

## Here's Why The FDA's New Cheesemaking Ban Is Terrible News For Artisans

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The latest ruling on cheesemaking literally stinks, and most Americans aren't going to be happy about it.

As most of us are focused on the [fight against processed foods](#), the Food and Drug Administration appears to be fighting *for* processed foods -- at least as far as cheese goes.

Hundreds of small business owners and artisanal cheesemakers were left aghast at a landmark executive decree from the FDA, which would ban the traditional method of aging cheese on wooden boards. [Most cheese that isn't manufactured](#) is aged by placing it on wooden boards, a centuries-old practice with relatively few documented health conflicts or concerns. However, the FDA, after citing numerous code violations (and yet a lack of any scientific research) has decided to [forgo its usual comment-rule making process](#), instead issuing [this statement](#):

“The porous structure of wood enables it to absorb and retain bacteria, therefore bacteria generally colonize not only the surface but also the inside layers of wood. The shelves or boards used for aging make direct contact with finished products; hence they could be a potential source of pathogenic microorganisms in the finished products.”

Although the relationship between the FDA and traditional cheesemakers has [always been a rocky one](#), this move would spell doom for the artisans who make the cheese, and the millions of people who enjoy it. Already, nearly [1,500 people have signed a White House petition](#) to force the Obama Administration into getting involved. Others are going directly to the source and [emailing the FDA](#). Already, reddit is abuzz with the prospect of ["Speakcheesies"](#) (basically just a smellier speakeasy) for future illegal cheese. Before you go stocking up on your favorite cheese, however, consider these facts that help explain the argument a bit better:

**Wait a second. Why are we suddenly afraid of bacteria? Isn't bacteria what actually makes cheese taste good?**

Yes, [yes it is](#). There's good bacteria and there's bad bacteria, and good bacteria is used to acidify milk's sugars into lactic acid.

**Why would the FDA want to do this?**

The [FDA's concern](#) is a nasty infection called *Listeriosis*, which comes from "eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*." This can be [prevented by properly preparing food](#), which is where the whole "aging cheese on wooden boards" thing comes in. And while the boards are indeed porous, most of the [bacteria and fungi](#) found on the wood is harmless, and actually helps create the unique flavors found in our favorite cheeses.

However, [the FDA has stated that](#), "Wooden shelves or boards cannot be adequately cleaned and sanitized" which is where scientific research has proven that claim wrong. As stated in the research paper, "[Future Uses of Wooden Boards for Aging Cheeses](#)," which was written in 2013 by experts Bénédicte Coudé & Dr. Bill Wendorff, "The present study shows that the use of wooden shelves does not affect the hygienic safety of cheeses if such shelves are in good repair and are thoroughly cleaned and sanitized by heat treatment."

### **So, the FDA is acting without legal authority here. How is that even allowed?**

In the past, the FDA has used a "[comment rule-making](#)" process, which is basically a democratic way to bring about public discussion on a particular issue before making any sort of final ruling. In this case, the [FDA didn't use this process](#) and just went ahead and banned the aging process with [little intention of repealing it](#), which is what has left so many in the cheesemaking industry and the general public in shock.

### **What kind of cheeses are aged on wooden boards that'll be affected by this?**

Most American-made cheeses are aged on wood, but European imports will be affected as well. As Rob Kaufelt, who owns Murray's Cheese in New York [told Slate](#), European cheeses like Beaufort, Comté, Reblochon, Abondance, Vacherin Mont d'Or, Salers and Parmigiano Reggiano will be affected because of the way they are aged.

### **So this won't only affect American cheesemakers?**

Actually, most of the cheeses made by this particular process of aging are European and Canadian. [The Cato Institute pointed out](#) that the "ban cheese aged on wooden boards could potentially shut out the bulk of imports from Europe" in their aptly titled article "[Did the FDA just ban European cheese?](#)" As it appears, yes, along with some [Canadian cheeses](#) as well.

### **How long until this begins taking effect?**

The [FDA just issued this decree](#), but there has been a [crackdown on general food safety](#) since President Obama signed the [Food Safety Modernization Act](#) in 2011. The FDA's decree to ban wooden boards came out recently after an inspection of certain [artisan cheesemakers in New York](#), but it's unclear how soon the ban will go into effect. And if it does happen soon, expect a LOT of debate and backlash.

### **Will Kraft be hurt by this?**

No, Kraft Foods won't be hurt by this, and [neither will Leprino Foods](#), the [world's largest](#)

[mozzarella cheese producer](#). Kraft and Leprino are not cheesemakers, they are [cheese manufacturers](#), which means that they don't use the traditional artisan techniques.

### **What are these artisan cheesemakers going to do?**

As Wisconsin cheesemaker [Chris Roelli told Cheese Underground](#), the FDA's recent ruling is a "potentially devastating development" for American cheesemakers. Numerous news outlets have [called upon the FDA](#) to bring the comment-ruling process back and allow the public (and the small businesses that make them) to fight to keep the foods they love.