

The Tradition of Cheese-making in the Netherlands

One of the most enjoyable ways to learn about a country's culture is through the local cuisine. Every bite reveals a glimpse at the inextricable connection between people and land.^{1,2} In the Netherlands, this story is told, in part, through the tradition of cheese-making.

Like many countries, the Netherlands boasts a long history of cheese-making. The earliest record of Dutch cheese production comes from Gouda in the 12th century. The Middle Ages witnessed a boom in cheese-making.³ Dutch polders—the iconic landscape of the countryside that has been reclaimed from the sea—played a major role in this development. The humid, rainy weather that persists year-round, in combination with this arable polder soil, helps create a lush grassland for grazing, and, therefore, a delicious base for making cheeses!⁴ Additionally, by packaging the cheeses in smaller wheels with colorful dye to deter pests, these cheeses were able to be preserved better and shipped with ease.⁵

The prevalence of the depiction of cheese in historical Dutch art is a true testament to its cultural importance. Just as it served as a ballast for the economy, cheese also sat front and center in many paintings. Look no further than works like *Still Life with Cheeses, Almonds, and Pretzels* (c. 1615) by Clara Peeters or Floris van Dijck's *Still Life with Cheese* (c. 1615).⁶

Nearly 1,000 years later, Gouda is still one of the most well-loved cheese varieties. Aside from Gouda, you may recognize names like Edam, Leyden, or Maasdam. (Fun fact: the cheeses were named for the market towns at which they were sold—not the location of production!) There are a plethora of other varieties that are made from both cow's and goat's milk, and many Dutch cheeses can be distinguished by their notes and inclusions of herbs and seeds.⁷

Today, varieties of Dutch cheeses grace supermarket shelves all over the world. Many of these cheeses are made in factories now, but there are still traditional makers and sellers. These cheese markets draw tourists to the Netherlands from all over the world and help solidify cheese (alongside clogs and windmills) as an indelible image of pastoral Dutch heritage.^{8,9}

So the next time you have a slice of Gouda on your sandwich, think of the millennia of interactions between farmers, reclaimed soils, cows, and markets, and appreciate the rich history of the Netherlands!

Curious to see traditional Dutch cheese-making for yourself?

Take your family or friends on a private full-day tour with us to Giethoorn and Zaanse Schans and see and sample the delicacies of traditional Dutch cheese-making in action at the cheese and clog factory.¹⁰ Book now [here!](#)

What other aspects of Dutch culture, cuisine, and landscape are you curious to learn more about in a blog? E-mail us at travel@dutch-tours.com and let us know!

References

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