



A Compendiary of the Cheeses of Mexico

Foreword

The following is an excerpt, a full homage lightly edited, from a wonderful cooking website: www.mexicoconnect.com. The site's owner and chef, Karen Hursh Gruber, has lived and traveled in Mexico a lot more than I have, and she has a devotee's feel and insights. Here, then, is Chef Gruber's service to the Cheeses of Mexico:

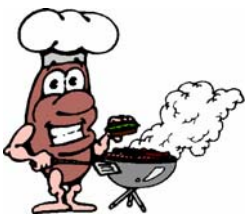
Mexican markets, especially the open-air variety, still bear an uncanny resemblance to their pre-Hispanic predecessors. The colors and aromas of carefully arranged piles of fruit and vegetables, bundles of herbs, and all manner of corn dough-based food baking on the comal is not that much different from the descriptions given nearly five hundred years ago by the newly-arrived Europeans. However, a look around today's Mexican markets, from small village affairs to huge, urban complexes sprawled over several city blocks, reveals a few outstanding differences, not the least of which is the presence of cheese.

Cheese packed into baskets and wooden hoops, cheese rolled like twine into balls of all sizes, cheese wrapped in corn husks or pressed into flat, white discs, are all part of the culinary landscape known as *puestos de queseros*, cheesemongers' stalls. But such was not always the case.

Before the Spaniards introduced cows and goats, sources of meat and milk, the inhabitants of what is now Mexico existed largely on a diet of fruit and vegetables, fish and fowl, and occasional wild game. The arrival of milk-producing animals, however, changed the diet of Mexico forever. Justo Sierra, the turn-of-the century Mexican educator, said that "the grocer, not the conquistador, is the real Spanish father of Mexican society", succinctly summing up the tremendous importance of the dietary changes brought on by Spanish colonization. This is strikingly evident in the realm of cheese-making which, though introduced by conquerors from another continent, evolved into a regional occupation, producing distinctly Mexican cheeses. In many parts of Mexico, this trade has become a family tradition, its secrets and techniques passed on from one generation to the next.

In the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua, where cattle descended from animals brought from Europe provide a major means of sustenance, the production of cheese is an important and respected industry, and one which is still frequently carried out in the home. Ranchers arise early each day to milk the cows, initiate the curdling, and begin the process of making **Queso Ranchero**, the ubiquitous appellation for many different types of cheese, including the ricotta-like **Requesón**, the smooth, moist **Panela**, and the pale yellow **Queso Chihuahua**.

Like all people close to the land, the ranchers are subject to the whims of nature. A good rainy season means good grazing for the cattle, more milk, and a more productive cheese industry. When drought conditions occur, goats' milk is used to make cheese. Goats are capable of surviving on even the driest, thorniest vegetation, and their milk is five times easier to digest than cow's milk. Although it contains significantly greater amounts of



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potassium, goat's milk is not nearly as popular as cow's milk for making cheese, and goat cheese is getting more difficult to find in the markets.

Mercados all over the country, in addition to their own regional specialties, sell cheese from the well-known cheese-making areas. Besides Chihuahua, these include Oaxaca, Querétaro and Chiapas.

Oaxaca's famous string cheese, known nationally as **Queso Oaxaca**, is not the only specialty of the region. In the huge *Central de Abastos* market, as well as the smaller weekly markets of villages in the Etna Valley, a wide variety of local pot cheese is sold. In Querétaro, a cheese and wine festival is held each May, and in Chiapas, the spongy white cheese of Rayon, Ocosingo and Pijijiapan is in such demand that people from other parts of the country place special orders.

The cheese produced on family ranches and sold in Mexico's *mercados* bears little resemblance to the plastic-wrapped versions found on supermarket shelves. However, sometimes there is little choice, and in that case, using supermarket cheese is preferable to not trying Mexican cheese at all. The variety of dishes that use different local cheeses is astounding and many of them can be prepared successfully with some creative substitution.

Ah; Sweet Bliss, those words...

