The Hidden History of Cheese in Asia: From Steppe to Pizza

Name Date Class

Reading

1 Open a bag at a market stall in the Himalayas and you may find what looks like a handful of pale stones. One is as hard as chalk. The seller suggests putting it in your mouth and waiting. Slowly, over many minutes, it softens enough to chew. This is chhurpi, a cheese made from yak and cow milk, and it is also exported to the United States, where it is sold mainly as a dog chew. The idea that cheese is a European invention with little connection to Asia is common. It is also a **misconception**.

2 The evidence for ancient dairy in Asia is solid. Proteins preserved in the dental plaque of people buried in Mongolia show that some of them ate dairy around 5,000 years ago. In China's Tarim Basin, cheese made with kefir cultures was found on mummies about 3,600 years old, described as the oldest cheese ever found. The puzzle is that many adults across Asia cannot easily digest fresh milk. Cheese and soured milk offered a way around the problem, because much of the lactose, the sugar that causes the trouble, drains away with the whey or is broken down by bacteria. For early herders, cheese was less a luxury than a piece of practical **ingenuity**.

3 On the Eurasian steppe, the great problem was movement. European cheeses are often large wheels ripened slowly in cool cellars, which suits people who stay in one place. Mongolian, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz **pastoralists** lived differently, so they dried their milk. Curds were shaped into small lumps, set out on the roof of a tent, and stored for the winter. These foods, called aaruul in Mongolian and qurt in several Turkic languages, keep for a very long time. Fresh milk is **perishable**, and for people on the move, drying was the most reliable way to store it. Some food scholars argue that dried curds are not really cheese at all, but the hard, portable lump has long been a **hallmark** of steppe cooking.

4 In South Asia, the story turns on a technique. Paneer, the firm white cheese found in countless Indian dishes, is made by adding an acid such as lemon juice to hot milk. It needs no animal rennet, which makes it easy to use in vegetarian cooking. Where the technique came from is **contested**. Some sources credit Persian and Afghan arrivals, since the word itself comes from the Persian for cheese. Others argue that Portuguese settlers brought the method to seventeenth-century Bengal, and one theory adds that an older **taboo** against splitting milk had slowed its spread. What is certain is that fresh cheese became the base of eastern India's best-known sweets. One of them, the rasgulla, caused such a quarrel over its origin that West Bengal and Odisha each ended up with protected-name status for their own version.

5 East Asia's story is one of rise and fade. Dairy reached the Chinese court early, partly through Buddhism, which used milk in ritual and medicine, and historians see evidence of a substantial dairy industry under the Tang dynasty. Japan adopted the practice around the seventh century, and its court produced so, a dense food made by boiling milk down for hours. It was aristocratic **patronage**, not popular appetite, that sustained it, so when court power weakened in the late Heian period, the industry, historians suggest, began to **dwindle**. In China, dairy never disappeared completely. A Ming-dynasty text describes curdling milk with vinegar much as tofu is made, and in Yunnan the Bai people still make rushan, a fan-shaped cow's-milk cheese that is a **staple** of local cooking.

6 Korea's cheese history is short and unusually personal. In the 1960s, a Belgian priest named Didier t'Serstevens began keeping goats in the small town of Imsil to give struggling farmers an income, and he had to persuade them that cheese was like tofu made from milk. It was Imsil's mozzarella that, according to one Korean newspaper, went into the country's first pizza shop in 1972. Pizza, burgers, and bakeries have since carried cheese into everyday meals, though the pace differs across the region. Estimates from the late 2010s and early 2020s put average intake at roughly two to three kilograms a year in South Korea and Japan, but at under a third of a kilogram in China, against about 18 kilograms in Europe. Analysts say Chinese shoppers mostly buy processed slices, which suit the local **palate** better than strong natural cheeses, and cheese has made only modest **inroads** there.

7 Japan offers a final twist. When schools closed in early 2020, farmers lost one of their biggest customers and were left with a **surplus** of milk. Home cooks on social media began to **revive** so, the thousand-year-old dairy food, as a way to use it up. History had become a cooking trend. Which of Asia's old cheeses, if any, will follow it into the **mainstream** next?

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**misconception**	_____	**A**	cleverness in solving a practical problem
2	**ingenuity**	_____	**B**	an amount left over beyond what is needed
3	**pastoralists**	_____	**C**	bring something old back into use or life
4	**perishable**	_____	**D**	become gradually smaller or fewer
5	**hallmark**	_____	**E**	financial support from a wealthy person or group
6	**contested**	_____	**F**	the ideas and tastes that most people accept
7	**taboo**	_____	**G**	a typical feature that makes something recognizable
8	**patronage**	_____	**H**	people who raise grazing animals and move with them
9	**dwindle**	_____	**I**	a custom that forbids something as improper
10	**staple**	_____	**J**	a person's sense of taste and flavor preferences
11	**palate**	_____	**K**	gradual progress into a new area or market
12	**inroads**	_____	**L**	likely to go bad quickly if not preserved
13	**surplus**	_____	**M**	argued over and not agreed upon by everyone
14	**revive**	_____	**N**	a mistaken belief shared by many people
15	**mainstream**	_____	**O**	a main food eaten regularly as part of a diet

