



This FDA Ruling Could Devastate Small U.S. Cheesemaking Businesses

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The U.S. Federal Drug Administration has sent a shock wave through the artisan cheesemaking community by saying that cheese can no longer be aged on wooden boards.

The FDA claims using wooden boards, a time-honored technique in cheesemaking, leads to health risks from microbes. The issue apparently came up after the federal agency cited some New York State cheesemakers for the practice.

When the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets' Division of Milk Control and Dairy Services asked the FDA for clarification, they received this. In comments now widely circulated online, Monica Metz, Branch Chief of FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition's (CFSAN) Dairy and Egg Branch [stated](#):

“Microbial pathogens can be controlled if food facilities engage in good manufacturing practice. Proper cleaning and sanitation of equipment and facilities are absolutely necessary to ensure that pathogens do not find niches to reside and proliferate. Adequate cleaning and sanitation procedures are particularly important in facilities where persistent strains of pathogenic microorganisms like *Listeria monocytogenes* could be found. The use of wooden shelves, rough or otherwise, for cheese ripening does not conform to cGMP requirements, which require that “all plant equipment and utensils shall be so designed and of such material and workmanship as to be adequately cleanable, and shall be properly maintained.” 21 CFR 110.40(a). Wooden shelves or boards cannot be adequately cleaned and sanitized. 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.”

Obviously, defenders of the technique feel the government is over dramatizing the risk.

Writing on the Cheese Underground blog, Jeanne Carpenter, a former spokeswoman for the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture [explains](#):

“Many of the most awarded and well-respected American artisan cheeses are currently aged on wooden boards. American Cheese Society triple Best in Show winner Pleasant Ridge Reserve from Uplands Cheese in Wisconsin is cured on wooden boards. Likewise for award-winners Cabot Clothbound in Vermont, current U.S. Champion cheese Marieke Feonegreek, and 2013 Best in Show Runner-Up Bleu Mont Bandaged Cheddar.”

The change to plastic or stainless steel surfaces will not only represent an added expense.

Many cheese enthusiasts argue it will alter the technique that allows small cheesemakers to differentiate their product from big corporate cheesemakers like Velveeta or Kraft, basically eliminating their competitive edge.

Critics like Walter Olson of the Cato Institute believe the real problem is the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) of 2011. He warns it will target many other small food businesses with standards that differ from larger producers. On his blog *Overlawyered*, Olson [points out](#):

“We warned at the time that the ill-conceived Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) of 2011 would tend to choke off many non-industrial food sources.”

And the law may not even stop at small U.S. cheesemaking businesses, Olson adds:

The agency apparently intends to apply the same standard to imported cheese as well, which means that in addition to devastating artisanal cheese producers in this country, the move would cut off Americans’ access to large numbers of classic European cheeses, many of which, like Comte and Reblochon, “are required to be aged on wood by their standard of identity.”