

# Against the common gouda

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Trays of San Andreas cheese — an unpasteurized cheese from raw sheep's milk — made by Liam and Cindy Callahan, a mother and son team, at Bellwether Farm in Sonoma County, Calif. Image courtesy of Heather Paxson

(PhysOrg.com) -- The cheese aisle of your local supermarket is an unlikely place to study a classic political problem: How do we balance state power with individual freedom? But for those with a trained eye, the variety, flavors, and textures of the products available have much to tell us. Cheese, says Heather Paxson, an associate professor in MIT's Department of Anthropology, is "a window into broader issues of politics and ethics." In this case, it reveals a conflict between the federal government and local producers that has been aging for two decades.

Indeed, at a time when the politics of food production are under increasing scrutiny, Paxson is breaking new ground on the subject by studying America's artisanal cheese-makers, a politically mobilized group of small-scale farmers and artisans who crave the freedom to produce and eat any kind of [cheese](#) they desire, in opposition to government regulations. Those rules, however, are not about to loosen. Thus cheese-makers must adapt: Some are refining their craft within America's long-standing rules, while others may transfer their energies to the country's burgeoning local-food movement, championed by the writer Michael Pollan and chef Alice Waters, which aims to enhance food quality through regional production and distribution. What started as a form of small-business protest could yet yield artisanal and economic innovations, altering the taste and availability of cheese in America.

## Heated disagreement

The central dispute over artisanal cheese-making in the United States involves pasteurization, the process of heating milk to kill bacteria. Unpasteurized dairy products can lead to serious illnesses, including tuberculosis, listeriosis and [diphtheria](#). According to the Centers for Disease Control, from 1998 to 2005 there were 45 recognized outbreaks of disease, accounting for 1,007 illnesses, caused by unpasteurized milk or cheese made from unpasteurized milk. The [Food and Drug Administration](#) requires either that milk be heated — at 145 degrees F for 30 minutes — or that unpasteurized cheeses be aged for 60 days above 35 degrees F. By contrast, unpasteurized and un-aged cheeses are legal in famed cheese-making countries like France.

Despite well-documented hazards, many artisanal cheese-makers believe their methods are safe, partly due to intensive cleaning practices, and think heating milk strips the taste from cheese. "You lose a lot of the flavor that makes cheese interesting," says Peter Dixon, head cheese-

maker of Consider Bardwell Farms in West Pawlet, Vt., which makes several types of unpasteurized — but legally aged — cheese. "You dumb down the aromatic potential of the cheese." Parmigiano-Reggiano, Roquefort, and Vermont Shepherd are all popular unpasteurized cheeses.

This difference in taste has turned into a deeper disagreement. "It's a clear case of the tension that arises from wanting to ensure the safety of a public that has low tolerance for illness," says Paxson. "At the same time, some people think they should be able to consume what they want, and the government shouldn't have any say in it." These tussles constitute the "microbiopolitics" of food in America, as Paxson termed it in an award-winning article in the journal *Cultural Anthropology* last year. And while artisanal cheese-makers seem small in number — there are between 400 and 450 creameries devoted to it, Paxson says — their ranks appear to have doubled between 2000 and 2007.

Paxson notes that federal cheese safety laws date to World War Two, when the government wanted to ensure that mass-produced cheddar made for American soldiers would be safe. In the eyes of artisanal cheese-makers, says Paxson, "This cheddar-based law has turned into a one-size-fits-all policy that does very little in some cases to address the question of safety. Different recipes of cheese are not just different flavors. Parmigiano-Reggiano and brie really are different foods in health and safety terms." Hard, dry cheeses, she says, are less likely than moist cheeses to become unsafe as they age.

The American Cheese Society is an artisanal trade group founded in 1983 to support small-scale cheese-making. A related group, the Cheese of Choice Coalition, wants to prevent a tightening of current law. Some of its members strongly express an anti-regulatory animus. "There is a food-safety hysteria across the land," says Kurt Dammeier, a Seattle-based artisan cheese-maker, who is a board member of the ACS and co-chair of the Cheese of Choice Coalition. "Our government is famous for

enacting regulations so they can look like they're doing something. The Cheese of Choice Coalition is out there to keep it from happening."

Federal officials say these concerns are unfounded. "I've been here for 10 years, and we've never been about to precipitously ban all raw-milk cheeses," says John Sheehan, Director of the Division of Plant and Dairy Food Safety at the FDA. He adds that the agency's research is accessible to the public: "There is ample opportunity for people to know what is going on."

Overall, says Paxson, "The grudging consensus in the cheese world right now is that the status quo is okay."

## **The craft response to regulation**

That cheese-makers see their trade in political terms is just one finding Paxson arrived at while studying subjects from California to Wisconsin to Vermont, and interpreting "what it means to them" to make cheese. "No one stumbles into artisanal cheese-making," says Paxson. "You have to go way out of your way to do it."

Some cheese-makers simply love the food. Others see it as an environmentally ethical mode of farming. "Some are more into food politics, and some are more into agricultural politics," says Paxson. "Cheese-makers are an incredibly diverse group of people. Former CEOs, old-school dairy farmers, former philosophy majors at liberal arts colleges." Dixon comes from a farming family, and has been making cheese since 1982.

But if artisanal cheese-makers can't alter America's pasteurization laws, what options remain for them? Paxson notes that some have developed their own styles as a result. "They can make an unpasteurized bloomy rind cheese, like a Camembert, last eight weeks, while in France it might

last four weeks. This is a craft response to the regulations."

Other cheese-makers, says Paxson, are taking commercially available bacterial cultures, "and figuring out how to blend them to get that rich and complex flavor" even with pasteurized milk. This still fits within her view of what it is to be an artisanal cheese-maker in the first place: "To have a feel for the milk, to have a sense of how to adjust the process in response to changes in the milk." Moreover, Paxson says, "People are saying Americans are getting better at making cheese from pasteurized milk than the Europeans are, because they've had to," says Paxson.

For instance, Dixon's farm, in addition to its unpasteurized products, sells a hand-made pasteurized goat's milk cheese called "Mettowee." In 2006 it was named as one of the world's top 300 cheeses in a guide by a popular retailer, "The Murray's Cheese Handbook."

Dixon also thinks cheese-makers could transfer their political energies to America's burgeoning local-food movement, the effort to improve food quality and lower its environmental impact by emphasizing regional production and consumption. "Cheese is a great vehicle for that," says Dixon. "It's an integral part of the whole cycle of dairy farming. If you make cheese, then you have whey, so you can feed pigs, and produce meat. It's the basis for a wonderful agricultural system around the U.S."

As Paxson notes, artisanal cheese-making can be an intensely local culture; some artisans find the American Cheese Society's national cheese-making competitions crassly competitive, and only interact with colleagues through state cheese groups. "Even if cheese-makers are all values-driven, those values are diverse," says Paxson. "So I think regional cheese guilds are going to grow."

And while the craft tradition in cheese-making did not originate in the United States, Paxson notes that this process of rebellion, adaptation, and

innovation has a distinctly American sense to it. "Cheese-making in this country has been largely industrial for 100 years," she says. "But not having that older artisanal tradition means they're free to experiment, creating cheeses that couldn't be made in Europe. They're creating a tradition of innovation."

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