

Big Cheese: Cheese and American Imagination

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ABSTRACT: Nothing fires human gustatory imaginations like cheese. Consider the British cheese gourmands Wallace and Gromit whose hunger for the stuff drives them to build a rocket ship that takes them to the motherlode of all cheeses, the moon (it's not Wallace's beloved Wensleydale). Wallace's and Gromit's turophilia are nothing compared to their American cousins' enduring zeal for quasi-rotted milk. Cheese is for eating, of course, but like other foods it represents ideas that American past and present have about themselves. Some of the ideas take political and social expressions, others are embedded in popular culture. The late nineteenth-century expression 'big cheese' meaning someone of importance, or 'big man' refers to large wheels of cheese displayed at state fairs among other venues and might refer to two historical patriotic cheeses. In broader food sense cheese tells us about how Americans think it should be produced, sold, and eaten, and what the taste and textures of desirable food should be or not be.

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261

It has become a cliché that in popular imagination America is the land of abundance, a cornucopia of food that makes its inhabitants fat and happy. True in terms of agricultural output, a poisonous falsehood in the hard reality of historic food deprivation among many American, the myth has always taken political form. A well-known cheese story of the early republic centres on just this. On New Year's Day 1802 President Thomas Jefferson stood at the door of his official home, the White House, ready to welcome a gift from political supporters: the world's largest cheese, four feet across, eighteen inches high and weighing

more than 1250 pounds. The cheese had been made in the late summer of 1801 by the women of Cheshire, a small community (the 1800 census lists 200 people) in Massachusetts' western backcountry. The effort was led by a charismatic if socially embarrassing preacher named John Leland – he tended to shout and stomp around while preaching in church and in public. His flock were free-will Baptists resolutely opposed to the hierarchical religious and political establishment of Massachusetts and who thought of themselves as true citizens of a free republic established by God.¹ When Thomas Jefferson (a notable religious sceptic) and his populist Republican-Democratic Party won the presidency Leland's people set to work to celebrate the electoral victory by using the most democratic food produced by an abundant land: cheese. The milk of nine hundred cows from parishioner's farms was turned into curd and placed in huge vat set on a cider press (cider the usual beverage of ordinary Americans). It was salted, and then transformed by pressing into a big block of cheese.²

Most American-made cheeses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century seem to have been cheddars though the people of Cheshire could have made the eponymous cheese. Since these were farmhouse products no records tell us what exactly they were. Cheese was a way to preserve surplus milk, especially during the warm months (milking lasted approximately from April to November), to provide protein over the winter, and to produce something that could be sold in local markets. Farmhouse cheeses were staples of rural America throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A cheese that weighed more than half a ton meant a considerable investment in each family's resources and labour since there were no milking machines. Ordinary milk cows of the period were shorthorns of mixed breeds mainly from northern England; not until the 1830s were 'improved' breeds such as Ayrshires and Dutch cows imported for better production.³ Super producing Holstein-Frisians did not appear until 1857. Early cows might have produced 1,500 pounds of milk a year or about 174 gallons a year.⁴ Even at these low milk yields an average farm with one cow could make 150 pounds of cheese assuming no milk was taken for drinking or butter. Cheshire dairy was already well-known because of the excellent grazing land so its cows were obviously much better producers than normal perhaps close to some exceptional yields of 2500 pounds of milk reported in 1800. Large amounts of milk were necessary because the great cheese required 13,000 pounds from the 900 cows in a short time. The American land and animals upon it were clearly abundant as the great cheese was meant to show.

The fame of this huge cheese spread, Leland glorying in the title given to him in the in the popular press 'the Mammoth Priest'. But the massive creation was so large and the roads so poor that it could only be shipped in wintertime over snow and ice by sleds and by water routes. It went down the Hudson River by boat to New York City where it was viewed by large crowds of people, then to Baltimore and on to Washington, DC. President Jefferson standing in his doorway welcoming this rare thing and was mightily pleased by gift. The makers may have known that in 1792 the village of Norleach in Cheshire, England had

created a 1350-pound cheese for America's *bête noir* King George III since it was reported in a United States newspaper.⁵ But here was a cheese all the better for being American, as Leland said in his message the president:

The Cheese was not made by his Lordship, for his sacred Majesty; nor with a view to gain dignified titles or lucrative offices; but by the personal labour of free-born farmers (without a single slave to assist) for an elective President of a free people ...

