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When flavor and safety are at odds

BY DAVID HAMMOND October 2, 2012 10:40AM

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Upon arriving in Reims, France, my first bite was at Cafe du Palais. I nibbled on Langres, a version of which I'd previously enjoyed at Chicago's Pastoral. The Langres I ate in France packed palate-perking tang and airy creaminess that gave way to deep dimensions of flavor.

In the United States, cheese must be either pasteurized or aged more than 60 days; in France, cheese may be made of raw milk and aged for just a few weeks.

Though some cheeses may "peak" in flavor in fewer than 60 days, in the United States it is illegal to sell raw milk cheese that isn't aged at least that long.

During this two-month period, the acidifying process of aging minimizes potentially dangerous pathogens. (This holding time is not required if milk is pasteurized because heat kills dangerous organisms.)

However, when pasteurization eliminates unwanted organisms it also can destroy flavor.

"The flavor of raw milk cheeses will often be more pronounced and complex," said Lydia Burns of Marion Street Cheese Market. "Pasteurization destroys some microflora in milk, the bad bacteria as well as the desirable flavor, so cheese made from pasteurized milk has less potential for flavor development."

Unfortunately, raw milk cheeses may be hazardous. Dr. Mary Hutton, my favorite foodie physician, described a family tragedy traced to Vacherin, a raw milk cheese.

"My husband is from Switzerland," Hutton explained, "where they consume quite a bit of raw milk cheese. My sister-in-law ate Vacherin during her pregnancy. She had a stillborn infant and her placenta showed signs of listeria [a dangerous milk-borne bacteria]. We still eat Vacherin, but I certainly wouldn't recommend it to anyone who's pregnant."

All foods carry potential dangers, and Burns points out that although "in the wrong hands, raw milk can be dangerous ... in a relaxed environment, pasteurized milk can be equally dangerous."

Last month Frescolina ricotta salata was recalled following reports of illness and death after eating this cheese. It may have become contaminated with listeria after this pasteurized cheese was made.

So pasteurized milk cheese is not guaranteed safe and raw milk cheese is not guaranteed delicious.

Still, although it's not certain raw milk cheese will be tastier than pasteurized milk cheese, odds are it will be.

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