A History of Food

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Reference

Chapter 5

The History of Dairy Produce

Cheese and Curds

Archeologists excavating lake dwellings on the banks of Lake Neuchâtel have found potsherds pierced with holes which date back to at least six thousand years BC. They conclude that these vessels could have been drainers for separating curds from whey. I would not wish to suggest that the archeologists were influenced by the making of this discovery on Swiss soil, but still, the idea gave much pleasure to the Swiss themselves, who saw it as yet another honour bestowed on their country as one of the world's major cheese-making areas.

What kind of milk might the ancient lake-dwellers have been processing in this way? It is an interesting question. Although domestication of goats and sheep was beginning to change the way of life of the Mediterranean peoples at this period, we do not yet know if they had reached the stage of milking the animals and making dairy produce to keep. Cows did not appear on the Alpine scene until after the Roman conquest of the Valais 53 centuries later, and their advent was a landmark in the subsequent glorious history of Swiss enterprise.

Many people think that the pottery strainer in question, when new, was more probably meant for extracting the juice from crushed wild berries. I shall return to this idea in the chapter on wine. Let us leave the matter of which theory is correct on one side, and turn instead to the Middle East.

Cheese does not figure very prominently in the earlier pages of the Bible. The unfortunate Abel is depicted as the first shepherd, but curds and butter get no mention until after the story of Noah and his excessive potations. Noah's descendant Abraham, 'very rich in cattle' presented to him by Pharaoh, gave 'butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed' to the three angels who came to visit him

(Genesis 18, viii). We can roughly situate the possible existence of the father of the Jewish nation in the second millennium BC.

If we go yet farther back to the time of the Sumerians, 20 centuries before Abraham, we encounter another stock-breeder. This one is anonymous, but his existence is well attested by the careful accounts he kept, beginning in the fortieth year of the reign of King Shoulgi. These accounts, engraved in cuneiform on clay tablets, are now in the State Museum of the Middle East in what was formerly East Berlin. They tell us that the breeder's herd of cattle increased fivefold within eight years, and production rose from 1.8 litres of butter and 8 litres of cheese a year to 42.5 litres of butter and 63.3 litres of cheese, obviously an excellent output.

A kind of strip cartoon depiction in a polychrome Sumerian fresco of 2500 BC, now in Baghdad Museum, gives some idea of the methods used. It shows cows with their calves, still not very far from the primitive aurochs cattle, being milked by peasants on both sides of the gates of a corral which would not shame Texas. The milk is put into large, carefully cleaned jars. Then the cream is poured from a small jar into a churn, and comes out as butter.

A seal of almost the same period, now in the Chicago Natural History Museum, comes from the kingdom of Elam and shows a goat offering her milk to the goatherd, under the benevolent gaze of a fertility goddess seated beside two milk-churns. Finally, in the seventeenth century BC, the Code of the Amorite king Hammurabi II regulates taxes (even at this early date) on the dairy produce for sale in the market of Babylon, in the same way as it lays down the law on the sale of meat.

Goats and sheep will adapt easily to any climate and browse on any kind of weed; goats will eat most prickly plants as well. They long supplied most of the milk that was drunk or made into butter and cheese. Cattle, worked to the bone as draught animals, provided hardly any. We may assume that the Babylonian cows gave milk only at calving time, when they were enjoying a respite from work. Virgil does not seem very keen on cow's milk; at least, he recommends its use only for rearing the calves:

> Don't follow our forbears' custom, whereby
> Mother-cows filled the snowy milk-pails: their young should have all
> The benefit of their udders.

The first cheeses, therefore, were made from goat's or sheep's milk, which was easier to come by.

Before the precious liquid could be stored or transported in jars like those of the Sumerians – that is, before pottery came into general use – shepherds and goatherds used containers, in the manner of the Touareg or the nomads of Central Asia, made from the bladders or stomachs of slaughtered animals. This was a refinement on the knotted skins still found in the present-day Stone Age culture of the Amazonian Indians, who use them in making mead. Obviously milk in such

containers would soon turn to curds, either because of the heat or carelessness (leave a cup of milk out in the sun and you will see how quickly it 'turns'), or because of the coagulant effect of natural enzymes contained in the stomachs of young ruminants. The *tauhem* of Anatolia and the sheep's milk *leskem* of the Caucasus have been made like this for thousands of years.

