

BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES

Traveling with Jewish Taste

Jews for Cheeses!

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



It's almost Shavuot, so that means it's time to start thinking of dairy foods to help us celebrate the spring festival. And what better way to include dairy on the holiday table than with cheese?

Ancient legend has it that an Arab merchant living some 4,000 years ago put his supply of milk into a pouch made from a sheep's stomach as he set out on a journey across the desert. The rennet in the lining of the pouch, combined with the heat of the sun and the bouncing of the camel onto which the bag was tied, caused the milk to separate into curds and whey. After his long day of traveling, he was hungry and thirsty, and he was delighted to find that the whey satisfied his thirst, and the delicious curd – what we call cheese – satisfied his hunger.

The ancient land of Israel was so active in cheese making that the 1st century CE historian Josephus reported that the ravine separating Mount Moriah from Mount Zion in Jerusalem was called the "Valley of the Cheese Makers." The western wall of the Temple Mount rose up from the bottom of this valley.

Unfortunately, cheese culture in the holy city, or in Israel in general, didn't quite live up to the sobriquet for many years. In fact, when I lived in Jerusalem, the corner *makolet* sold "yellow cheese" and "white cheese." Aside from the totally uninspired names, those cheeses didn't have much flavor. There were only a handful of other varieties available, including Bulgurit, a feta-like cheese, and of course, labneh, a staple on every mezza platter. Tzefatit, a salty sheep's milk cheese, was the only one that could lay claim to historical authenticity, having been produced in the ancient northern city of Tzefat for centuries.

Luckily for us, the Valley has evolved into the Nation of the Cheeses, as small boutique dairies have revitalized the industry with quality cheeses made from cow, goat, and sheep's milk.

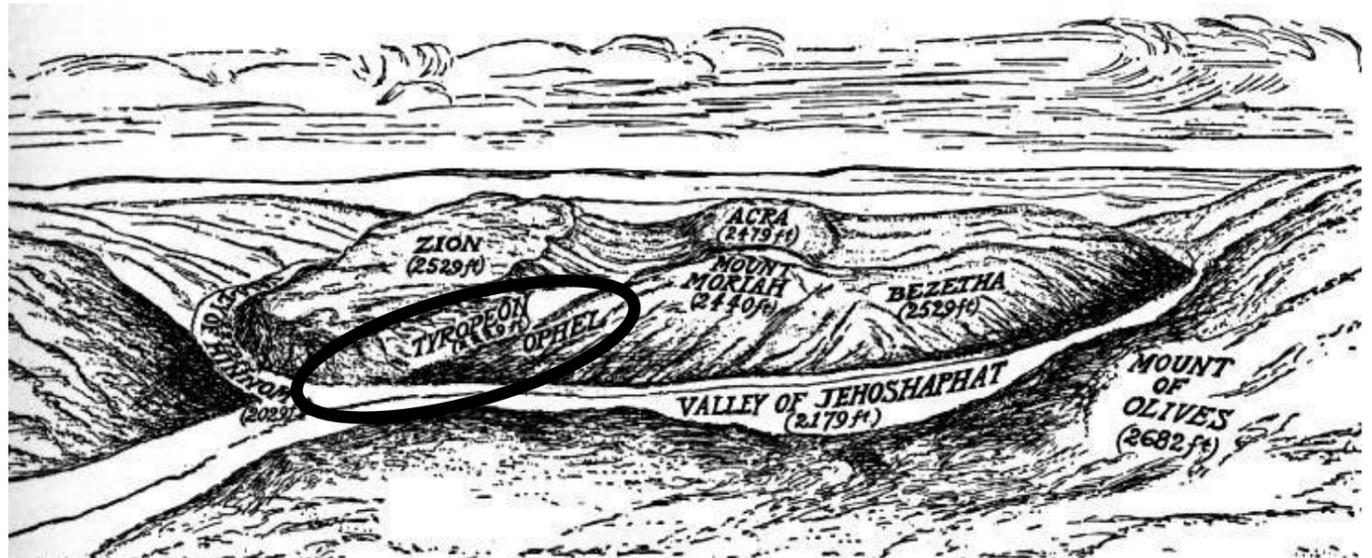
In fact, cheese has become so much a part of the Israeli diet that it was the subject of the great Cottage Cheese Boycott, a consumer-led protest against the continuing rise of food prices in the country. The boycott had its genesis in a governmental decision made in 2008. Because one particular dairy cooperative, Tnuva, controls more than 70% of the market, it is considered by Israeli law to be a monopoly. Therefore, the Antitrust Authority has the power to regulate prices to prevent price gouging. However, working on the theory that deregulation would foster competition and thereby reduce prices, the then finance minister, Avraham Hirschson, decided that the government should stop regulating the price of cottage cheese. Unfortunately, just the opposite happened, and prices increased