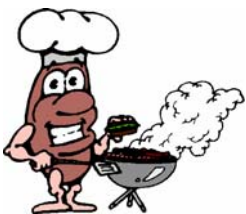
Now that you've had a great tour of Mexico and are getting Really Hungry for some great Mexican food, let's start learning all about the most important flavoring material in their recipes (unless you consider that far-distant, also-ran pretender, the chile pepper)...

Mexican Cheese Basics

Mexico produces a wondrous variety of cheeses, and many of them are available in grocery stores anywhere in the States. That's a great change in recent years, and the trend continues. However, ask your best friend to name three Mexican cheeses, and it's likely they'll be stumped after two or less. To make matters worse, in US markets, there are no standard names for Mexican cheeses, which causes Americans much confusion. Even within Mexico, the names of some of the cheeses change from area to area; an effort has been made to provide alternate names when possible.

Well, never fear, Dad is here! And he's going to help you out with this threat to your life, your loved ones, and your cooking. Or at least you'll always have the answer for the last one of those, ready at your fingertips. Assuming you're stuck on which Mexican cheese to buy for what dish. Anyway, moving right along...

The Cheeses of Mexico come in five basic categories: Fresh (sometimes called Soft), Melting, Semi-Firm, Firm, and Hard. (Okay, maybe you think differently. I can live with that. Just write your own cookbook, okay?) Depending on the producer, region, and even time of year, there may be some cross-over between these categories; but generally, their distinct. Here's some thoughts about each category:



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Fresh Cheeses

Fresh cheeses are moist, crumbly and prized for their ability to become soft when heated, but without running or melting. Why would you want a cheese to hold its shape? For dishes like **Chiles Rellenos** and **Enchiladas**, in which the cheese is actually a stuffing. In these instances, a soft queso fresco works best because it won't run or ooze out when melted. Common fresh cheeses that keep their shape when heated include **Queso Blanco**, **Queso Fresco**, and **Panela**. All are mild in flavor, and they can also be used without heating; if you've ever been served a salad or a platter of refried beans with a soft, crumbled white cheese on top, it's likely one of these. Many Americans are put off by the Mexican soft cheeses since they don't melt like the cheeses we are use to.

Melting Cheeses

One advantage that Mexican melting cheeses have over Cheddar and Monterey Jack is that they resist separating when heated. Said differently, the oil does not separate from the solids, making for more palatable and attractive **Nachos**, **Quesadillas**, toppings, sauces, and baked cheese dishes. Look for names like **Queso Asadero**, **Oaxaca**, **Quesadilla** and **Chihuahua**; all melt well and easily, with smooth, creamy textures. **Asadero** has a slight tanginess and a more robust flavor, making it one of my favorites.

Semi-Firm Cheeses

These cheeses are the most like their European cousins: Edam, Gouda, Muenster, even Swiss. It often takes a real Mexican cheese enthusiast to tell the difference, in fact! They have found some unique preparation methods, such as **Queso Relleno** (described below under Queso Edam). There can be quite a flavor range, even from supplier to supplier. These are the easiest to substitute for.

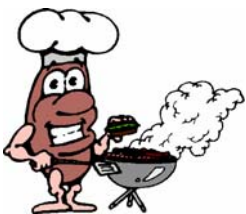
Firm Cheeses

While some of the Melting Cheeses shown above could be considered Firm, they are most often used for their melting property. Firm Cheeses are usually okay at melting, but double as grated or crumbled, without the sometimes too-soft texture of a Fresh Cheese or the dryness of a Hard Cheese. Examples include Aged Asadero, Smoked Asadero, and Manchego.

Hard Cheeses

Mexicans enjoy adding a sprinkling of a grated or finely crumbled dry cheese to finish off a dish. The most common is **Queso Cotija**, and has a texture and taste much like Parmesan, but with its own distinctive style. I use it often and you can even find it grated in shaker containers. It has a lively zest and perks up the flavor of cooked dishes and salads. Another hard cheese is **Queso Enchilado**, a white block of cheese with a red, paprika coating. It's quite salty, though, so you may prefer the milder **Queso Cotija**.

