

Pickled Cheese Tyros eis Halmen

“Cheese keeps after being washed in fresh water and dried in the sun, then put in an earthenware jar together with savory or thyme, each cheese separated from the other according to its strength, with the addition of sweet wine vinegar or a mixture of vinegar and honey, until the liquid rises above the cheese and herbs.”¹

Bassus, *Country Matters* as translated and set out in Roman Cookery by Mark Grant

My Recipe:

Take sheep or goat cheese feta in a block. Rinse and dry well. Chop into bit size cubes. Place in sealable jar. Layer in with sprigs of savory or thyme. Take honey and mix well in ¼ c. white wine vinegar. Add to jar. Fill jar (well cleaned/sterilized) to brim with white wine vinegar. Seal. Let sit at least 1 day.

[approximate proportions for a 1 pint jar – 14 oz feta, 1 cup white wine vinegar, 2 tablespoons honey, 1 oz fresh herb sprigs]

Historical Background:

Cassianus Bassus (c.600) is traditionally credited with assembling a 20 volume agricultural treatise called “Geoponica” which translates as “Country Matters” or agricultural pursuits. In the text of the section on cheese noted by Grant (appended), there are multiple references to ways to make cheese last longer including smoking, mixed with honey, sea/salt water, and stored with grain in addition to pickling.²

Cheese was a staple for country and city people. Most cheese was from goat’s or sheep’s milk.³ Bassus notes a preference for goat milk for making cheese.⁴

In the city, cheese was served both for breakfast and dinner; as well as being available as part of the mid-day meal. At dinner, it was usually part of the *Gustum* or appetizer course. There are numerous recipes for making cheese in various forms from the freshest to the hard dried cheeses⁵. Several of the softer cheese recipes have additions of oil and herbs for flavoring and were eaten with bread; cold or heated.⁶ A favorite was fresh curds

¹ Grant, page 77 – full text on last page of this documentation

² Grant, page 77.

³ Frayn, pages 39- 41.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Frayn, pages 41 and 43.

⁶ Giacosa, pages 2-3, 13-14.

flavored with herbs and oil. It is mentioned in several texts and several of the Roman cookery texts give recipes for it; including Apicius (8th C.).

In ancient Rome, vinegar was made from wine that had gone “flat” or that had been fermented with additional yeast, salt and honey. It was used to preserve fruits, vegetables and fish.⁷ Modernly, vinegar soaked wrappings of cheesecloth are used to inhibit mold during cheese storage and give it a longer shelf life.⁸

Honey was used as a major flavoring in Roman times for both foods and wine. This recipe calls for sweet wine vinegar. In Columella’s text, Flower notes the proportion is given as 6 oz. of honey to a pint of wine for a sweetened wine drink.⁹ While this is for a drink, many recipes use honey quite liberally. This gives us an indication that they liked well sweetened foods. Honey is also used as a preservative for fruit – coating the fruit in honey and then storing it is mentioned in several different texts.

Developing the Recipe:

Grant provides a recipe¹⁰ and it was considered as one set of possible guidelines.

Feta – the cheese is noted as being able to be handled – washed and dried. Sheep and/or goat feta is available. Also the cheese needed to be of a type that would spoil relatively quickly without further steps being taken. Feta meets all these requirements.

Savory or Thyme – the herbs are specified, but not the amounts. 1 oz of fresh herb sprigs is a substantial quantity – several tablespoons worth. Thyme was easily available in the stores and my savory was not ready to harvest.

Vinegar & Honey – the original talks about sweet wine vinegar which we know is sweetened with honey during the fermentation process OR vinegar and honey. If the vinegar is sweetened with honey during fermentation, it probably is not super sweet, but rather lacks the bite commonly associated with vinegar. If honey is added to vinegar, no amount is specified in the original. I chose to add enough honey to white wine vinegar, to take out some of the vinegar bite without becoming super sweet; although many of the Roman foods were fairly heavily sweetened.

The cheese needs about a day absorb some of the flavor from the herbs and vinegar. Previous experiments show it keeps well for a couple days without refrigeration or a couple weeks with refrigeration.

⁷ Black, page 73.

⁸ <http://food.oregonstate.edu/faq/dairy/cheese2.html>

⁹ Flower, page 26. [ed: Columella was a contemporary of Apicius and wrote *De re rustica* of which volume 12 is on food.]

¹⁰ Grant, page 78. [7 oz feta cubed in ½” cubes, handful of fresh thyme, 7 fl. oz. white wine vinegar, 1 tsp. clear honey]

Appendix:

Text of section as reported in Roman Cookery by Mark Grant page 77:

“About the making of cheese, from a recipe by Berutios. Many people make cheese, which at the outset some people call whey, but most farmers name the same thing junket. It is better made from kid’s milk. And parched sugar curdles milk, as does fig juice, and the your twigs of fig trees or their leaves, and the fur that grow in the heads of artichokes that are unfit for eating, and pepper, and the gizzard of any domestic bird which has been laid up in some dung within the intestine as a sort of husk. Animals that have been pastured on hound’s berry will produce rather good milk, but they will make far better milk after grazing on clover. The milk lasts for three days, if the day before transporting you pour it into a pan, boil it and then transfer it from one pot to another, stirring it with a giant fennel or a reed until it cools, and then you sprinkle over it a little salt. Soft cheese keeps for longer if it is made up with thistle seed and a little warm water, or even added to warm honey. Cheese keeps after being washed in fresh water and dried in the sun, then put in an earthenware jar together with savory or thyme, each cheese separated from the other according to it strength, with the addition of sweet wine vinegar or a mixture of vinegar and honey, until the liquid rises above the cheese and herbs. Some people preserve the cheese by putting it in sea water. Cheese stays white after being put in salt; it stays firm and sharp hung over smoke. All cheese if dipped in pulses¹¹, and especially chickling or peas, seems to last longer. But if it is hard or bitter through age, you should mash it with bruised barley meal (that is the bruised meal that comes from unparched barley), put the cheese in the water and then remove whatever floats to the surface.”
[*Bassus* Country Matters – being “Geoponica” 18.19]

Bibliography:

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¹¹ Flower defines pulses as grains and beans – pg. 123