almost 50%. Hence, the boycott.

Organizers urged people to stop buying cottage cheese. Within a short time, 100,000 users signed onto the protest on Facebook. As the protest gained followers, it sparked a public debate on the high cost of living in Israel, and led ultimately to a drop in price.

Long fascinated by the process of cheese making, I have actually made goat cheese and labneh in my own kitchen (both super easy to do). But the really interesting stuff requires a degree in food science. Cheese making is not a simpleton's game; the bookshelves in a professional cheese maker's office are lined with tomes on chemistry, microbiology, and food science. The interested amateur can order everything needed to embark on cheese making – from cultures to molds to salts – online.

Now we get to the subject of cheese and kashrut. Not surprisingly, there is a great deal of debate/confusion over what makes a cheese kosher. Some rabbis say that if the source of the rennet is a kosher species of animal and ritually slaughtered under rabbinic supervision, that rennet may be used to turn milk into cheese. The fact that the rennet comes from an animal somehow doesn't make it meat, which of course could not be combined with dairy. Other rabbis believe that



The location of the Tyropeon Valley (i.e., "Valley of the Cheese Makers") in Jerusalem from a historical topographical map. The valley is now filled in with debris.

animal-derived rennet has been so chemically altered that it no longer resembles the cow from which it came. Therefore, it is not considered a meat product, but it still requires a *heksher*. My own rabbi, citing the Conservative movement's ruling, asserts that all domestic cheeses are kosher.

Any way you slice it, cheese is a really delicious way to simultaneously celebrate Shavuot and get your calcium.



"Did he say, 'Blessed are the cheese-makers?'"

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She is currently at work on a food history/cookbook, tracing the paths that some of our favorite foods have taken from their origins to appear on dinner plates and in cultural rites and artifacts around the world. She invites readers to read her blog at carolgoodmankaufman.com and to follow her on Twitter @goodmankaufman.

Bourekas

Bourekas, baked and filled pastries, are a cross between the Turkish borek and the empanada that Sephardic immigrants brought with them to Turkey when they fled the Spanish Inquisition. Now one of Israel's quintessential street foods, bourekas can be eaten out-of-hand while strolling down Ben Yehuda or Dizengoff, or as a meal served with salad, olives, and sour cream or plain yogurt.



Bourekas

Ingredients:

2 eggs	1 pinch black pepper
1 c. frozen spinach, drained well	1 (17.5 ounce) package frozen puff pastry, thawed to room temperature
1 c. crumbled feta cheese	2 t. water
1 t. dried parsley	2 T. sesame seeds
1 pinch garlic powder	
1 pinch onion powder	
1 pinch salt	

Directions

- Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Coat cookie sheet with vegetable spray.
- Beat 1 egg in a bowl, and mix in the cheese. Season with parsley, garlic powder, onion powder, salt, and pepper.
- On a lightly floured surface, cut each sheet of puff pastry into 6 equal squares to give 12 squares in total. Beat the remaining egg with water in small bowl. Brush edges of each square lightly with egg wash. Place a heaping tablespoon of the spinach/cheese mixture in the center of each square. Fold pastry over the filling, and seal edges with a fork. Transfer to the prepared baking sheet, brush with remaining egg wash and sprinkle with sesame seeds.
- Bake in the oven 30 minutes, or until golden brown. Serve immediately.

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