Okay, ready to learn all about the individual cheeses? Lead On, McDuff!





Fresh Cheeses

Queso Blanco

Queso Blanco, which literally means "white cheese," is quite similar to **Panela** and **Queso Fresco**. It is a mild creamy fresh cow's milk cheese. If you can imagine this, it sort of resembles a cross between a high-moisture Mozzarella and a salty cottage cheese or Ricotta. (Actually, the Ricotta made in the US up until the 1970's was this texture. It wasn't sold in tubs, it was sold in balls and could be sliced.)

Queso Blanco is traditionally made from skimmed milk or whey. The curd is set with lemon juice which gave it a fresh, lemony flavor. Currently however, many producers have begun to set the curd with rennet, which means it is no longer a cheese appropriate for vegans and vegetarians. The curd is scalded and pressed to create a somewhat elastic texture which holds its shape when heated.

Queso de Canasta

This cheese gets its name from the distinctive impression the carry-basket leaves on the fresh, soft cheese when the farmer transports it to market. See **Queso Panela**.

Queso Fresco

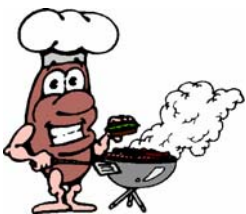
Queso Fresco literally means "fresh cheese." It is quite similar to both **Queso Blanco** and **Panela**. The US version is a soft, moist, mild and crumbly cheese, sort of like a cross between a Feta and a cottage cheese. It is good for sprinkling over foods like enchiladas, chilis and soups or crumbling onto a salad. Traditionally, **Queso Fresco** was made from goat's milk; however, most producers now use cow's milk.

Queso Jalapeño

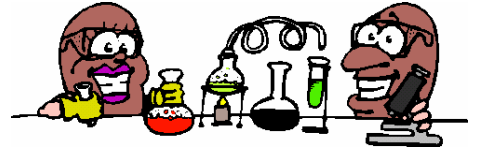
A smooth, soft white cow's milk cheese with bits of *jalapeño* chile in it, this cheese is served as a snack or used to make **Quesadillas**.

Queso Panela

Queso Panela is the most popular of all the fresh cheeses in Mexico. It is a milky and mild cow's milk cheese, the texture somewhat resembling a high-moisture Mozzarella. It softens with heat but does not melt making it excellent in **Enchiladas con Queso** or crumbled over tacos, chili and used on **Apris** and other **Botanas** or **Antojitos**, (*snacks or appetizers*). Some producers make a style firm enough that it may be sliced and used for making **Fried Cheese**, a Mexican favorite. In Mexico it is also a favorite cheese to use as fillings for many pastries and desserts.



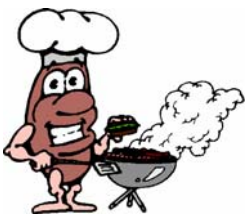
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Panela very closely resembles both **Queso Blanco** and **Queso Fresco** and may be used interchangeably in most recipes that call for it. Ricotta is often a reasonable substitute, but you may not get quite the consistency or Mexican essence you crave. (That's right, I know you; you gotta have it!)

Queso Requesón

In its freshest form, this is a loose, ricotta-like cheese used to fill **Enchiladas** and to make cheese spreads, this variety is most often sold in the markets wrapped in fresh corn husks. A mild - not salty - ricotta can be substituted for **Requesón**.





Melting Cheeses

Queso Asadero

Queso Asadero, or **Queso Oaxaca** as it is sometimes referred to, is quite similar to a soft Mozzarella. Some producers make their **Queso Asadero** rather soft and it comes either in a container or shrink wrapped while other producers make a firmer style that is sold sliced or in balls or blocks. When in ball or block form it is a semi-soft string-type cheese. It is used on sandwiches but it is an excellent melting cheese making it superb for **Nachos** and **Mexican Style Pizza**. The firm style, like Mozzarella, is a cow's milk cheese, the curd being scalded and then kneaded to make it string. It is then formed into balls or blocks, the more traditional being the hand-shaped balls. After being formed the balls or blocks are placed in brine for about an hour before being placed on aging racks. Mozzarella is the best substitute but a soft Monterey Jack could be used as well.

