The Canadian Jewish news

Looking at what makes cheese kosher

Jennifer M. MacLeod, Special to The CJN, Friday, April 20, 2012

TORONTO — For most of us, the phrase "curds and whey" doesn't mean much, but for Ruth Klahsen of Monforte Dairy, curds (and whey) are a way (or whey?) of life.

At the Shoresh Food Conference this winter, Klahsen joined Rabbi Aaron Levy and Andrea Most for a panel on "Kosher Curds," which looked at the ramifications of kosher cheesemaking.

Klahsen, of Mennonite origin and knowing little about kashrut, offered his-torical and practical insights, while Rabbi Levy, a graduate of the Orthodox Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, presented halachic and traditional Jewish viewpoints. Most, asso-ciate professor of American literature and Jewish studies at the University of Toronto, moderated and fielded questions.

Historically, Klahsen explained at the Miles Nadal JCC gathering, cheesemaking was women's work, preserving crucial milk proteins for the long winter period when cows, bred seasonally, wouldn't give milk.

Cheese is made by coagulating the milk, then separating the solid proteins (curds) from the watery liquid in which they're usually suspended (whey).

The easiest way to make cheese, Klah-sen said, is to leave the milk overnight. It will acidify itself naturally, curdling to produce soft, fresh cheeses like chèvre or quark. But for a solid cheese that stays fresh all winter, you need a higher con-centration of protein, which calls for a coagulant, typically rennet, an enzyme complex that's historically found in calf stomachs, although a genetically modi-fied vegetarian version is now available.

This is where where kashrut comes in, and Rabbi Levy explained the Halachah behind the derivation of rennet, present-ing a series of sections from the Mishnah and Shulchan Aruch explaining permitted and forbidden sources of rennet.

Rennet isn't the only issue, though. If the animal wasn't milked by a Jew, or the milking was unsupervised, milk could have been mixed with that of a non-kosher mammal, like a horse or a pig. Some sources suggest that any cheese made by non-Jews is automatically pre-sumed to not be kosher.

Rabbi Levy pointed out that the rea-sons stated for this presumption are un-clear. One rabbi in the Talmud is quoted as suggesting that non-Jews used to leave milk uncovered

in snake-infested areas, where a snake might potentially have in-jected venom into the uncovered milk. The presumption is that Jewish cheese-makers were more careful.

While origins of these customs may be surrounded by questions, they eventually became encoded in Halachah. Today, to avoid these and other potential problems, kosher cheese must bear a reliable hechsher (kosher symbol), which, as Klahsen pointed out, adds another layer of regulation, not to mention expense, on top of a heavily regulated and expensive product.

With milk becoming more and more expensive every year, a small dairy like Monforte (which isn't currently kosher) can't afford to take on the higher fixed costs that come with supervision. Even with her loyal fan base, Klahsen is $1.4 million in debt, partly because she was evicted on short notice a couple of years ago from the location she'd worked out of for years.

What would be involved in koshering the curds of a small company like Mon-forte? Rabbi Levy called both the Kash-ruth Council, which administers the COR kosher symbol, and Badatz Toronto, and both listed essentially the same three steps.

First, all equipment would need to be made kosher – fairly simple for cold items, but more involved if, as for cheesemaking, food products go over 110 degrees Fahrenheit. Then, the kashrut organization would screen the ingredi-ents. Milk isn't a concern here because it's government-regulated, but other products like cultures and rennet would be checked to ensure that they're certi-fied.

Finally, a mashgiach (kashrut supervi-sor), would need to be present from start to finish, while any hard cheese was being produced. In the case of COR, the mash-giach is the one to add the culture and rennet, thus meeting the additional strin-gency of gevinat Yisrael (cheese of a Jew). For soft cheeses, with fewer concerns, only random spot checks are needed.

It's possible that a "working mash-giach" arrangement, where a full-time kosher supervisor would go partly on pay-roll, could help cut the cost of going ko-sher. Additionally, a community-supported agriculture (CSA)-type model, where kosher consumers signed up for high-quality local cheese ahead of time, might make the proposition more afford-able.

Several audience members asked whether kosher supervision is really nec-essary, particularly with a business like Monforte, which delivers directly to To-ronto customers through a CSA model and farmers' markets. "Me to you – that's our chain of distribution," Klahsen said.

Rabbi Levy explained that in the past, people did count on "knowing who made something." However, with the scale and general anonymity of modern food pro-cessing, it's best to rely on the word of a witness, like the mashgiach, who "really knows what's involved in kosher."