

HISTORY OF GRUYERE CHEESE

Gruyere cheese has a history as rich and nutty as its flavor. This is a cheese so good and so fascinating that countries went to war over it! Yes, you read that right... war.

Gruyere's identity crisis

Is Gruyere a Swiss cheese? Is it French? Is it Austrian? It is hard to know. Medieval peasants developed this variety of cow's milk cheese as a means of survival. It was developed in the mountainous town of Gruyeres, Switzerland (making it Swiss Cheese by its geographic origins). However, since the town is so close to the Franco-Swiss border, there are many similar varieties of cheese, including Comte and Beaufort, that are made in France that still fall under the umbrella term of Gruyere. To complicate matters even further, there is yet another variety of Gruyere cheese that originates on the Austrian side of the Alps. The Austrian variety is similar to the Swiss variety in taste, color, and texture. Regardless of the country of origin, there is no doubting that this creamy, sweet, and nutty cheese is nothing short of spectacularly delicious. Cheese this good is worthy of a distinction all its own; perhaps it is best to simply refer to Gruyere as an Alpine cheese.

The Gruyere War

Few things bring about international disharmony more than cheese. This was one time when the Swiss absolutely did not remain neutral. Cheese makers in France and Switzerland went to battle for three years over which country made the best Gruyere cheese. Both countries claimed to have exclusive rights to the "Controlled Designation of Origin" for Gruyere. Since both varieties of cheese have distinctly different taste and appearance, this caused a problem. The French believed they deserved the distinction since their cheese was more widely recognized. The Swiss argued that the cheese is named after a region on their side of the border, and they had been making the cheese longer. The debate was so heated the European Union (EU) had to step in to mediate. The EU decided in favor of the Swiss since the origination of the cheese came from Switzerland.

The Gruyere timeline

Gruyere cheese has a long and storied history dating back many centuries. Here are but a few of the highlights of this storied cheese.

The 12th Century

The region of Gruyere has been producing their namesake cheese since the early twelfth century. The inhabitants of the area during that time found a way to produce the cheese from the excess milk that was produced by their cows. They were eventually able to sell their cheese to people in France and Italy.

The 17th Century

The seventeenth century brought with it official recognition of the regional name of the cheese. It was around this time that the exportation of the cheese began to take off. Since its popularity was beginning to grow, the concern for the protection of its origin also began to take root. But, not until the 1762 was the word that specified its origin entered into the dictionary of the Académie Française.

The 18th and 19th Centuries

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many people from the town of Fribourg, Switzerland immigrated to the Gruyere region. This movement extended the geographic production zone of Gruyere cheese to the neighboring villages of Vaud, Neuchatel, Jura, and some areas of France. However, there was no trade protection in place, and the cheese was often imitated. By the mid-nineteenth century, a campaign toward structuring trade and a fight for recognizing designation of origin was begun.

The 20th and 21st Centuries

Discussions regarding Gruyere cheese took place in Madrid in 1891, Paris in 1926, and Rome in 1930. The result of these meetings was an agreement to protect the denominations of goods and their origins. However, it was not until 2001 that Gruyere cheese was awarded “Controlled Designation of Origin” protection, which regulates the methods of locations of the production of the product in Switzerland. In 2011, it received the same designation for the entire continent of Europe.

Interesting miscellaneous facts about Gruyere cheese

A food with such a long and storied history must have some interesting facts about it, and Gruyere does not disappoint in that area. Here are a few interesting Gruyere tidbits to chew on:

The hole controversy

There is some international controversy regarding the presence of holes in Gruyere cheese. According to French agricultural law, French-style Gruyere cheese must have holes in it. However, in the Swiss varieties of Gruyere, no holes are present.

A cheesy faux pas

An old legend states that way back in AD 161 Emperor Antonin the Pious actually died of indigestion after eating too much Gruyere cheese. At least he went happy and satisfied!

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