Queso Chihuahua

Queso Chihuahua is a mild, firm, slightly tangy cow's milk cheese. It is an excellent melting cheese, similar to a very mild Cheddar or Monterey Jack. It is perfect for such dishes as **Queso Fundido** and for cheese sauces or casseroles. Traditionally it is braided and then formed into a ball. Sometimes a regional spicy version is available which is flavored with cherry pits. Mozzarella makes a good substitute.

Queso Menonita

See **Queso Chihuahua**. This name pays homage to the Mennonites, who introduced cheese-making to the Chihuahua region.

Queso Oaxaca

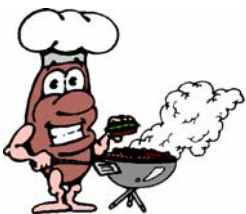
See **Queso Asadero**. This cheese even has a nickname: **Quesillo**.

Queso Requesón

Requesón is sometimes called **Queso Quesadilla** since it is one of the cheeses of choice for making dishes like **Quesadillas**. It is a smooth, semi-soft cow's milk cheese, creamy white in color and usually mild in flavor. It is a favorite throughout Mexico and is used in many dishes that require the cheese to melt. It is also a favorite cheese for snacking.

Queso Quesadilla

See **Queso Requesón**.





Semi-Firm Cheeses

Queso Criollo

This pale yellow cheese is a specialty of the region around Taxco, Guerrero, and is so similar to Munster that the two can easily be used interchangeably.

Queso Edam

Although not considered a Mexican cheese, Edam has become such an intrinsic part of Yucatecan regional cooking that it is worth including here. The cheese round is scooped out, filled with a seasoned meat **Picadillo**, and steamed in the oven in the same manner that a custard is prepared. This **Queso Relleno** is then presented whole, accompanied by a **Salsa Roja**.

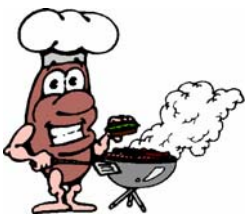
Firm Cheeses

Queso Añejo

Añejo is basically an aged Queso Fresco. It is most often used crumbled, shaved or grated in salads. A mild Romano may be substituted.

Manchego

Manchego is a mellow firm cheese, somewhat resembling a Pecorino Romano or an aged Jack. It will melt and can be used in many cooked dishes as well as for snacking. It is a Mexican adaptation of the original cheese from Spain.





Hard Cheeses

Chontaleno and Chontaleno Ahumado

Chontaleno and Chontaleno Ahumado are both dry, grating cheeses, seldom found on the U. S. market. Ahumado means smoked. There is no real equivalent.

Queso Añejo Enchilado

Enchilado literally means, "flavored with chile. " It is similar to a Cotija Añejo, but it is coated with a mild chile or paprika and then aged until it hardens. The end result is a semi-hard cheese with a slightly spicy flavor. It is red on the outside and creamy white inside. A true Enchilado is difficult to find in the U. S. The closest thing you are likely to find would be a dry Feta.

Queso Cotija

Cotija is known as the "Parmesan of Mexico. " It's a salty, dry grating cheese, sometimes referred to as the "Parmesan of Mexico. " It was originally made with goat's milk but now cow's milk is almost always used. This is a strong flavored cheese hard cheese and is perfect for grating. It is used in Hispanic cooking in much the same way that Parmesan and Romano cheeses are used in Italian cooking. Grated or shaved it is perfect for topping many dishes, both Mexican and other. Parmesan or Romano are good substitutes.

Queso Manchego Viejo

As its name indicates, this is **Manchego** that has been aged to the point where it hardens and becomes more intense in flavor. It is quite often shaved over **Botanas**.

Now for the real fun! Look in Dad's Cookbook for some recipes, and Enjoy!!