The Hebrews obtained primitive curdled milk products in this way until Moses forbade mixing milk with young animal products: 'Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk.' The ten cheeses David's father Jesse gave him to take to the captain of his brothers' thousand (I Samuel 17, xviii) and the 'cheese of kine' given to David himself when he 'was come to Mahanaim' (II Samuel 17, xxix) will have been made by the action of the coagulant properties of certain vegetable substances such as fig tree sap, still used in the Balearic Islands, or thistle buds. Today, ecologically minded breeders of goats in Corsica and the lower Alps are returning to such methods. The wild flower plant known as Our Lady's Bedstraw or Yellow Bedstraw (*Galium verum*), another of whose English common names, aptly, was Cheese Rennet, was used for a long time to give Cheshire and Gloucester cheeses their orange colouring, and could also curdle the milk.

There is evidence of the making of cream cheese[1] in the Renaissance period, in a curious and fanciful verse menu devised by a poet at the court of the Sforza family: 'E sugo di tetta vaccine! Blancho sopra le fusche in gelatina' (And the juice of the cow's udder, blanched into a jelly on straw).

Marco Polo states that the Mongols simply left skimmed milk, either unheated or boiled, to dry out in the sun, as they still do, and the same method is employed by the Bedouin of Sinai. Skimmed milk was the basic material of cheese for a long time, indeed up to the modern period, the cream having been skimmed off to be churned into butter. The buttermilk or skimmed milk was then reduced by boiling and made into cheese, a procedure still in use today.

Although Homer describes the Cyclops Polyphemus merely putting the milk he had curdled 'in wicker baskets' to drain (in the Middle Ages, a soft white cheese in France was called *jonchée*, from the word *jonc*, rush, because it was made in rush baskets), the operation is described in more detail by Columella in first-century Gaul. He calls the woven rush baskets *fiscinae*, while pierced wooden or ceramic vessels, reminiscent of the remains left by the lake-dwellers of Neuchâtel, are *fiscellae*. The cheese drainer is not a recent invention.

In Columella's time, someone had the idea of a press which could be screwed down to compress the drained curds instead of simply piling stones on a lid or plate over them. The compressed curds were then moulded in a basket or a wooden box (*phormos* in Greek, *forma* in Latin), and the result was what we would now regard as cheese. The medieval French word was *formage*, from the Latin *forma*, the mould in which it was made, whence modern French *fromage*, while English *cheese* comes ultimately from Latin *caseus*, the foodstuff itself.

Cream cheese, curd cheese and cottage cheese are the drained curds eaten fresh, unlike cheese properly so called, which has undergone some form of treatment –

salting, drying, smoking or maturing in a cellar (the ripening process either occurs naturally or is induced by yeasts) – and can thus be kept for some time. Both cream cheeses and matured cheeses were widely used by pastrycooks throughout the classical period, particularly when they were made from full-cream milk, or milk from which very little cream had been skimmed. There are still many recipes of this kind: Russian *pashka*, English and American cheesecake, Corsican *cacavellu*, *fidone* and *cherchiole*, and the true *cassata* of Sicily.

The drained cream cheese called *turos* by the ancient Greeks, and *tiri* by their modern descendants, which is sometimes dipped in brine, was particularly valued in antiquity because it became hard as it dried. There cannot be much difference between a modern Chavignol goat cheese or *crottin* and the cheese which Nestor, according to Homer, recommended to Machaon to help him recover from his wounds at the siege of Troy: Nestor's woman Hecamede 'mixed a potion ... with Pramnian wine, and on this she grated cheese of goat's milk'. She served an onion with it, 'a relish for their drink'.

And what could be more fortifying than cheese, a concentrated form of milk, the best food in the world? The Tibetans, unfamiliar with Homer, who drink tea instead of wine, thicken that beverage with a kind of butter so rancid that it is more like cheese; they thrive on it. According to Pliny the Elder, Zarathustra acquired eloquence only after living entirely on cheese for 20 years.

A Roman recipe inherited from the Greeks, *moritum*, must have been equally fortifying: it was a salad of salted and matured cheese, grated and well seasoned with garlic, spices and aromatic herbs. This must have been something like the *cervelle de canut* (literally, 'silk-weaver's brains') of Lyons (famous for its silk-weaving), which is made with cream cheese. The Romans also ate cream cheese prepared in the Greek fashion: *hypotrima*, to which dried fruits and wine of the aperitif type were added.