Sir, we had some thought of impressing some significant inscription on the Cheese; but we have found such inconveniency in stamps on paper, that we chose to send it in a plain Republican form.⁷

For the dairymen and women of Cheshire, the cheese was good publicity, their products well-known throughout the nineteenth century. Even better for Leland Jefferson paid him \$200 (roughly \$4238 in today's dollars).⁶

The word mammoth had just come into vogue partly due to Jefferson's own work on America's fauna and flora. Since his tenure as envoy to France he and earlier Benjamin Franklin had argued successfully with French naturalists that American plants and animals were larger and better than European ones. He succeeded in convincing the greatest one of all Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon by sending him a much-decayed moose skeleton and hide. In 1801 with Jefferson's help famed artist and naturalist Charles Willson Peale's had put the skeleton of a mastodon discovered near Newburgh, New York on display at his natural history museum in Philadelphia. Peale declared it 'the LARGEST of Terrestrial Beings', in short a mammoth.⁷ John Leland's huge cheese was an edible version of a nascent publicity industry. Peale's skeleton was later brought by P.T. Barnum for his American Museum showing that bigger and flashier almost always works in American minds as signs of superiority.

263

Big food was of the moment and Jefferson's political enemies in the Federalist Party used it to ridicule him in their newspapers. They called it a 'Mammoth' cheese that would soon be filled with maggots and that only Republican-Democratic rats would eat. Actually there is no record of what happened to the cheese once it was brought into the White House, so it is possible that maggots did have a feast on some of it because it seems to have remained there for two years. One writer suggested that the women of Lenox also in western Massachusetts bake a mammoth apple pie, 15 feet across and 4,800 pounds in weight, to accompany the colossal cheese: 'the Apple Pye ought therefore to weigh at least forty-eight hundred as Mr. Jefferson, unless he has a Mammoth appetite for Cheese, will want four pounds of Pye to one of Cheese.'⁸ Pie and cheese for dessert was just as American as it was French or British.

Not to be outdone by opposition hyperbole the party of the people took up the theme with gusto in more than one way. In the spring of 1804, the official bakers of the Navy

prepared a Mammoth Loaf of bread presumed to be eaten with the last of the great cheese. Dressed in their best uniforms, the Navy bakers carried it into the Capitol where it was set in a Senate committee room. There is sat beside huge quantities of roast beef, whiskey, and hard cider. Jefferson, normally a fan of French and Italian dining, dressed in a plain old coat, mingled with a large crowd of ordinary people. A critic said, they were ‘people of all classes & colors from the President of the United States to the meanest vilest Virginia slave’. The President took out his pocketknife, hacked off a hunk of beef and bread and ate them, washed down with liquor. The ‘mob’ joined in and spent the rest of the day eating, likely cheese included, and drinking. The event was part of the administration’s campaign to raise money for the Navy to fight the infamous Barbary pirates, but it was a populist celebration of American food and drink.

