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Rhetoric (H)

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Cheese: A Philosophy of Life

I once watched my friend have a meltdown because her Apple Watch told her she hadn't met her "move goal" that day. It was around 11:30pm and she literally, in pajamas, ran laps around the kitchen in a desperate bid to satisfy her neon-colored rings. She wasn't moving for joy, or health, or exercise; she was doing exactly what the watch wanted her to do. And, honestly, can you blame her?

We live in the United States, and even worse, the Bay Area: a pressure cooker that ticks relentlessly: *tick, tick, tick, ding!* Your time is up. And this isn't just a product of my stressed teenage brain. Even older author Barbara Ehrenreich, in her book *Natural Causes*, points out how the Bay Area's "hustle culture" is slowly killing us.¹ Obsessed with science and constant tech advancement, we forget the "hippie shit"² that actually makes us feel good, like winding down at sunset for our own sake, maybe with a glass of milk and cookies. Instead of obsessing over health, the "next new thing," Ehrenreich urges us to just *live*—and maybe then we wouldn't let Apple Watches govern us.

And that need for control doesn't stop at our wrists, it even comes down to the food we eat: what if, instead of stressing about that Instagrammable "organic" salad, you went for Annie's mac n' cheese—a comfort food—because it brings you real joy? Now I'm not suggesting we go

¹ Ehrenreich, Barbara. 2018. *Natural Causes : An Epidemic of Wellness, the Certainty of Dying, and Our Illusion of Control*. New York, NY: Twelve.

² Pardon my French...

completely off the rails, but humans do need to sprinkle moments of peace and enjoyment in their lives of constant stress. We must allow ourselves to savor meals, live mindfully, and relax. I see the duality of mealtime in my own home: my French dad eats slowly—really slowly—until he’s about 80% full and then stops. My American mom, on the other hand, skirts around the kitchen, foot halfway out the door, eyebrows pinched in a Bay-Area-stress-syndrome³ sort of way. Watching her frantically dart from counter to counter has led me to try to reclaim my mealtimes with something simple and grounding. You guessed it... *cheese*. Everyday. A small, delicious (and nutritious) push to embrace slowness, imperfection, and natural processes—the opposite of micro-management. In *Ratatouille*, a clip⁴ of the rat trying cheese and strawberries for the first time appears to play in slow motion—he practically *melts* into the flavors; fireworks explode in the background; his eyes roll back and his nose tips up. I’m talking about *that* level of enjoyment.

This tension doesn’t just play out at my dinner table—it’s baked into two entire cultures and the ways that they approach life. In the U.S., cheese reveals how deeply convenience, safety, and control shape our decisions. Here, convenience shapes everything. Stores like Walmart and Target offer one-stop shopping, giving quick access to a variety of goods at any time. Plastic-wrapped, pre-cut, pasteurized, processed, packaged, predictable, and most importantly “safe” slices of cheese dominate the mainstream. We call it “plastic cheese”—think Kraft’s too-orange slices, a product so weirdly, proudly American. Market researcher Clotaire Rapaille



³ “Thought Partners.” 2023. Thought Partners. 2023. <https://mythoughtpartners.com/anxiety-unique-to-the-bay-area-causes-and-coping-strategies>.

⁴ “Ratatouille Tasting Fireworks Strawberry Cheese.mov.” n.d. Wwww.youtube.com. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yyah49_Oz78.

explains that, in America, cheese is “dead”⁵: pasteurized (strict pasteurization laws reinforce that “unpasteurized = dangerous”), legally and scientifically dead. It must be labeled safe (“FDA approved”), wrapped in plastic, a body bag, as though to suffocate bacteria cultures, and stored in the fridge, the morgue of dead foods.

It’s like micro-management on a cultural scale: just as the Apple Watch counts calories and tracks steps, cheese faces an endless cycle of rules to achieve safety and perfection. Ehrenreich points out that over-medicalization (or over-pasteurization) doesn’t necessarily improve health, or reduce risk. Fear of bacteria in cheese—just like our fear of mold⁶ in blue cheese—mirrors these fears of diseases: the risk is often exaggerated, and excessive control can create more anxiety than benefit. Even comfort foods like grilled cheese become guilt-inducing “cheat meals”—their fat-content scares us. In the U.S., food is often treated as either medicine or poison, turning cheese into something to manage.

Cheese also symbolizes our “positive-thinking” culture where food. We tell ourselves that ‘attitude’ can prevent illness, although research⁷ shows no reliable correlation. Let’s take



Chuck E. Cheese: multicolor arcade lights, buzzing machines, Coca-Cola fueled energy, and greasy cheese pizza are all designed to generate smiles. Even the word “cheese” itself forces a smile—from a photographer’s joke “cut the cheese” (or “say cheese!”) to today’s slang

“cheesing” for grinning—the “ch” sound positions the teeth and the long “ee” pulls the lips and

⁵ “In America, the Cheese Is Dead.” Kottke.org, 29 July 2013, kottke.org/13/07/in-america-the-cheese-is-dead.