The Romans liked to smoke cheese, and it is still smoked in Central Italy today. Pliny, who seems to have been a well-informed cheese-lover, gives a considerable list of the local specialities of the Iberian peninsula and Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul, among them 'Luni cheese from the borderland of Tuscany and Liguria', a large and very heavy wheel-shaped sheep's milk cheese. He speaks appreciatively of the cheeses of the Cevennes and the Auvergne, the ancestors of today's Roquefort and Cantal.

After the fall of the Roman Empire and the great invasions of the barbarians (who cannot have been so very barbarous, since cheese formed a large part of their daily diet), the monks of the Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries, thanks to whom the population did not starve to death entirely during the Dark Ages, were the pioneers of the new cheese-making industry of medieval times. If the chronicles of Eginhard, Charlemagne's biographer, are to be believed, it was in one of these monasteries – probably the abbey of Vabres near Roquefort – that the Emperor, another lover of cheese, was given a sheep's milk cheese veined with mould. Much to his surprise, he liked it. He made the prior promise to send two crates of this

cheese a year to Aix-la-Chapelle, thus nearly ruining the poor community. Charlemagne was equally enthusiastic about the cheese of Reuil in Brie. A man of discernment, he pronounced it 'one of the most marvellous of foods', and requisitioned two crates of this cheese as well, to round off his dinners at Aix.

The monks, who ensured the survival of European agriculture during this period, turned out excellent wine-growers as well as cheese-makers (which may explain why wine and cheese have always seemed to go so well together). Grimod de La Reynière described cheese as 'the iron rations of drunkards'. As with liqueurs, the names of abbeys of this period are often associated with the making of cheeses, which kept those names even when they were subsequently produced elsewhere. Port-Salut and Maroilles, for instance, originally came from the abbeys of those names. The consumer's unconscious mind has not forgotten the connection, and nor have modern manufacturers, who often put the picture of a monk on their labels.

However, the large cheeses sold cut into sections – cheeses of the Jura, such as Emmenthal, Comté, Gruyère and Beaufort, or of Italy, such as Parmesan – need so much milk, up to 1000 litres for a single large cheese, that ever since they were first made in the twelfth century they have been produced by village or regional cooperatives. Reblochon cheese owes its name to the fact that it was made secretly, from a second milking or *rebloche* not officially declared by the tenant farmers and shepherds of Savoy. It thus escaped the dues levied by their lords, either lay or religious.

There was not much cash in circulation during the Middle Ages, and, as we shall see repeatedly in the course of this study, tithes were often paid in kind. Farm accounts and inventories show that dairy produce, which was easy to transport, made up a considerable part of these dues. Pierre Charbonnier[2] tells us that the Seigneur de Murol, a country gentleman of modest means, received ten *quintaux* of cheese from his farmers in 1418, for the use of his household alone, i.e. a little over half a tonne in modern terms. The cheese *quintal* was a special Auvergnat measure of weight, equivalent to 115 pounds.

Up to the eighteenth century a great deal of cheese was eaten in Europe, and especially in France.[3] Then people of high rank developed a sweet tooth. Sweet desserts became so popular that the only kind of cheese considered elegant was cream cheese heavily sweetened and flavoured with perfumed oils. Rove sheep's milk cheese sprinkled with orange-flower water is still a speciality of Marseilles. Eaten in the evening, it is supposed to be an aid to slumber.

Fortunately, the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie brought cheese back into fashion. Brillat-Savarin wrote that 'a dessert course with no cheese is a beauty with only one eye.' The first industrial dairy in Normandy was opened in 1875 to meet demand.

The French, who now regard cheese as their national speciality – particularly Camembert, popularly visualized as being eaten, with French bread, by picturesque characters wearing berets – are rather inclined to think that the varieties produced

in France itself (at least 365 of them) are the only cheeses in the world. And France is indeed the world's major cheese-making country, producing over a million tonnes a year. General de Gaulle used to deplore the difficulty of governing a country which made more than 300 varieties of cheese. Winston Churchill, however, another lover of cheese, said during the Second World War that a country with so many cheeses on its table could not perish.

