Encyclopædia Iranica

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Published: December 15, 1991
Last Updated: June 28, 2015

CHEESE

CHEESE (Pers. *panīr*), with milk and other dairy products a significant part of the diet in Persia and Afghanistan (e.g., in the Qom area, where in 1348 Š./1969 they supplied between one-eighth and one-quarter of average daily calories, depending on season, type of residence, and economic status; Bazin, 1973). Cheese is far less important than yogurt (*māst*) and butter, either solid (*kara*, *maska*) or clarified (*rowḡan*), though its consumption has been steadily growing among urban dwellers for the past decades (author's own observations).

In Persia and Afghanistan both nomadic pastoralists and sedentary peasants make the same basic kinds of domestic cheese. The only clear distinction is between acid and rennet cheeses (for the technical basis of this distinction see Ramet), both made from mixed milks, except in Gīlān; there acid cheeses are usually prepared from cow's and buffalo's milk and rennet cheeses from ewe's and goat's milk, which has higher fat content (Pour-Fickoui and Bazin, p. 92). Recently, in response to growing demand, several European types of cheese have been introduced.

Acid cheeses. Traditional acid cheeses are by-products of the pan-Iranian technique of making butter from yogurt. The resulting buttermilk (Pers. *dūḡ*, Darī *dōḡ*, Pashto *šlōmbē*) is either drunk fresh or further treated to produce a kind of dry cheese through the action of lactic bacteria. In the latter instance it is boiled for about an hour until thick, then strained through cloth bags to separate the whey from the casein, or curds. The curds (called *šūre* in northwestern Persia, *čaka* in Afghanistan) may be eaten fresh, but they are

more often molded into small balls or sometimes flat squares and dried in the sun. The resulting very hard cheese (Pers. *kašk*, Darī *q(o)rūt* < Turk. *quru–* "to dry," Pashto *k(o)rūt*) keeps for years and must be crushed and dissolved in water before being eaten. A variant form of *kašk*, known as *šīrāz* in Luristan and *kama* in northeastern Persia, is obtained by putting the buttermilk in a skin and allowing the curds to precipitate (Black-Michaud, p. 45; Martin, p. 25).

The whey (Pers. *āb-e kašk*, *āb-e q(o)rūt*, Pashto *ḵarpīn*) is commonly fed to dogs, but it can be saved, reboiled, and drained; the solid brownish residue is used as a condiment (*tarf*, *panīr-tan* in central and southern Persia, *qara q(o)rūt* "black dried-buttermilk cheese" in Afghanistan and western Persia, *sarje* in Azarbaijan). *Tarf* producers are sometimes ridiculed by their neighbors (Barth, p. 8). Both *kašk* and *tarf* are boiled over wood fires, thus contributing to deforestation in many areas (see, e.g., Martin).

The Iranian tradition of making acid cheeses differs strongly from the Turkish tradition, in which whole yogurt is used instead of buttermilk, and the product, also called *q(o)rūt*, has a much higher fat content. The Turks are likely to have learned the Iranian techniques as they migrated to the west (Balland, 1987, p. 261; Figure 36a).

Within the Iranian tradition there is a further distinction between cheeses in which either the buttermilk or the curds are salted before boiling or drying and unsalted cheeses. The former are generally preferred as they keep longer.

Acid cheese from buttermilk is eaten mostly in winter and is generally popular throughout Persia and Afghanistan, with the exception of isolated groups (e.g., in the Hazārajāt; Ferdinand, 1959, p. 35). In Arabic and Persian medicine based on the Greek tradition it is considered the only "hot" sour-milk product (Penkala, p. 209). It is produced mainly by nomadic pastoralists, who commonly sell or barter their surplus production to itinerant traders from the towns. *Kašk* is thus the only dairy product sold by the Lurs, for example, though such trade is much scorned among the Baḵtīārī (Digard, p. 198).

Wide diffusion of mechanical churning devices (see churns) led to a serious decline in *kašk* production in Persia during the 1350s Š./1970s. The residual buttermilk is so much less rich than formerly that its only byproduct, a low-grade and uneconomic dried acid cheese called *q(o)rūt-morḡī* ("bird cheese"), is considered good enough only for poultry feed (Pâpoli-Yazdi, pp. 104, 111).

Rennet cheeses. Rennet cheeses are obtained through the clotting action of enzymes added to milk. Although in Persia (but not Afghanistan) the use of powdered rennet imported from Denmark or Bulgaria is increasing, the traditional method of manufacture, by drying or smoking the abomasum (*šīrdān*) from a dead suckling lamb, kid, or calf is still common. Most cheese makers pulverize the dried abomasum and store the resulting powder (*panīr-māya*, Pashto *māya*) in goatskin bags, earthen pots, or hollow pumpkins filled with water (Gīlān) or whey (Nūrestān), but eastern Pashtun nomads store it whole.

The details of making rennet cheese in Persia and Afghanistan have rarely been described. Information from the two best-documented areas, eastern Afghanistan (Ferdinand, 1969, pp. 151-60; Edelberg and Jones, pp. 85-91) and northwestern Persia (Pour-Fickoui and Bazin, pp. 93-94; Bazin et al., p. 33), suggests that there are many local variations; the cheeses are known by many local names, the study of which would be fruitful.

