

Make an Ancient Treasure

Use this simple recipe to create feta in your own kitchen

WRITTEN BY **ALEXIS ADAMS**

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **MARK FERRI**

In the *Odyssey*, one of two major ancient Greek poems attributed to Homer, the cyclops Polyphemus, “whose pails and bowls for milking, all solidly made, were swimming with whey,” is described as a shepherd and a cheesemaker, albeit a terrifying one. Today in Greece it is commonly (if not officially) held that Polyphemus was making feta, the cheese that put Greece on the map—and got Odysseus and his crew into a boatload of trouble when they tried to make off with armloads of the stuff.

Today feta is still a treasured cheese, by far the most popular in Greece. In taverns across the country, it is often sprinkled with dried oregano, drizzled with olive oil, and served as an appetizer with ouzo or retsina. It tops the ubiquitous “Greek salad” made with tomatoes, cucumbers, bell peppers, and olives, and it is crumbled into savory pies and melted into stews and sauces.

Feta is fried or grilled and served as a side dish, and it is blended with olive oil to create dips. Put simply, in Greece feta cheese is everywhere.

In 2002, feta received Protected Designation of Origin status in the European Union, meaning that, where EU rulings apply, cheese can bear the name “feta” only if it is made with sheep’s milk or a mixture of sheep’s milk and up to 30 percent goat’s milk using traditional methods in specific regions of Greece. The good news for home cheesemakers is that we can replicate feta using a variety of milk types no matter where we make our cheese.

Because my partner and I live in both Greece and the United States, we decided to visit two cheesemakers, one in each country, to see how they craft the cheese they call “feta.” Our research took us to two farms in two very different parts of the world: one near a remote mountain village on the south-eastern Peloponnese Peninsula, the other in the foothills of the Beartooth Mountains in Montana. Despite the distance that separated them, on each farm we saw strikingly similar methods used to make the cheese.

In Greece the cheesemaker we visited, Maria, used her sense of touch to test the temperature of the milk, while in Montana Margaret used a dairy thermometer. Maria heated her goat’s milk on a fire she lit on the ground outside her house; Margaret used the stove inside her kitchen. Because the temperature of the air in Greece in summer is warm and balmy, Maria did nothing to insulate the milk as it rested. Margaret, in cool, autumnal Montana, wrapped a blanket around the pot she was using to stabilize the milk’s temperature as it rested. Perhaps most notably, Maria used rennet from the stomach of a suckling goat; Margaret used commercial rennet. Apart from those differences, the cheesemakers’ approaches—and their openhearted generosity as they shared their passion for making cheese—were the same. I only wish I could introduce the one to the other.

Alexis Adams is a writer with a passion for the traditional foods of Greece. She blogs at theshepherdandtheolivetree.com, and her work has appeared in The Boston Globe, The Art of Eating, AFAR, and other publications

HOMEMADE FETA

INGREDIENTS:

2 gallons raw or pasteurized whole goat’s, sheep’s, or cow’s milk, or a combination

$\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon calcium chloride diluted in $\frac{1}{4}$ cup room-temperature spring water (for commercial milk only—see note at end of recipe)

Mesophilic culture (choose one):

- 1 packet of feta cheese starter culture
- 1 packet of direct-set mesophilic starter culture
- 1 tablespoon of yogurt, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon liquid rennet, or $\frac{1}{2}$ rennet tablet

diluted in $\frac{1}{4}$ cup room-temperature spring water
Cheese salt or other coarse, noniodized salt

EQUIPMENT:

Large, nonreactive pot
Dairy thermometer
Long-handled wooden spoon
Curd knife or knife with long blade
Colander
Clean tea towel, butter muslin, or cheesecloth



1 Over a medium flame, heat the milk in a stainless steel (or other nonreactive) pot to 86°F. Stir frequently. If using calcium chloride, add the diluted calcium chloride to the milk as the milk begins to warm.

2 Add the culture to the milk, and stir thoroughly but gently, with minimal disturbance of the surface of the milk. Allow the milk to sit at room temperature, undisturbed, for 1 hour. After the milk has rested for 1 hour, pour the diluted rennet mixture into the milk using an up-and-down motion with your spoon (not a stirring motion) to gently incorporate it.

3 Place a lid on the pot, and let the milk mixture sit undisturbed for at least 1 hour and up to 12 hours. Then check that the milk has gelled and that there is a “clean break” in the curd. You may do this by inserting a clean finger into the curd. If it “breaks” or splits when a finger is inserted, it is ready. If it is mushy and soft, it isn't.

4 Use a knife to cut the curd into a crosshatch of approximately ½-inch cubes. Allow the cut curd to rest for 10 minutes. After the curd has rested, gently stir it occasionally for the next 20 minutes. This helps the curd release additional whey and allows the curd to shrink and become somewhat retracted.

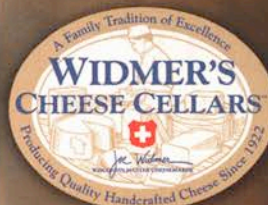
5 Line a colander with a tea towel, butter muslin, or several layers of cheesecloth. Place the colander in a sink, a bowl, or a bucket, and pour in the curds, allowing the whey to drain. Use your clean hands to gently press the whey from the curd. Once the whey has drained, tie the cloth in knots, and hang it over the sink, a bowl, or a bucket. Allow the curd to drain for at least 4 hours or overnight, until the whey ceases to drip. The longer the cheese hangs, the drier and denser it becomes.

6 At this point you can add salt and eat the feta fresh, or you can age it in a brine solution to make the flavor more pronounced. Don't do both, or the feta will be far too salty.

FRESH: Cut the feta into a crosshatch, and sprinkle with approximately 2 tablespoons of salt, stirring the cheese with your hands to be sure all the cubes are coated. Store in a glass container in the refrigerator.

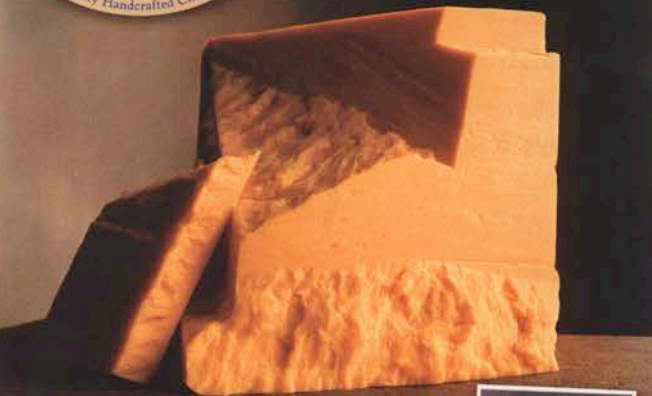
AGED: To make a brine solution, combine ½ cup noniodized salt with ½ gallon of spring water. Place the drained curds in the brine solution in a covered container, and allow it to age in the refrigerator for 3 to 4 weeks.

Note: If you are using commercial milk, calcium chloride will improve your chances of firm curd formation. Mesophilic cultures work better at typical room temperatures than do thermophilic cultures. **c**



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