264

Thirty years later, another great cheese arrived at the White House, this one dedicated to the self-proclaimed greatest populist president up to that time, master self-promoter, Andrew Jackson. This one was made in the summer of 1835 at a time when American agriculture was becoming a main element in the new national market with consequent industrialization. Col. Thomas S. Meacham was a well-to-do dairy farmer with lands in Salt Creek New York near Lake Ontario. Although a Whig, opposed to Jackson politically, he was a patriot and nationalist. President Jackson’s suppression of South Carolina’s attempt at disunion in 1832 was applauded by men such as Meacham and so in honour of these acts (and to ingratiate himself with political leaders) he created several big cheeses. Three weighing 750 pounds went to the Vice President, the governor of New York State and New York City’s mayor. But the biggest cheese of all went to the big man himself at the White House on New Year’s Day 1836. Two feet thick, 11 feet in circumference and weighing more than 1400 pounds the cheese was made in a specially constructed vat composed of 24 staves – one for each state of the union – using milk from 150 of Meacham’s cows. It took days to fill with curd; no doubt this was an American cheddar since the technique calls for layering of curds. Once pressed it was wrapped in patriotic garb. Proclaimed a gift from ‘the whole people of the State of New York’, on the cheese was a banner 12 feet long and 7 feet wide painted with the motto: ‘The National Belt: The Union it must be Preserved.’ Twenty-four gold stars and a dedication to President Andrew Jackson came with the banner. A grand procession of boats and wagons carried the great cheese and its smaller fellows down Lake Ontario to Oswego, then by the on the decade-old Erie Canal and Hudson River to New York City thence to Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington. Throngs of people in cities along the way came out to admire the great creation and the cheered the sentiments on the banner. When the mammoth arrived at the White House the President accepted it and served up bottles of wine from the White House cellar. Jackson was pleased with the gift and even more with the banner if for no other reason than the phrase about the Union was his own toast (one of 24) given at the White House Jefferson Day dinner in 1830.⁹

Big Cheese: Cheese and American Imagination

The cheese sat in the vestibule until 22 February 1837 when on George Washington's Birthday the White House was opened to the public for Jackson's last levee. The President announced that anyone could come and take whatever pieces of cheese that they wanted. One writer described coming to the threshold to encounter 'an atmosphere, to which the mephitic gases over Avernus must be faint and innocuous'. Never a people to turn down free food a crowd estimated at 10,000 from across the social spectrum arrived to grab whatever piece of the by now very ripe cheese they could get. Another eyewitness said:

For hours did a crowd of men, women, and boys hack at the cheese, many taking large hunks of it away with them. When they commenced, the cheese weighed one thousand four hundred pounds, and only a small piece was saved for the President's use. The air was redolent with cheese, the carpet was slippery with cheese, and nothing else was talked about at Washington that day.¹⁰

The reek of rotted cheese lingered in the White House for months, requiring all the drapes and furniture to be aired out and the walls whitewashed to remove 'an odor which is pleasant only when there is not much of it'.¹¹ Free, abundant food and drink marked the next political campaign in 1840 along with hokum and bunkum that shape or reflect Americans' political imaginations.

Since those days Mammoth cheeses appear at state fairs and other agricultural exhibitions to show the fecundity of the land and the technical skills of the farmers – and their marketing associations – who create them. Farmers in Perth, Ontario created a 22,000-pound cheese standing six feet tall for the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. It is reported to have crashed through the floor of the railcar carrying it and the stage on which it was shown at the Fair.¹² These giants may have given rise to the satirical phrase 'big cheese' to denote a person of some importance or at least self-importance. New York State became the major American cheese-making centre especially in the Mohawk Valley. In the 1820s Herkimer became a centre for cheese production, by the 1860s shipping 25 million pounds or more. The first factory was set up by Jesse Williams in the upriver town of Rome in 1851.¹³ Although milking machines had not been invented until the 1870s and even then were not refined until the 1920s milk production increased. New cow types and selective breeding along with mechanized hay production combined with more efficient milk collection and curd making technology allowed dairymen (with the factory system men came to replace farm women as cheesemakers) to meet the American appetite for cheese. That the factories, some 200 in all, were set along the Erie Canal, built to link the Great Lakes and New York City shows what the new American dairy entrepreneurs were doing: feeding a growing national market. Farmers in Wisconsin finding that wheat crops were failing on the state's gravelly soils, turned to dairy farming in the 1870s and became the nation's largest cheese maker. By the late nineteenth century Americans were fully caught up in factory farming

ideology. Cheeses were not artisanal farmhouse varieties but like meat, flour and canned goods, mass produced to be consumed not by gourmets but by ordinary folks. The quicker and softer – hence more gobbable – the food the better.¹⁴