The other main producers are the USA, where immigrants taught the secrets of European cheese-making as well as wine-growing, Denmark, Italy, Holland, West Germany, Switzerland and Great Britain. Even Japan, which excels in imitation of every kind, makes cheese.

However, if French cheeses are internationally famous – only 26 of them have the right to label themselves *appellation contrôlée*, like French wines of guaranteed vintage – there are a thousand names of other cheeses made all over our planet, in every latitude, and all of them are different. Even the imitations differ from the original product. Curds and cheese are made not only with cow's, sheep's and goat's milk, but with the milk of the buffalo introduced into Lombardy by the Sforzas to pull loads in convoy on the *naviglii*. Buffalo's milk produces mozzarella, without which pizza is just a tomato tart. The milk of mares, female zebras, reindeer (a favourite with the Romans), lamas and yaks can also be made into cheese.

However, so far as anyone knows, cheese has never been made with ass's milk. Three hundred donkeys a day had to be milked to produce the mere 30 litres required by Poppaea for her beauty treatment when she bathed in it.

Yoghurt: Fermented Milk

The Balkans, Bulgaria in particular, are very proud of their remarkable number of people who live to be 100 and over. It appears that they owe their unusual longevity to a frugal diet consisting mainly of yoghurt.

Yoghurt is not curdled milk, but milk fermented by the action of two lactic bacilli acting together. *Lactobacillus bulgaricus* acidifies the milk and causes the formation of lactic acid from lactose ('milk sugar'). This lactic acid makes casein coagulate. *Streptococcus thermophylus* gives a particular and characteristic aroma under the influence of the slight warmth in which, as its name indicates, it thrives. A 120-millilitre pot of commercial yoghurt containing 125 grams of the product consists of 5.20 g protein, 6.40 g lactose, 1 g lactic acid, and 1.4 g mineral salts of which 0.2 g is calcium. It has 57 calories, 36 per cent protids, 20 per cent lipids, say 1.25 g, and 44 per cent glucids (if sugar or jam is added, the amount of glucids rises in proportion to the additive).

In fact the reason why 'natural' yoghurt contains very few lipids is that it is made with partly skimmed milk. Eating yoghurt with '0 per cent fat', therefore, is

a purely morale-building aid in low-calorie diets. So-called Bulgarian yoghurt is fermented in a special way and left to stand to acidulate further; it remains more liquid and contains more calories than natural yoghurt. Finally, the same amount of 'full-cream' yoghurt contains 90 calories. Cream, and even powdered skimmed milk, has been added to the basic skimmed milk. A pot of yoghurt equals a glass of milk.

Yoghurt, when commercially made, may be flavoured with fruits (either pieces of fruit or natural extracts). As the extracts have no colour, permitted colourings have to be used to answer the expectations of the consumer, particularly the young consumer. Coffee, chocolate, caramel and vanilla are not compatible with the principle of yoghurt-making, so products with these flavourings are sold not as yoghurt but as milk thickened with starch or gelatine. Yoghurt can be made at home with a yoghurt-maker, or simply by tipping the contents of a pot of yoghurt into a litre of warm milk. You leave it to stand at a mild temperature for 12 hours, just as the peoples of the Balkans and Asia have always done.

Lactic acid, if not absolutely guaranteed to make you a centenarian, is very good for the digestive system, except in a few rare cases of allergy to milk. It destroys the microbes causing putrefaction (which is not digestion but its opposite), which are present in intestinal infections and cannot live in an acid environment. Finally, the decalcifying effect of yoghurt is legendary.

Yoghurt has been naturalized as part of the Western diet, particularly since the last war, and is even to be found in the supermarkets of Spain and Africa. However, it was known in France as early as 1542, when François I was suffering from what would now be diagnosed as severe depression. The doctors could do nothing for his listlessness and neurasthenia until the Ambassador to the Sublime Porte disclosed that there was a Jewish doctor in Constantinople who made a brew of fermented sheep's milk of which people spoke in glowing terms, even at the Sultan's court. The King sent for the doctor, who refused to travel except on foot; he walked through the whole of southern Europe, followed by his flock. When he finally arrived before François I, the latter's apathy had given way to a certain impatience, but he still did not feel well. After several weeks of sheep's milk yoghurt, the King was cured. The sheep, however, had not recovered from their long walk and caught cold in the air of Paris. Every last one of them died, and the doctor left again, refusing to stay despite the King's offers. He went home, taking the secret of his brew with him. The health of François I continued to improve, which was the point of the exercise, and yoghurt was forgotten for nearly four centuries.