⁶ Did you know moldy cheese doesn’t actually cause an increase in food-borne illness?

⁷ Ehrenreich, Barbara. 2018. *Natural Causes : An Epidemic of Wellness, the Certainty of Dying, and Our Illusion of Control*. New York, NY: Twelve.

cheeks back. But Chuck E. Cheese has gone in and out of business, drowning in files for bankruptcy; so perhaps artificial and performative happiness doesn't last.

In contrast to America's processed-culture, let's have a look at France and the lives of my French relatives. Starting off, quality always outweighs convenience. In contrast to Target and Walmart, stores are specialized: bakeries, cheese shops, fishmongers all carry artisanal, high-quality products. Multiple stops are common, and many stores close early or on Sundays. Even the law guarantees leisure. School lunches last two hours⁸ instead of 40 minutes: four-course school lunches emphasize variety, slow eating, and taste education ("éducation au goût"). Mothers receive long postpartum leave⁹ (up to 16 weeks of paid leave in France, but the US doesn't offer any federal-paid leave), and France's "right to disconnect" law gives employees legal protection from after-hours email and work demands. Life is slower. And I dare you to ask a French person to "hustle."

I experience this slow-moving lifestyle when I visit my family in France. Over winter break, my grandma transforms our chalet into an eatery: long, wooden tables are covered with ham boards, cheese plates, tiny, eccentric appetizers, and rich, chocolate logs. The *fondue* cauldrons. The *raclette*¹⁰ set-ups (a communal dining experience centered around melting cheese). Cheese becomes a ritual, a pause before dessert: after the entrée, a medley of *brie*, *comté*, and *beaufort* arrives, and the room slows. Here, if you eat too fast, you might honestly explode before the Bay Area's pressure cooker could get you.

⁸ When I visited Fumel, France in 4th grade as an exchange student, I was shocked by how long the school lunches felt

⁹ Up to 16 weeks of paid leave in France, but the US doesn't offer any federal-paid leave

¹⁰ A communal dining experience centered around melting cheese

French culture embraces natural processes, from cheese decay to life's aging; they allow cheese to bloom with mold, and don't rush lunch breaks or time-off. Bacteria-filled, raw, wrinkly cheeses are celebrated; they're enjoyed; they're eaten slowly; they're praised and shared rather than feared and suffocated. Raw-milk cheese is banned¹¹ in the U.S. but widely sold in France; nobody panics at a bit of bacteria¹². Because here, as my French grandpa loves to say: *Le plus grand risque c'est d'avoir peur*¹³ ("The greatest risk is being afraid," echoes Ehrenreich's reminder that our illusion of control only adds anxiety). The French don't obsess over low-fat, dairy-free, or "functional" foods—they eat for experience and enjoyment, for heritage and culture. Their comfort with life's natural messiness shows that happiness isn't won through control, but through living without fear or micromanagement.



We must understand that decay is a natural process. Cheese, as an example, gains value¹⁴ as it ages, yet we often veer away from foods that smell or look "imperfect," like moldy varieties. If, from the farmer's market, you find a strawberry with some white fuzz in your carton, don't toss the whole thing, just remove the bad one and keep the rest because I promise they're perfectly fine! (the USDA actually says that a little bit of mold will not ruin the whole bunch)¹⁵. The U.S.'s obsession with perfection and control—through policies, anti-aging creams,

¹¹ Bonem, Max. 2022. "Why Americans Don't Get to Eat Delicious Raw Milk Cheese." Food & Wine. 2022. <https://www.foodandwine.com/lifestyle/why-americans-dont-get-eat-delicious-raw-milk-cheese>.

¹² *Vieux Boulogne* and *Roquefort* (French delicacies) are the stinkiest and moldiest cheeses in the world

¹³ "The greatest risk is being afraid"

¹⁴ Époisses is one of the most expensive and most aged French cheeses

¹⁵ "Here's What to Do about the 1 Moldy Berry in Your Bunch." Allrecipes. 2024. <https://www.allrecipes.com/can-you-eat-moldy-berries-8681799>.

and plastic wraps—feels like bubble-wrapping every corner of your house just because you *might* bump into something. We don't need to manage every aspect of life. Wellness culture tricks us into believing that if we think positively, run around the kitchen in our pajamas enough times, or buy the right products, we can prevent illness or death—something biologically impossible. Just like cheese, we all decay. Eating cheese every day can remind us that slowing down to savor life and letting things happen is much healthier than constantly trying to control it. So, take a second, *breathe*, and go get yourself a piece of cheese.

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