty and the right to the city, focusing on how citizens produce, manage, and experience urban space, access land, and transform urban food systems. Christopher has previously worked with artisan cheesemakers in the UK and in New Zealand.