Most of the early American cheeses were semi-hard or hard. Of course when made at home some remained fresh like cottage cheese or farmer's cheese, but cheeses made for storage and for the market were the former types. The term 'American cheese' likely referred to the common cheddar or perhaps Cheshire styles. Soft cheeses such as brie and young Gruyère (most of these are now considered to be hard cheeses) were known by the American dairy industry but they were not popular.¹⁵ By 1905 soft cheeses Camembert type cheeses were beginning to make their appearance in the American market but limitations on storage made shipping of such European cheeses expensive.¹⁶ Limburger was the most widespread soft cheese but it is an acquired taste or at least smell is. A savoury, soft yet somewhat gelatinous texture was in favour; gelatinised meats were popular so the texture of soft to semi-liquid savoury would be applied to cheese.¹⁷

Health gurus from the nineteenth century on recommended hard and coarse-grained foods as better for digestion – Sylvester Graham linking it to taming libidos – but soft cheese is irresistible and when merged with something a bit chewy or even crunchy then a perfect food is created. This dish, or class of dishes, is melted cheese on bread or toast. Early nineteenth-century American cookbooks have recipes for melting cheese on bread in a fireplace or later on a stove using either a tin Dutch oven or a common household utensil, a handheld grill-like cheese toaster. An English import, the popular cookbook Hannah Glasse's popular cookbook gives three versions of the dish calling them Welsh, Scotch and English Rabbit. Welsh and Scotch are basically melted cheese on bread, the English using wine to soak the bread.¹⁸ All American grilled cheese sandwiches in their many forms from lunch counter flat griddled to fancier panini descend from these early versions. Kraft Foods whose single sliced processed cheeses are the American standard has an encomium to melted cheese sandwiches. Like so many other advertisements for factory-made foods, it represents another theme in American food imagination, nostalgia.

The nineteenth century's premier melted cheese dish was no doubt Welsh rarebit or rabbit-the two names are used just as often and interchangeably. This familiar cheese sauce made with ale or milk and mustard came in numerous varieties and appeared restaurants featuring ale and wines. In 1837 New York's Pickwickian Club and The Grotto, ('104 Cedar Street, Edward Riley fitting up rooms where he will have Ales, wines, Welsh Rarebits in their season'¹⁹) were but two of many serving what was considered to be a British dish. Restaurants from the top of the social scale to the lowest served the dish. Rarebits then moved into polite society when the chafing dish craze gripped American culinary imaginations later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Beginning among the upper classes chafing dish cookery and its accompanying cookware moved down the social

chain into middling class American homes. Chafing dish cookbooks appeared in large numbers, and general cookbooks all had recipes including Welsh rarebit. The chafing dish was a perfect vessel for melting cheeses in sauces and numerous variations were created, lobster, crab, oysters, mushrooms, Mexican, Golden Buck (with an egg in it), tomato juice, bean (using mashed cooked beans) among them. In 1898 The Natural Food Company (later Nabisco) promoted its shredded wheat as the base for many varieties of rarebits. So popular was rarebit that a well-known snack food was created to replicate it. Cheese-It, now one hundred years old, was described by its creator Green & Green of Dayton, Ohio as 'baked rarebit'. It is still made much the same way with the preferred cheddar cheese and a thin crispy biscuit.²⁰ Here is an example of food that is democratized in an American way – cheap, nostalgic, uniform, and made in a factory.

