

Is cheese America's favorite food?

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

What did the taco say to the tortilla chip? "It's nacho problem."

If that joke strikes you as really cheesy, you may be onto something: America is getting cheesier by the decade. Has cheese become one of our favorite national comfort foods?

Chicken and [potatoes](#) are still two of our staples, but there's no doubt

that we're eating more cheese than ever before, explains Kerry Kaylegian, dairy foods research & extension associate in Penn State's department of food science. A recent report on food availability and consumption from the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows that the amount of cheese manufactured in the U.S. has nearly tripled since 1970, with mozzarella and cheddar accounting for well over half of the cheese produced.

Kaylegian, who teaches several Penn State courses related to cheesemaking and has built a national reputation as a judge in cheese competitions, says the increasing popularity of Italian and Mexican cuisines is behind this trend.

While the U.S. leads the world in cheese production, with over 4,000 tons churned out annually, we don't make the short list of leading cheese exporters in terms of our products' economic value, nor do we top the list of cheese-eating countries per capita. Care to guess who makes the world's most valuable cheeses? The French, bien sûr! And the Greeks eat the most cheese per person, with feta served with almost every meal.

The difference between American cheese consumption and that of many European nations, says Kaylegian, can be summed up in two words: fast food. "We saw an increase in cheese consumption starting in the late '80s as fast food became more popular, including pizza, burgers, and tacos. However, now we are seeing a great increase in the number and variety of American-made artisanal cheeses as consumers are looking to have more of a connection with their food producers, want more local foods, and are looking for new flavors and textures in their foods."

Artisanal cheeses are those made by hand in smaller batches, using traditional craftsmanship handed down by skilled cheesemakers. "Artisanal doesn't necessarily mean a 'mom and pop' venture," clarifies Kaylegian. "Some larger, commercial manufacturers have started smaller

artisanal lines within their company. While some of these cheeses are based on traditional recipes, some are newly created by the cheesemaker. Regardless, the key here is that these cheeses are a craft, a labor of love. For instance, Carr Valley Cheese has seven or eight plants in Wisconsin, but makes 'artisanal' cheese that we can buy at Wegmans in State College, Pennsylvania."

Whether from a large or small artisanal company, the resulting cheeses, some of them aged and ripened, are considered to have more distinct and nuanced flavors than those made in large-scale processing, notes Kaylegian.

"I believe that making cheese involves both science and art," she explains. "It's amazing to me how many different products you can make from the same vat of milk, whether it's from a cow, goat, sheep, water buffalo, or a mixture. Many beginner cheesemakers learn from a recipe that says 'Do this step for this amount of time or until this pH or other target is reached.' It's important for them to have an understanding of the chemical and microbiological changes that occur during different steps in cheesemaking and aging. But they also learn by feel—and that's where the art comes into play."

Kaylegian advises large and small organizations in the industry, from the Mid-Atlantic Cheese Guild to the Penn State Cheese Club, and has judged the U.S. and World Cheese Championships. Recently, she was asked to chair the newly created PA Farm Show Cheese Competition.

Kaylegian says the competition was created, in part, to showcase the growing number of artisan cheesemakers in the Commonwealth ("almost 120 and counting!") and to introduce consumers to the variety of high quality, locally made cheeses they're producing. Though Pennsylvania is the fifth-largest dairy-producing state in the country, it doesn't rank among the country's leading cheese producers (Wisconsin and California

lead the pack)—although some are determined to change that picture.

One of Pennsylvania's proud cheesemaking facilities is right here at Penn State, says Kaylegian. The Penn State Berkey Creamery, celebrating its 150th anniversary this year, has been selling cheese to the regional market since 1932. Their highly popular cream cheese is "made the old-fashioned way," says Tom Palchak, longtime Creamery manager. "We press the cheese curds in cloth bags for four days before it's made into cream cheese." The Creamery's ricotta cheese is made fresh with whole milk once a week, and "we age our cheddar cheese for nine months before it's sold." It takes a lot of milk to make cheese, reminds Palchak. "To make 100 pounds of cheddar cheese, you need 1,100 pounds of milk!"

"The world of [cheese](#) offers an empty canvas for the creativity of the cheesemaker to meet the increasing demand for new flavors and textures," says Kaylegian. "Cheesemakers have an amazing palette of bacteria, yeasts, molds, and process variables to develop unique cheeses that complement their milk, the seasons, their geographical location, their values, and their passions."

When it comes to working hard to fill a growing demand for all things creamy, crumbly and gooey, there's nothing cheesy about that.

More information: The report is available online:
[www.ers.usda.gov/data-products ... on.aspx#.U5cLhNzobx7](http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/on.aspx#.U5cLhNzobx7)

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