The *kefir* of the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus is whey fermented by the addition of granules of a particular lactic bacterium and dried, powdered *kefir*, an ancient method going back to the dawn of time. It becomes a fizzy drink, both acid and slightly alcoholic, sometimes up to a strength of 1 per cent alcohol. Half its volume is carbonic gas. All this makes it hard for some people to digest.

The *koumis* of Central Europe is made from fermented mare's milk, but its origin

lies in farthest Asia. The 'barbarian' Huns and Mongols brought it with them. In the past Western Europe made milk-based drinks which were not yoghurt, but were more like *kefir* or diluted and flavoured curds. Such drinks bear witness to the memory of ancient migrations: they are the beverages of people who did not grow vines and whose only wealth was the flocks they drove ahead of them. The Celts of northern Gaul, the British Isles and Ireland used to celebrate great events with brews of curdled milk. The first emigrants to America, many of whom were Catholics from Celtic areas of the British Isles, still made them when they could: curdled milk-beer, for less important occasions, was a carefully adjudged mixture of one-third milk, one-third cream, one-third beer and lime juice mixed with cinnamon. The old recipe used cider vinegar instead of lime juice. A *posset* made of curdled milk and hot wine, well seasoned with spices, was drunk to aid digestion after the great medieval banquets. 'Lait sur vin, venin', says a French proverb, 'milk on top of wine is poison'. But, it continues, 'vin avec lait, santé': 'wine with milk, good health'.

Butter: the Cream of the Milk

Marc Bloch[4] suggests: 'It may be that in the final reckoning we owe butter to the nomadic peoples of the Euro-Asiatic plains.' He mentions the Mongolian technique of churning cream horizontally in a leather flask suspended above the ground, after it had been skimmed off the milk. This is the most archaic way of butter-making, still practised by the people of the Atlas.

By the time invaders from Asia settled at Sumer around 3500 BC, they were shaking cream in a vertically designed churn, as shown in a bas-relief now in Baghdad Museum. The Celts and then the Vikings passed on a taste for butter to their descendants; they may have derived that taste partly from their origins, but also from the fact that cattle did so well in their various adoptive countries, always chosen for green pastures.

The Berlin Papyrus Number 1, translated by Maspero, contains among other fascinating material the memoirs of an Egyptian corsair who lived at the time of the 18th Theban dynasty (*c.* 1500 BC). The author, in flight, had taken refuge with a nomadic Bedouin chief from north-east Sinai somewhere near Eilat on the Gulf of Akaba, a region where stock-breeding seems to have flourished. 'Here they gave me every kind of butter and cheese.' There were plenty of animals, but Sanuhate the Egyptian does not say what kind they were. However, the climate would have favoured sheep and goats rather than cattle, which were more likely to be found in the Gaza plain and Lebanon. The butter and cheese he mentions, therefore, would have been made with goat's or sheep's milk, as it still is in the hot regions of the Middle East and the Maghreb. Arab sheep's milk butter, almost white and

even richer than butter made from cow's milk, is preferred for making couscous, particularly when it is rancid and has a Roquefort-like flavour.

The ancient Greeks and Romans did not use butter much in their cooking. Whatever its origin, they called it *buturon* (in Greek) or *butyrum* (Latin), meaning literally cow's cheese. Pliny mentions it as a food of the barbarians, and Strabo says of the people of the Pyrenees that 'their butter serves them as oil'.

Graeco-Roman butter being 'cow's cheese', it would be interesting to compare it with a butter-making recipe given in a fourteenth-century Venetian cookery book, the *Libro di cucina*. Chapter X of this work explains that cream cheese must be pounded with hot water. The fat which rises to the top is skimmed off and then beaten to make butter.

At this period, judging by the other cookery books just beginning to appear, butter seems to have been almost unknown in Italy. Nor does it enter into more than 2 per cent of the recipes given in Taillevent's French book of around 1380, *Le viandier*. Butter was not really used much in Italy until the fifteenth century; in France, it features in a third of the recipes of the sixteenth-century *Livre fort excellent*. The use of butter for thickening sauces, in the classic manner, was slow to infiltrate the kitchen.

