Getting to Know the Family

When someone utters the word “cheese” many things and experiences can come to mind. Like the oozy melty grilled cheese I had for lunch or the hard pungent gratings on my pasta that someone told me was aged 24 months, that makes it taste so good. Maybe for you it brings to mind the small white disc that was served on the cheese board at your daughter’s wedding that tasted of earth and mushrooms. To some of us it means ubiquitous orange blocks or individually wrapped slices. Many times I’ve heard stories in my family or someone else’s of good old Uncle Bob (let’s call him that to protect his identity). Now Uncle Bob would take the notion from time to time to come home with one of those stinky cheeses. When he would open that thing up to begin his gastronomic indulgence it would darn near pollute the whole house. At which time Aunt Grace would uncharacteristically and ungracefully banish him from the house while he “insists on eating that thing”. Uncle Bob would then continue to enjoy his treasure in the garage or in the barn or sometimes on the back porch “if the wind was a blowin’ right “ but most often on a sandwich with equally aromatic sliced onions. Now if you are feeling a little confused about this subject you are not alone. I’ve been told that the French have over 3000 types of cheeses. All that variety in a country smaller than the state of Texas. How do we sort through all this dizzying diversity? We have to get to know the family. Don’t worry this won’t be as scary as getting to know your girlfriend’s family. This cheesemaker and a few others sort cheeses into 6 basic families generally sharing commonalities in how they are made or ripened. Like our human families, the cheeses in each family have a lot in common but at the same time can be very different. While all the cheese families share a common ancestor. Milk. The family distinctions may help us find new cheeses to enjoy by linking the known with the unknown. They also give us language when we want to describe a cheese we’ve recently discovered. When you know the family it belongs to you can say with complete confidence: “It’s like….” as you rattle off names of known cheeses in the same family. Here are the 6 basic families of cheese:

1. Fresh Cheeses
2. Soft Ripened or Bloomy Rinds
3. Washed Rinds or Smear Ripened
4. Blue Cheese
5. Pasta Filata or Stretched Curd Cheeses
6. Hard Cheese

Fresh cheeses are just that. Fresh. They are seldom ripened because they are designed to be consumed immediately. Usually they have very little form like ricotta or cottage cheese. Sometimes they are acidic and tangy like Chevre (goat cheese) or sweet and milky like ricotta. Those changes are created by either an acid or heat coagulation step by the cheesemaker. Some cheeses can live in two families at the same time. Cheddar, for example, sold fresh as cheese curds and the hard cheese we all know. Mozzarella is frequently consumed without ripening. But because of the unique way its curd is stretched it belongs with another family. More on that in a bit.

Soft Ripened cheeses are known by the characteristic white mold that grows on their rinds. *Penicillium candidum.* The cheesemaker encourages this mold to “bloom” on the outside surface of the cheese. Which is why the nickname Bloomy Rinds. The mold ripens the paste from the outside in changing the interior from acidic and brittle to neutral, creamy and supple. It also creates all those earthy mushroomy notes fans of Brie and Camembert love so much.

Washed Rinds are the family where we find the stinkers. They are known by their strong aroma. Think gym socks. And their usually mild flavor (there are some exceptions), pinkish, orange colored rind, and smooth sometimes almost spreadable texture. The cheesemaker washes the rinds of this family with a weak salt brine or sometimes an alcoholic beverage so a “smear” will develop on the outside surface. I think you see where the nickname comes from now. The smear consists of a complex mix of yeasts, molds and bacterias. This cascading ecosystem ultimately becomes dominated by a bacteria called *B. linens.* This microbe is tasked with ripening of cheeses like Epoisses, Taleggio, and Grayson by Virginia cheesemakers at Meadow Creek Dairy.

Next is Blue Cheese. These cheeses are recognized by their pockets of blue-green mold *Penicillium Roqueforti,* growing throughout their interior. First the cheesemaker must make the cheese in such a way that it develops open places in the body for the mold to grow. This is referred to as an open texture. In order for Roquefort and Stilton to become the cheeses we know and love, the cheesemaker has to get oxygen into the open places he left inside the cheese. The blue mold, that does the work of ripening this family, needs oxygen to thrive so the cheesemaker perforates the cheese full of holes. Air brings the necessities of life, creating the pungent, spicy flavors and aromas that we associate with blue cheese.

A long time ago the Italian people figured out that if they heated curds of cheese it wouldn’t sour as quickly and would therefore keep longer. They also made another amazing discovery. These heated curds could be stretched and formed into shapes easily with the added benefit of the resulting silky texture. This is the Pasta Filata or Stretched Curd Family. Sometimes in the case Mozzarella these cheeses are eaten fresh. Savored on bread with recently picked tomatoes and basil and a little drizzle of olive oil. Mozzarella, in its most popular form can be made with a drier texture and melted on a pizza. Cheeses in this family can be aged for long periods of time too. Provolone is one example. Traditional people used this attribute as a food storage and preservation technique. Heated and stretched Provolone curds could be formed into 200 lb logs, swaddled with rope and hung from the ceiling. Safe from vermin and with the advantage of good air circulation these cheeses could be held almost indefinitely. With the passage of time these cheeses became memorable for their intense flavor.

The last family is also the broadest. Hard Cheeses. The most beloved cheeses of the world are linked to this family. Cheddar, Gouda, Parmesan, and swiss cheeses just to single out a few. Although there are many different techniques used to make the cheeses in this family, they all share the fact that their curds are cooked and pressed. This cooking and pressing of the curds is done to expel moisture from the final body of the cheese. Lower moisture means the cheese can stored for an extended period of time as it slowly develops more flavor. From flaky, tangy Cheddars to sweet and nutty swiss styles there’s a full range of flavor and texture to admire in this family.
Hopefully next time you are standing at the cheese counter you will be inspired to explore an unfamiliar family or include a member from each family on your next cheese plate.

As with cheese and likewise with the human family, all this diversity keeps life interesting.

Enjoy!