

Before empires and royalty, before pottery and writing, before metal tools and weapons – there was cheese. As early as 8000 BCE, the earliest Neolithic farmers living in the Fertile Crescent began a legacy of cheesemaking almost as old as civilization itself. The rise of agriculture led to domesticated sheep and goats, which ancient farmers harvested for milk. But when left in warm conditions for several hours, that fresh milk began to sour. Its lactic acids caused proteins to coagulate, binding into soft lumps. Upon discovering this strange transformation, the farmers drained the remaining liquid – later named whey – and found the yellowish globs would be eaten fresh as a soft, spreadable meal. These clumps, or curds, became the building blocks of cheese, which would eventually be aged, dressed, ripened, and whizzed into a diverse cornucopia of dairy delights. The discovery of cheese gave Neolithic people an enormous survival advantage. Milk was rich with essential proteins, fats, and minerals. But it also contained high quantities of lactose – a sugar which is difficult to digest for many ancient and modern stomachs. Cheese, however, could provide all of milk's advantages with much less lactose. And since it could be preserved and stockpiled, these essential nutrients could be eaten throughout scarce famines and long winters. Some 7th millennium BCE pottery fragments found in Turkey still contain tell-tale residues of the cheese and butter they held. By the end of the Bronze Age, cheese was a standard commodity in maritime trade throughout the eastern Mediterranean. In the densely populated city-states of Mesopotamia, cheese became a staple of culinary and religious life. Some of the earliest known writing includes administrative records of cheese quotas, listing a variety of cheeses for different rituals and populations across Mesopotamia. Records from nearby civilizations in Turkey also reference rennet. This animal by-product, produced in the stomachs of certain mammals, can accelerate and control coagulation. Eventually this sophisticated cheesemaking tool spread around the globe, giving way to a wide variety of new, harder cheeses. And though some conservative food cultures rejected the dairy delicacy, many more embraced cheeses, and quickly added their own local flavours. Nomadic Mongolians used yaks' milk to create hard, sundried wedges of Borsage. Egyptians enjoyed goats' milk cottage cheese, straining the whey with reed mats. In East Asia, milk was coagulated with a variety of food acids, such as lemon juice, vinegar, or yogurt and then hung to dry into loaves of paneer. This soft cheese could be added to curries and sauces, or simply fried as a quick vegetarian dish. The Greeks produced bricks of salty brined feta cheese, alongside a harder variety similar to today's pecorino Romano. This grating cheese was produced in Sicily and used in dishes all across the Mediterranean. Under Roman rule, "dry cheese" or "caseus," became an essential ration for the nearly 500,000 soldiers guarding the vast borders of the Roman Empire. And when the Western Roman Empire collapsed, cheesemaking continued to evolve in the manors that dotted the medieval European countryside. In the hundreds of Benedictine monasteries scattered across Europe, medieval monks experimented endlessly with different types of milk, cheesemaking practices, and aging processes that led to many of today's popular cheeses. Parmesan, Roquefort, Munster and several Swiss types were all refined and perfected by these cheesemaking clergymen. In the Alps, Swiss cheesemaking was particularly successful – producing a myriad of cow's milk cheeses. By the end of the 14th century, Alpine cheese from the Gruyere region of Switzerland had become so

profitable that a neighbouring state invaded the Gruyere highlands to take control of the growing cheese trade. Cheese remained popular through the Renaissance, and the Industrial Revolution took production out of the monastery and not machinery. Today, the world produces roughly 22 billion kilograms of cheese a year, shipped and consumed around the globe. But 10,000 years after its invention, local farms are still following in the footsteps of their eolithic ancestors, hand crafting one of humanity's oldest and favourite foods. English