Artisanal cheeses are a link to the history and culture of their place of origin

April 4 2016

Artisanal cheesemaking is an important industry in Mexico, but many varieties of artisanal Mexican cheeses are in danger of disappearing because they have not been adequately documented. A team of dairy science experts is working to prevent that loss by collecting the information needed to standardize, protect, and preserve traditional artisanal production processes and to seek protected designation of origin (PDO) status for those that qualify. Their review is published in Articles in Press and will appear in the May 2016 issue of the *Journal of Dairy Science*.

"Currently, cheesemaking is one of the most important industries in Mexico," explained lead investigators Aarón F. González-Córdova and Belinda Vallejo-Cordoba, of the Laboratorio de Química y Biotecnología de Productos Lácteos, Coordinación de Tecnología de Alimentos de Origen Animal, at the Centro de Investigación en Alimentación y Desarrollo, A.C., in Hermosillo, Mexico. "The importance of artisanal cheesemaking is reflected in the estimation that around 70% of all Mexican cheese comes from small-scale productions."

González-Córdova, Vallejo-Cordoba and colleagues examined the challenges facing artisanal cheesemaking in Mexico. Among those challenges are:

- Compliance with food safety regulations, because most Mexican artisanal cheeses are made using raw milk.
- Large-scale industrial production of cheeses that were once only

produced using artisanal methods.

- Difficulty in categorizing local and regional cheeses—in some cases, the same name is used for different cheeses, whereas in others the same cheese may be known by different names in different areas.
- The perception that artisanal cheeses may be unsafe.
- Scarcity of systematic characterization of artisanal Mexican cheeses, including the roles of different groups of microbiota that affect food safety, sensory characteristics, and shelf life.
- Lack of specific defined standards that would allow the cheeses to be included in a PDO system.

In their review, the authors describe the production methods and characteristics of eight important artisanal cheese varieties produced in Mexico and discuss efforts that have been made to preserve these cheeses.

"Certain varieties of artisanal Mexican cheese, such as Bola de Ocosingo, Poro de Balancan, Crema de Chiapas, and regional Cotija cheeses, possess unique characteristics that make them potentially eligible to be protected as PDO products. This distinction could help to expand their frontiers and allow them to become better known and appreciated in other parts of the world," added González-Córdova and Vallejo-Cordoba. "With sufficient information, official Mexican regulations could be established that would encompass and regulate the manufacture of Mexican artisanal cheeses."

"There is a rich cultural heritage in the dairy foods that we eat. Artisanal Mexican cheeses are part of that heritage. Unfortunately, a lack of scientific information on manufacturing endangers the future of these unique foods. Preservation of these cheeses will depend, therefore, on dairy foods research," said Matt Lucy, PhD, Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Dairy Science*, and Professor of Animal Science, University of Missouri,

USA.

More information: "Invited review: Artisanal Mexican cheeses," by A. F. González-Córdova, C. Yescas, Á. M. Ortiz-Estrada, M. de los Ángeles De la Rosa-Alcaraz, A. Hernández-Mendoza, and B. Vallejo-Cordoba, *Journal of Dairy Science*, published online in advance of Volume 99, Issue 5 (May 2016)