

The politics of cheese

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So back in the day, folks would store milk in cow stomachs. Seemed sensible, since a stomach makes a nice bag and all. Trouble was that the milk would come out sort of hard and crusty. Being desperate, they ate it anyway, and cheese was born.

Here in the modern day, we know that it's the mucous lining of the cow stomach, aka rennet, which does the magic. Although it no longer involves pouring milk into a stomach, your average store-bought cheese is made from rennet, listing it on the label with the enigmatic term 'enzymes', thus hiding the fact that cows were killed to make this cheese stuff. Most people—even the majority of vegetarians, I'd say—don't know this.

It's not true the world over. In the U.K., the Vegetarian Society (Paul McCartney, benefactor) labels those foods it deemed suitable for vegetarians, the way that much food would be labeled as kosher. Cheeses made from microbial rennet are OK and those made from cow rennet aren't, and at any Tesco's in the UK you can thus tell at a glance what's in your cheese. Trader Joe's lists the source of the rennet on all of the cheeses it sells (many are microbial) since the store is designed around an educated clientele. At the U.S. chain supermarkets there are one or two brands of cheese which make some mention of animal rennet or lack thereof down in the fine print.

But most of the world is blissfully ignorant of the mucosal underbelly of their cheese, and there are people complicit in perpetuating this ignorance that you'd expect wouldn't be, like the vegetarian cookbook over in my kitchen filled with cheese recipes. [A roommate points out that I'd missed a sentence at the end of the introduction that mentions it, though the recipes themselves disregard the issue.] Vegetarian Times has a similar attitude: last I checked they had a paragraph over in the FAQ somewhere, but unless you care to look for it, you'd think by reading the magazine that all cheeses are cow-free.

Of course, the cheese manufacturers of the world don't want you to know that they're putting mucous in their cheese, and so the ingredients list nothing but milk, salt, enzymes (coughs and looks away). Labeling laws OK this.

Identity and Stearic acid

The identity of 'vegetarian' is clearly a desirable one for many people, as I've learned from a million and one conversations with people where they eagerly

try to convince me that they're down with my veggie lifestyle. Maybe it's just the crowd I hang with. But taking as a premise that for many people the veg label is a good one, what do they have to do to maintain that label? This is not necessarily a question of what I or society believes, but what the person him/her/itself feels.

Beyond the whole issue of whether fishetarians count or not is the food additive issue. It's obvious that a slab of animal came from an animal, less obvious that a slab of Jell-o came from an animal, and you have to do your friggig research to know that lecithin is sometimes cut from an animal—how to draw the line? The first strategy to maintain a vegetarian identity is to do the research, become a food chemist, and read the labels on everything.

For those who want to take that route, the most interesting resource I've seen on food chemistry and restrictions is the Tofutti FAQ. Beside the requisite promotional copy are lengthy discussions about the difference between kosher and halal, what to feed an autistic child, the source of many a mysteriously named food additive, et cetera. Truly enthralling stuff. Tofutti products themselves use sugar filtered through animal bones, and is therefore debatably vegetarian.

The other option is to maintain a healthy ignorance. Clearly, this is the easier route to take, since learning requires active participation—and only leads to more work required to maintain the vegetarian or kosher or halal or whatever identity.

On the other side are the organizations that promote vegetarianism; I presume that their overall goal is to reduce the world's slaughter and consumption of animals all around. They have the choice of either promoting the low-grade vegetarianism which fails to oppose the slaughter of animals for a variety of additives and goops but lets people feel good about themselves and try out the vegetarian tag for size; or they can promote the full-information vegetarian, who knows to write the manufacturer of their favorite foodstuffs to demand that they find a non-animal source for their mono- and di-glycerides. As far as I can tell, U.S. advocacy organizations (and magazines and cook books and such) generally push for low-grade vegetarianism. It makes them less shrill and divisive, but also less informative. [The shrillest of them all, PETA, doesn't push much for the avoidance of food additives, since they're so busy worrying about the glitzy stuff. They too have a single page of fine print which mentions rennet down in the Rs. In their defense, they're pushing for vegan and therefore advocate avoiding cheese entirely.]

Anyway, I wonder what the U.S.A. would be like with stronger full-information advocacy. Living in the U.K. was easy. I was much more vegetarian than vegan at the time, and had no problem going out for pizza, since every place specified on its menu that it used veggie rennet. As a truly impoverished student, I subsisted on the all-you-can-eat pizza place, by fasting the day before, eating a huge quantity there (the trick is to dab off the grease with a napkin), and then shoving many a slice in a plastic shopping bag under the table for the next day. Three days' food for four quid, and it was all thanks to the Vegetarian Society which made it known that there are people like me who don't want cow stomachs in our food.

Meanwhile, here in the States, I've been avoiding pizza entirely, save for a few kosher places, which are always hilarious for their delightful array of the pimply and the orthodox. E.g., try Tel-Aviv Kosher Pizza, 6349 N California Ave, just south of Devon. In Chicago, the city with the big pizzas. Back when airlines served food, it was always a risk as to whether the vegetarian meal would actually be vegetarian. I've been served a vegetarian meal or two with Jell-o. As a full-information vegetarian, I just have no advocacy organization to do all this groundwork for me.

On the one hand, full-information advocacy makes it harder for people to self-identify as vegetarians, since there are more rules to be had, but it also makes it easier, since the airlines and pizza parlors know the rules and will make some effort to comply to them. Menus, ingredient labels, and every other source of food information reminds the reader that there are vegetarians who care about what they eat. Either as a cause or a result of more vehement advocacy, the U.K. has about twice as many vegetarians per capita than the U.S. (5-9% for the U.K. versus 2.5% for the U.S.A.).

The U.S. advocacy organizations have obviously thought this one through and have chosen the low-grade advocacy route, but sometimes I wish more would take the risk and tell people what's really in their food.

PS.: Ms. ZK of Canberra, Australia left this interesting comment:

There's an interesting eating meditation where you trace back the history of the energy in your food all the way back to sunlight as you're chewing. So if you're eating a piece of bread, you'd visualize the wheat growing up in the sun, sucking up water through its roots, getting harvested and threshed, being ground, being carried in a truck to the bakery, being kneaded and cooked by the baker, and making it to your stomach where the energy from the sun can be released again to nourish you. The implication is that this meditation should be a joyful process and that if any step in the production of your food disturbs you, you shouldn't be eating it. Of course with 90% of the stuff you'd buy in the grocery store, this exercise would be impossible - you just have no idea what crap goes in there. People in Europe do indeed seem much more bothered by this. Whenever I walked around the store with my French great-aunt, she used to scowl at all the packages and mutter darkly, "The only way you can trust your food is to grow it yourself."