



CHEESE MATTERS

The history of ash in cheesemaking dates back hundreds of years

BY KRIS LLOYD 

Farmhouse cheesemakers in France used it to help preserve cheeses that they produced in autumn through the winter months when milk supply was lean. The ash referred to as *sel noir* was generally mixed with salt then dusted on the surface of the cheese. As years passed cheesemakers realised that this coating improved the growth of surface moulds responsible for ripening cheeses.

First records of cheese ash were from burning grapevine clippings in the Loire Valley of France, famous for its production of fresh goat milk cheese. When the ash was used on these cheeses it was found to draw moisture from the wet surface. By doing this it produced a cheese that was better-preserved, easier to handle and reduced the incidence of rancidity. Along with these revelations was a greater acceptance of a rind that seemed less feral than what the *au naturelle* rinds offered. The greyish rind also had the ability to deter insects from settling on the cheese and given the dryer surface it tended to be much less habitable.

Generally you will find most ash-coated cheeses are fresh, lactic goat milk cheeses. Unlike other firmer cheese styles that have natural rinds, the delicate nature of fresh goat milk cheese does not lend itself to being rubbed, washed or over handled in any way. The high

moisture content also means that unwanted bacteria from over handling can easily occur. The ash protects the rind in so many ways and the application of dusting means that you barely need to touch the cheese.

As time went by, other variations of using ash in cheese appeared. One of the most famous is the French Morbier, a semi hard washed rind cow milk cheese. Morbier originally was produced for personal consumption by the cheesemakers of Franche - Comte is rather a different application of ash. Traditionally this cheese was made with milk from two milkings. Beginning with the evening milk, it was said there was not enough milk to make an entire cheese and the curds were left in their hoop overnight. To protect the curd from drying and insects the cheesemakers would smear ash on the top of the curd and leave it overnight. The following morning more curd was made to top up the hoop and complete the cheese. When cut, Morbier has a distinctive layer of ash through the middle and two different shades of curd due to the morning and evening milk fat content.

One story about the origin of this ash layer is that a cheese was accidentally dropped on the floor between milking landing in the ash from the fire used for heating the milk. I just



love these slightly vague stories!

The Italian cheese *Sottocennere* (meaning under the ash), which is buried in a grey ash inside large terra cotta clay pots and aged for months, is another traditional cheese made using ash, again, in a slightly different form.

At Woodside we have been producing Edith, a lactic goat milk cheese, for over 16 years. I can attest to some of the hypothesis made in much earlier times. Edith is a high moisture cheese, which is reliant on the ash to suck away moisture from the surface and allow the fluffy white mould to bloom. The same cheese made without the ash, not only behaves differently through its maturation cycle, the flavour is vastly different. The ash accelerates the rate at

which the cheese ripens and imparts a distinct savoury note to the rind. This is largely because the surface acidity is neutralised by the ash. This creates a more attractive surface for moulds such as *P. candidum* (found on Brie and Camembert) to develop more quickly. This also dries the surface, which keeps the rate of mould activity from becoming excessive resulting in unpalatable thick rinds.

Aesthetically ashed cheeses have appeal and the finish is widely used in modern cheesemaking. They add dimension, and given the mottled greyish rind, look interesting and classy on a cheese plate. The origins may remain a little mysterious, however, the use of ash in cheesemaking clearly lives on.



» Kris Lloyd is Woodside Cheese Wright's Head Cheesemaker