But, lust for cheese can lead people astray for gluttony is deadly sin. Americans are still a puritanical (hypocritically so) people who like just deserts meted out at the end of stories. Popular medical knowledge in the period held that rarebit was a hard to digest dish, indeed, dangerous to one's health and sanity. A correspondent to 26 October 1887 edition of *The Evening World* remarked in response to a question about how to make good Welsh rarebit: 'Editor of Evening World! Tell Mrs. R. that, for mercy's sake. If she loves her husband and has any regard for his friends, not to cook any rarebits at all. They nearly killed me. A Dyspeptic Brooklyn.'²¹ In 1904 cartoonist Winsor McCay created a comic strip for the New York newspaper, *The Evening Telegram*, called *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*. In each strip a protagonist overindulges in eating Welsh rarebit and then after going to bed with indigestion has fantastical dreams, usually nightmares with a moral at the end. McCay was a genius artist who has influenced generations of illustrators up to the present day (Japan's great Studio Ghibli for one) especially with his brilliant *Little Nemo in Slumberland*.²² He was also a pioneer animator, *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1913) his most famous character. McCay animated one of his rarebit-themed strips in 1921, perhaps the first monster-eats-a city-genre films: Winsor McCay's *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend – The Pet*. Another early film based on *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* is an early live action piece made by Edwin S. Porter for the Edison Company in 1906. It has amazing special effects something like Georges Méliès's but based on McCay's strip. The disgusting eating scene in the 1906 film rivals any ever filmed since. McCay never did say why he chose Welsh rarebit as the subject of his moralizing jokes, but dyspepsia was a common trope and maybe he had suffered a bout of it from the infamous dish. Sloppy, gooey foods eaten quickly and in excess have always been thought to be funny the world over for varieties of reasons that range from bad manners to unconsciously rude behaviour to satire on supposedly elite food.

Something happened to rarebits during twentieth century: they mostly disappeared in America, though they did remain in their place of origin, Britain. Not that soft cheese went away, only this vehicle for serving it. Soft and melted cheeses hold sway over the American

culinary imagination. The texture of warm, silky cheese running down the gullet is embedded in all Americans. It is comfort food, not much to think about, just quick and easy to eat. The reasons for rarebit replacements are changes in cooking fashions that made chafing dishes only vessels for keeping party foods warm, the rise of processed cheeses and the popularity of pizza. The latter stories are beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that historians use James L. Kraft as the model for making processed cheese the America's standard. His pasteurization and emulsifying techniques made cheddar cheeses – inferior ones – shelf stable.²³ His company bought the Velveeta company (the stuff invented in 1918) in 1927 and marketed it as a health food, liquid gold, the advertising said.²⁴ Melted cheese sandwiches as in the advertisement mentioned above are unthinkable without Kraft, or other company's knockoffs, invented in 1956. Cheez-Whiz (1952) is further development of processed cheese, indeed with virtually no cheese in it. It was marketed in the UK as a quick way to make Welsh rarebit and then, like rarebit, migrated to America the next year. Pizza, once popularized in the 1950s, drove the demand for melted cheese since unlike Neapolitan pizza American ones are loaded with it. The American culinary theory is more is always better.²⁵ Today America's most consumed cheese is not cheddar but mozzarella. These cheeses are triumphs of industrialized food processing just as milk and the animals from which it comes are the end product of a long history of American technical prowess.

268

The arc of Americans' idea of cheese through time is this. The earliest cheeses were home bound, made by farm women for family consumption and local markets. It then entered the wider American marketplace with the rise of factories. Early cheeses were communal in the sense that makers in each town such as Cheshire, Massachusetts or Little Falls near Herkimer, New York took pride in the local products and linked them to patriotic ideas. Cheese preparations always had class built into them as seen in the rise of chafing dish cookery late in the nineteenth century. Welsh rarebit/rabbit was one dish common in genteel cookery, but it also reverted to its gastrically raucous public dining roots. As industrialized food production rose interrelated with urban-centred living so did consumer society. Cheese became a commodity, democratized because it was cheap, easy to use and ubiquitous. No longer thought of as a community-based food but now marketed to individuals and families processed cheese represents a different idea of America. It is one where seventy percent of the economy is driven by consumer demand and advertising emphasizes individuality over community. Grab a slice or two of packaged cheese, place it between slices of white bread and fry it in a non-stick pan until thoroughly melted. Television food advertising tells us this. It is replete with artfully made images, often nostalgic of gooey cheese, pizza for instance, showing long strands of melted cheese, melted cheese food drenching tortilla chip (corporate versions of nachos), vegetables...well, anything.

Finally, if there is a credo of American cuisine it is this: there is no food that cannot be improved but with the addition of cheese...and not a little bit of it, either.

Notes

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Big Cheese: Cheese and American Imagination

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