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Artisanal

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How to cite:

Blundel, Richard (2016). Artisanal. In: Donnelly, Catherine ed. The Oxford Companion to Cheese. Oxford Companions. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 42–44.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-oxford-companion-to-cheese-9780199330881?prevSortField=1&sortField=8&start>

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The Oxford Companion to Cheese

New York: Oxford University Press

Publication date: 1st October 2016

ISBN: 978-0-19933088-1

<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/category/academic/series/general/oc.do>

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This is a pre-publication draft of the entry Production (Cheesemaking Process) – ‘Artisanal’, authored by Richard K. Blundel. Further details of this volume will be made available on the Oxford University Press website.

Artisanal, a term used to describe production systems that are relatively small-scale and where hand-working and the skilled, intuitive judgment of the maker takes precedence over mechanized and automated methods. Common synonyms include: ‘craft’, ‘handmade’, and ‘traditional’. Artisanal cheese is often made on-farm with milk from the farmer’s own herd (in North America, these varieties are usually known as farmstead cheese). [See FARMSTEAD CHEESE]. However, there are also many independent cheesemakers, including a growing number of urban micro-dairies based in the heart of major cities such as London and New York. While it is relatively easy to distinguish modern artisanal cheesemakers from their high-volume industrial counterparts, there is still scope for ambiguity and confusion. For example, specialty cheese, a term that is sometimes applied to artisanal products, is also used to describe exotic or novel varieties produced at an industrial scale. [See SPECIALTY CHEESE]. Artisanal cheeses tend to display greater variability in comparison with their factory-produced counterparts and are characterized by distinctive organoleptic properties of taste, smell and texture. While industrial-scale cheesemakers prioritize consistency by standardizing key ingredients, artisanal makers accommodate and control for seasonal and other naturally occurring variations and nuances in more sensitive and intuitive ways. Their working practices are based on long-established bodies of knowledge, practical skills and associated values, which can be applied to every stage, from the milking of livestock through to maturation and ripening. [See MATURATION AND RIPENING]. In Europe, artisanal cheeses are generally associated with a particular *terroir* or locality, and draw on its unique combination of environmental variables (e.g. micro-climate, soil type, flora, fauna, mold, bacteria) and cultural heritage. [See TERROIR]. Over the centuries, many of the traditional European cheese varieties have been relocated, and to some degree reinvented, in other parts of the world. The rise of ‘new world’ artisanal cheesemaking represents a further refinement of this process that is, like its wine industry counterpart, generating novel insights and approaches. The individual cheesemaker faces a similar set of challenges, irrespective of location. As recent anthropological studies suggest, it is precisely her capacity to think ‘with’ and ‘through’ these complex ecologies that gives artisanal cheeses their distinctive qualities.

In the pre-industrial era, cheese was mainly produced on-farm and much of it would have been of indifferent quality. Modern artisanal cheesemaking emerged largely as a reaction to the standardization imposed by industrialization. [See INDUSTRIALIZATION]. The movement has enrolled a varied cast of actors and has played itself out from the mid-19th century up to the present day: gastronomes and social commentators have railed against the loss of regional varieties and expressed their dissatisfaction when confronted by poor quality cheese; small farmers and development organizations have mounted vociferous and often effective campaigns to preserve the livelihoods of rural communities in the face of industrial competition; cheesemaking enthusiasts including Juliet Harbutt, Randolph Hodgson and Jean-Claude Le Jaouen, Mary Keehn and Patrick Rance, have been instrumental in promoting and developing new markets; trade organizations such as the Specialist Cheesemakers' Association (UK) and the Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese (USA) have provided makers with valuable information and technical support. [See HODGSON, RANDOLPH, LE JAOUEN, JEAN-CLAUDE, RANCE, PATRICK; and SPECIALIST CHEESEMAKERS' ASSOCIATION]. Government policies have also played an important, yet more ambivalent role. Some initiatives, such as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC), have had a largely (though not entirely) beneficial impact on artisanal practice. [See DESIGNATION OF ORIGIN (DO) and APPELLATION D'ORIGINE CONTROLEE (AOC)]. Other interventions, including those designed to accelerate agricultural modernization and industry concentration, have tended to undermine smaller farm-based cheesemakers. Regulatory restrictions placed on raw milk cheeses have proved particularly challenging for artisanal makers as far afield as Scotland, where Humphrey Errington fought successfully for his Lanark Blue sheep's milk cheese, and Brazil, where small farmers in the Campos de Cima da Serra region are defending an unpasteurized Serrano Cheese that has been produced there for more than 200 years. [See RAW MILK CHEESES].

By the mid-twentieth century, the prospects for artisanal cheesemaking was looking fairly bleak – particularly in countries like Britain and the United States, where the political consensus around 'big business' was at its height. However, in retrospect, this period marked a turning-point for smaller-scale producers as a new generation of artisans has made its presence felt – a trend that has been replicated in many industrialized countries. These cheesemakers are more

self-consciously 'artisanal' than their predecessors. They study traditional practices and seek inspiration from the past, while also making selective use of modern production technologies. There is also a growing interest in the ways that science – and microbiology in particular – can be applied to artisanal production processes in order to address food quality issues. Though many are closely connected to their local community, today's artisans also form part of a much larger community of practice that can interact via the Internet and modern transportation systems. Similarly, while many small producers are actively focusing their attention on local food markets, artisanal cheeses often travel much farther afield courtesy of global food retail and food service supply chains, as well as 'alternative' channels such online delicatessens.

There has been a rapid growth in artisanal cheesemaking in many parts of the world. For example, when the American Cheese Society awards began in 1985, there were just 89 entries from 30 cheesemakers; by 2014, the event was attracting 1,685 entries and the number of makers had increased to 289 [See AMERICAN CHEESE SOCIETY]. Despite this, artisanal cheese remains a niche product. Modern artisanal production processes are also something of a hybrid creation, subject to powerful competitive and regulatory pressures of a food industry that has become dominated by transnational corporations. However, there is good cause to celebrate the vision of both established and 'new generation' artisanal cheesemakers who continue to thrive in a highly industrialized global food system. Working in tandem with similarly-minded wholesalers, retailers and restaurateurs, they are championing more sustainable food production methods and contributing to broader changes in the way we think about food.

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