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

contested	**dwindle**	**ingenuity**	**inroads**	**mainstream**	**misconception**	**palate**	**pastoralists**	**patronage**
perishable	**revive**	**staple**	**surplus**	**taboo**				

1 It is a common _____ that we use only ten percent of our brains.

2 Their _____ in repairing the bridge with simple tools impressed everyone.

3 Mountain _____ move their herds to higher pasture each summer.

4 Fresh strawberries are highly _____ and should be eaten within days.

5 The ownership of the island has been _____ for decades.

6 In some families, talking about money is a _____ .

7 The orchestra survived thanks to the generous _____ of a local businessman.

8 If nobody visits the museum, its funding will _____ year by year.

9 Rice is a daily _____ for millions of households.

10 The spicy dish was too strong for my delicate _____ .

11 Streaming services have made deep _____ into the film industry.

12 The bakery sold its _____ at half price at the end of the day.

13 The new director hopes to _____ the town's old music festival.

14 Once a niche hobby, board games have entered the _____ .

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 Why does the writer begin with the example of chhurpi, and what common idea about cheese does it challenge?

2 What two pieces of archaeological evidence does the reading give for ancient dairy in Asia?

3 How did cheese and soured milk help people who could not easily digest fresh milk?

4 Why were dried curds better suited to steppe herders than large cellar-ripened cheese wheels?

5 Why does the writer say that dried curds may not count as cheese, and does this change the argument of the reading?

6 How is paneer made, and what are the main theories about where the technique came from?

7 According to the reading, why did the Japanese court's dairy industry begin to decline, and how sure is the writer about this?

8 What does the story of Imsil show about how new foods can take root in a country?

9 The reading moves from ancient evidence to a modern trend in Japan. Why might the writer have chosen this order, and how does it affect the final question?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"Historians agree that paneer first came from Persia."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that cheese has little connection to Asia."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer end the reading with a question? Is its purpose to predict the future, to leave the topic open, or something else?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** Chhurpi is eaten in the Himalayas and is also sold abroad as a dog chew.

2 **T / F** The cheese found in the Tarim Basin was on mummies about 3,600 years old.

3 **T / F** The reading says lactose is the sugar that makes fresh milk hard for some adults to digest.

4 **T / F** The reading says large European-style cheese wheels were ideal for herders who moved often.

5 **T / F** The reading says that all food scholars agree that dried curds are cheese.

6 **T / F** Paneer is made by adding animal rennet to hot milk.

7 **T / F** The reading says historians have settled where paneer came from.

8 **T / F** Japan's so was made by boiling milk down for hours.

9 **T / F** Didier t'Serstevens began his work in Imsil in the 1960s.

10 **T / F** Japanese farmers had too little milk in early 2020.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1. Do you eat cheese? If so, what kinds do you like, and when did you first try them?
2. What is a food from your region that visitors often find strange at first? What would you say to help them try it?
3. Is there a food in your family that was made to last through a long winter or a long journey? How was it prepared?
4. The reading says many adults across Asia cannot easily digest fresh milk. Do you or people you know avoid dairy? How do people manage?
5. The reading says dried curds may not count as cheese. Who should decide what a word like "cheese" means: scientists, cooks, governments, or ordinary speakers?
6. Have you ever believed something about another country's food that turned out to be wrong? What changed your mind?
7. The reading says fresh cheese became the base of eastern India's best-known sweets. Which foods in your country were invented by cooks who made use of whatever they had?
8. Two Indian states each received protected-name status for their own rasgulla. Should a place be able to own the name of a food? Why or why not?
9. The reading says Japan's court dairy industry depended on aristocratic support. What happens to a food tradition when the group that supports it disappears?
10. A priest in Imsil had to explain cheese to farmers by comparing it to tofu. What comparison would you use to introduce an unfamiliar food to someone?
11. The reading says pizza, burgers, and bakeries have carried cheese into everyday meals. Is it good or bad when a global food becomes the default version of a local one?
12. In early 2020, home cooks revived an ancient Japanese dairy food to help farmers. Can small personal choices, such as what we cook, really support local producers?
13. The reading challenges the idea that cheese is a European invention. How could we make the history of other foods more global?
14. Which of the old cheeses in the reading do you think has the best chance of reaching the mainstream, and what would it need to succeed?

Language Focus: Cleft Sentences for Emphasis

A cleft sentence splits one idea into two parts to put the most important information in focus. The main patterns are It + be + focus + that/who … and What + clause + be + focus.

In the reading:

- "**What is certain is that** fresh cheese became the base of eastern India's best-known sweets."
- "**It was** aristocratic patronage, not popular appetite, **that** sustained it…"
- "**It was** Imsil's mozzarella **that**, according to one Korean newspaper, went into the country's first pizza shop in 1972."

Practice: Rewrite this sentence as a cleft sentence that stresses the underlined idea: *Price and convenience will decide whether these cheeses succeed.* Use *It is … that* or *What … is*.

Activities and speed challenge
englishbridges.com/lessons/cheese-in-asia

Notes