

Curds and Whey

Over 200 years ago, this familiar nursery rhyme first appeared in print.

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on her tuffet
Eating her curds and whey.
Along came a spider
Who sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away.

Different stories have also been written to go with the poem. One version tells of a little rich girl named Miss Muffet who didn't like the nanny who was caring for her so she ran away to the country. Little Miss Muffet was taken in for a time by a farmer and his wife, and she helped with the chores. One day the farmer's wife gave Little Miss Muffet curds and whey to eat for a meal. She took the food outside where she sat on a little green mound to eat it. Do you know what food Little Miss Muffet was eating? Little Miss Muffet was enjoying a meal of cottage cheese before she was scared off by the spider.

Cottage cheese is a product made from milk. It contains soft lumps of cheese called curds and a liquid called whey. Curds and whey are produced when milk is curdled. Curdled milk is easy to recognize because it thickens and separates into solids (curds) and a liquid (whey). The curdled milk is strained to save the curds and remove most of the whey. What remains is soft, moist cottage cheese that is ready to eat.

There are 2 ways to curdle milk. One way is to add acids like lemon juice or vinegar to milk and then heat it. This method is easily used when cooking at home. The other way to curdle milk is to add a natural ingredient called rennet and then heat it up. Many believe the first cheese ever made was made with rennet. Rennet comes from the stomach of calves, lambs, or goats. According to one theory, about 10,000 years ago sheep and goats were domesticated by people in the Middle East and kept as a source of food. Nomads on camels would carry milk in a bag made from a sheep's stomach. The hot sun, rocking motion, and rennet from the stomach bag would curdle the milk. Hungry travelers would end up with curds and whey by the end of the day. The curds satisfied their hunger, and the whey satisfied their thirst.

It is possible that the first cheese was made by accident. But, the outcome was so positive that cheese-making practices grew and spread throughout Europe and eventually to the United States. Cottage cheese is thought to be the first cheese made in America. In the early seventeenth century, Puritan dairy farmers brought their knowledge of cheese making with them when they immigrated to the New World.

Today cottage cheese is a popular dairy product and nutritious to eat as part of a balanced diet. It is rich in both calcium and protein, nutrients the body needs to be healthy. Calcium is used by the body to build strong bones and teeth. Protein is used to build strong muscles. Cottage cheese is enjoyed plain or with fruit and herbs added.

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Miss Muffet may not have known that the curds and whey she was eating was cottage cheese, but if she was a real little girl, she might have. Some trace the origin of the name to the same time period as the nursery rhyme.