Maximum fat content is ensured by adding powdered rennet or the dried abomasum as a coagulant to lukewarm fresh milk. The resulting lumps of casein are removed and drained to obtain "raw" cheese (*panīr-e ḵām*, Pashto *poca*), which is molded in a variety of shapes. In Nūrestān a mixture of rennet and buttermilk is commonly added to the fresh milk to produce a raw cheese called *kīlā* (or *kīlīa*). For "boiled" cheese (*panīr-e poḵta*, Pashto *ḵaydak*, various local names, e.g., *lor* in northern Persia) whey or a mixture of whey (*āb-e panīr*) from the raw cheese-making process and milk or buttermilk is boiled until it solidifies; the fat content of this type is generally low. In Gīlān the whey from "boiled" cheese (*āb-e lor*) is boiled again; the solid residue (*šūre*) resembles *qara q(o)rūt* in appearance and taste and is used in the same way.

Rennet may also be added to yogurt, blurring the distinction between acid and rennet cheeses (for the Baḵtīārī, see Digard, p. 195).

Rennet cheeses are eaten fresh (*panīr-e qālebī*) or salted; they are occasionally stored in untanned goatskins (*panīr-e ḵīgī*) for later consumption. On the whole they are much less popular than acid cheeses, except in Nūrestān and Gīlān and among some nomadic tribes. The Nurestanis have developed rennet-cheese production "not only in quantity, but also in quality, to a standard unknown elsewhere in Afghanistan" (Edelberg and Jones, p. 90). In addition, a single nomadic Pashtun tribe, the Taraḵēl, which camps on the outskirts of Kabul in summer, has developed a unique commercial production of cheese

from whey (*ḵaydak*); it finds a ready market in Kabul (Balland, 1987, p. 263).

Industrial production and imports. Although cheese making is still largely a domestic activity, it has recently evolved into an industrial or semi-industrial specialty as well, especially in Persia. This process of industrialization is an aspect of the deep penetration of city-based trading capitalism into the countryside (for Tehran, see Hourcade, p. 48; for Rašt, see Pour-Fickoui and Bazin, p. 95); it is nowhere more important than in Azarbaijan, which has long been known for the high quality of its cheese, particularly that made in the village of Līqvān (*panīr-e Līqvān*) near Tabrīz. Since about 1334 Š./1955 several cheese merchants from Tehran, Tabrīz, and other towns in Azarbaijan have operated mobile two-man manufacturing units (*kārḵāna-ye panīr*) sheltered under large white-canvas tents, in order to take advantage of two complementary pastoral schedules among nomadic sheep raisers in the region. The Šāhsevan nomads' lambing season is between November and February, whereas that of the Kurdish seminomads is between February and April, as is usual in Persia and Afghanistan. The cheese tents are thus sent from Šāhsevan winter quarters in Dašt-e Moḡān (q.v.) on the Soviet border to Kurdish summer quarters in Kūh-e Sahend south of Tabrīz, in order to ensure a steady supply of milk throughout the year (Schweizer, p. 129). In 1344-45 Š./1965-66 there was one such unit processing the milk from each group of three or four winter camps among the Geyiklū tribe of the Šāhsevan, a total of approximately fifty households with 1,500-2,000 milking ewes. One trading company ran an average of four such "factories," one of which served as headquarters, to which a jeep brought the daily production from the three others and from which the cheese was shipped every few days by truck to Tabrīz and especially Tehran. Some Šāhsevan nomads have embarked on similar cheese trading on their own account (Tapper, pp. 56-57, 290 n. 6). The large and relatively reliable supplies thus obtained are sold in all major Persian towns, where *panīr-e tabrīzī* (or simply *tabrīzī*) has become popular among the upper and middle classes. Similar proto-industrial developments occurred during the 1350s Š./1970s in the western Alborz, where cheese makers mainly use ewe's and goat's milk; cow's milk is generally consumed by the breeders themselves (Bazin, 1980, II, p. 109).

Tabrīz has emerged as an important center for the dairy industry, with several factories producing various European types of cheese from milk collected in the immediate countryside. Best-known among them are *panīr-e pīzāʾī* ("pizza cheese," resembling Italian *grana padano*, or Parmesan) and *panīr-e holandī*

("Dutch cheese," a kind of Edam), which have gained a national market.

In Afghanistan during the 1350s Š./1970s the Ministry of Agriculture promoted a national cheese industry. A prototype for a mobile cheese-making unit was tested among the nomadic sheep breeders who winter in the Dašt-e Gabar, northwest of Bāḡlān, but it was never put into operation. The only successful venture has been the dairy factory opened in Bāḡlān in 1354 Š./1975. A state-owned establishment created and managed with Swiss technical assistance, it produced a tasty kind of French *tomme de Savoie*, which was sold almost entirely in Kabul under the name *panīr-e bāḡlān(ī)*, or more simply *bāḡlān*, until it was closed in 1360 Š./1981 because of growing political insecurity in the region (Balland, 1987, pp. 264-66).

In the 1360s Š./1980s Afghan cheese production thus reverted to the pre-industrial, domestic sector, with unimportant marketable surpluses. The towns, particularly mushrooming Kabul, came to depend almost entirely on imported cheeses. The U.S.S.R. and other East European socialist countries replaced the Federal Republic of (West) Germany and Denmark as the main suppliers. No figures on this trade are available, but it is certainly small and irregular.

In Persia, on the other hand, the combination of declining domestic and growing industrial production (totaling ca. 100,000 tons, according to the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization, though the figure is questionable) is nevertheless far from sufficient to meet the increasing national demand, and imports have been on the rise since the early 1360s Š./1980s. In those years Persia rose from eighth to fifth among cheese importers in the world. In 1363 Š./1984 imports reached a peak of 126,400 tons, that is, 7.2 percent of the total exchanges of cheese in the world (Table 36b) and higher than the national production. The main supplier was Bulgaria, which shipped via Turkey a soft cheese selling in Tehran for three or four times less than the similar local *tabrīzī*.

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