The influence of the example set by the Vikings and Normans when butter consumption began is obvious; in those parts of Western Europe which they later colonized, there is no mention of butter among the dues in kind collected by the officers of the Merovingian, Carolingian and even the first Capetian kings of France until the conquerors had really settled in. Not until the fourteenth century did the Church have anything to say about butter in its directives for fasting. Meanwhile the eating of butter spread from Normandy and the Loire valley to the Netherlands and Switzerland, where people also began to make it. In the twelfth century no one was sure whether, unlike lard, it could be considered suitable for fast days, a suggestion made by an abbot of Saint-Denis.

As Jean-Louis Flandrin[5] points out, butter consumption is a natural development in regions suitable for cattle-breeding. In such places, popular taste and the local economy had gone right over to butter as a cooking fat within 400 years.

Flandrin is speaking of the butter-eating areas of Europe in the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, but things are much the same today: 'The area covered a whole or part of the Alps, half or the northern two-thirds of France, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and countries as far north as Iceland. The Bretons, Flemish and Icelanders were famous for their butter exports.' The Icelandic butter made by the descendants of the Vikings is mentioned in a book of 1607, the *Thrésor de santé*, as being 'pressed into wooden vessels 30 to 40 feet long.' But in Paris, over a long period, the butter made in Vanves was regarded as the finest and enjoyed the greatest reputation, particularly in the last decades of the seventeenth century, when it commanded a high price.

When it was recognized that indulging in a now well-established traditional food on fast days was a sin, the people of those parts of France which prefer butter to

oil were not pleased to find themselves deprived of it for long and frequent periods of abstinence. It must be admitted that the people of those parts which prefer oil regarded butter with great suspicion. There are accounts of medieval Provençal or Catalan travellers, obliged to journey through foreign countries or even stay there, who took their own olive oil with them, believing that butter made you more vulnerable to leprosy.

René of Anjou, when he became Count of Provence, was presented with a welcoming gift of jars of virgin olive oil by his new subjects; it was a great luxury in Provence, not yet as well planted with olive trees as it is now, but the Count could not conceal his disgust, thus hurting the feelings of the good Provençals. He had cows brought from Angers and pastured on the banks of the Rhône, in a place which became known as the Pâtis (grazing ground), and being a good Christian, he planted walnut trees near Aix to provide walnut oil for fast days.

Those good Christians who had a liking for butter were soon able to buy dispensations. The bull of the Crusades, or *Cruzada*, allowed Spaniards to eat lard,[6] and the dispensation was still in force during the eighteenth century, long after the Crusades were over. The Church did not make a fortune out of that particular dispensation, since Spanish stock-breeders raised *toros bravos* in preference to dairy cows, and oil is more popular as a cooking fat in Spain. The Comtesse d'Aulnoye, of the famous *Fairy Tales*, boldly crossing Pyrenean borders which were soon to change in the year 1681, complained of the scarcity of the rancid butter which was all they could provide for her, and the strong smell of the oil-fried food so popular among the Spanish, from fried eggs to prime steaks of beef, made her feel ill.

In his own time, and for his personal use, King Charles V of France had obtained a bull from Pope Gregory XI allowing him to replace Vanves butter on fast days by *oleum lardinum*, a charming if euphemistic term for rendered bacon fat. Anne of Brittany received a wedding present from the Holy Father when she married the King of France: complete absolution for her own gluttony, then for that of her household, and finally for all Bretons, who were known to enjoy salted butter. In 1495 the same dispensation was granted, although this time for considerable sums of money, to Germany, Hungary, Bohemia, and then France.

Matters had not yet reached that point when François de Bourdeille, the father of the historian Brantôme, visited Rome with ideas of his own in mind. 'The Pope having asked him, "What do you want of me? You shall have it", he asked only for a licence and dispensation to eat butter on fast days, since he could eat neither olive nor walnut oil; this the Pope readily granted and had a Bull sent, for him and for his, which could long be seen among the treasures of our house.' And indeed, over a long period the Church, well knowing on which side its own bread was buttered, made money by selling dispensations to eat butter. The 'Butter Tower' at Rouen was actually financed by such payments. The city of Strasbourg obtained both guns and butter in the shape of the *Ankerbuchsen*, cannon founded with the blessing of Bishop Albert of Bavaria.

