

A Quick Guide to How Cheese is Made

1st Step: A small amount of milk is left out, at room temperature – cow’s milk, sheep’s milk, or goat’s milk.

As it warms, the milk begins to curdle or separate. This is because bacteria, naturally found or specially added to the milk, grow as the milk warms.

These bacteria “eat” the proteins in the milk, changing the milk’s look, smell, and taste. This is known as the “starter culture.”

2nd Step: A much larger amount of milk is warmed up quickly – to about 85 °F – and the starter culture is added. The bacteria from the starter culture now have a lot more to eat. They grow very fast in the larger batch of milk.

3rd Step: An ingredient called rennet is added to help the milk form solid pieces, called curds. As this mixture continues to warm, the curds start to hold together in big pieces. Sometimes, flavorings are added at this stage, such as salt or even mold. The watery part that’s left over is called whey. Curds and whey are what Little Miss Muffet was eating when that spider came along!

4th Step: The curds are collected and formed into a block or wheel and left to dry for a few days.

Depending on the type of cheese being made, a block or wheel may be wrapped in cloth, coated in wax, rubbed with salt, or simply left alone.

5th Step: Perhaps the most important step -- the cheese is stored in a cool, moist environment to age.

As the cheese rests, the enzymes and bacteria inside continue to eat away, changing the flavor and texture. At this stage, if the cheese was not previously wrapped or protected from the outside air, mold in the air will also eat away at the outside of the cheese, forming a rind.

6th Step: The only step left is to grab some crackers!