A contemporary of Brantôme's father, although not in anything like such favour with the Pope, was Luther, who was particularly scandalized by this trafficking in indulgences in 1520. In his tract *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation* he complains that, 'in Rome, they make a mockery fasting, while forcing us to eat an oil they themselves would not use to grease their slippers. Then they sell us the right to eat foods forbidden on fast days ... but they have stolen that same liberty from us with their ecclesiastical laws.... Eating butter, they say, is a greater sin than to lie, blaspheme, or indulge in impurity.'

Flandrin[7] remarks, in this connection, that those countries which use butter for cooking are almost identical with those which broke away from the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century (although in the case of England the polygamous leanings of the King were perhaps more involved than gastronomy). As for the Languedoc area of France, where people would think a good cassoulet worth excommunication, traditionally olive oil was eaten in the south, walnut oil in the north, and goose fat everywhere, so it could do without butter very well.[8] If Protestantism did make a certain amount of headway here, perhaps the goose fat had something to do with it.

However, we should bear in mind that those countries of northern Europe which became Protestant are countries with a tradition of dairy farming. An obligation to eat oil in Lent was as hard to digest as the foreign debts incurred by importing it unnecessarily. Nor could people stomach the sight of an important sector of economic expansion being threatened annually by a sudden fall in sales. Indeed, the arguments in favour of the Reformation made their way into that situation like the proverbial knife through butter.

To give some idea of world butter consumption, I may add that as a matter of cultural fact those white populations which subsequently settled in the Americas, Australia and Africa have preferred to eat the fats of the customary diets of their countries of origin. The real natives of the countries they colonized have either clung to their local ancestral customs, or else, in 'developing', have adopted the dominant mode of the Westerners who now share the land with them. The popularity of oil and butter roughly coincides with the official spoken language. People in English-speaking countries tend not to eat much oil. Hispanic countries consume a great deal of it. The French-speaking countries, like France itself, are half-and-half. In places where people like to eat butter, but it is not produced locally, it is imported. But the European Community is still faced annually with the problem of its butter mountain.

Finally, in recent years the trend towards skimmed milk has led to a fashion for half-fat butter, and butter substitutes which are known only by their brand names and are made from buttermilk or whey, lecithin and soya. They offer people obsessed by their cholesterol intake 'butter' with only 50 per cent fat matter. As you cannot cook with these fats, they are just right for spreading on toast to go with decaffeinated coffee. This is progress. Fasting is a thing of the past, so we have reinvented it.

The Symbolism of Butter

Butter, as a luxury food, naturally occupied a prominent place in ancient religious ceremonies, either as an ointment (this is the meaning of its Irish name *imb* and its Breton name *ammanh*) or as a sacred or magical food. Not for nothing did Little Red Riding Hood take her grandmother a little pot of butter.

Until quite recently the Bretons would place a pat of butter near a person suffering from cancer. The butter was supposed to absorb the disease, and it was buried after the sick person's death. The Indians of Vedic times invoked butter as a primordial deity: 'Tongue of the gods, navel of the Immortal. Let us praise the name of butter, let us maintain it with our sacrificial homage.... As a wild steed breaks through barriers, so does melting butter caress the flaming logs, and the fire, satisfied, accepts it', says the *Rig-Veda* (IV, 58). Indeed, butter thrown on a fire will make it crackle as it nourishes and regenerates the flames. It is regenerating life itself. The offering of butter is a form of prayer, a source of sacred energy such as might create a universe.[9]

The butter made from the milk of Indian sacred cows was intended for religious ceremonies; it was a purified, clarified, liquid butter. Indians still use the clarified butter called *ghi* for cooking. In Tibet butter is made from yak's milk. It is eaten when very rancid, almost like cheese, and mixed with tea, the sacred drink. It is also spread on temple statues. There are even butter sculptures, which keep quite well in the climate at such altitudes. The Chinese annexation of Tibet put an end to the ancient custom of simmering dead lamas in boiling butter before embalming them.

Butter with its sunny, golden colour is so closely associated with fire in folk memory that in Iceland, according to seventh-century texts from the monastery of St Gall, the farmers' wives of that time were still asking the smith god Gobhin to look after the butter they made. Whether in the rites described in the Vedas, or in magical Celtic practices, butter features as a substitute for those natural golden treasures, honey and virgin wax, which themselves have sometimes been called the butter of the bees.