

FROM CHEESE TO CHEESE FOOD

Kraft persuaded Americans to accept cheese by divorcing it from its microbe-laden origins

BY CURT WOHLER

THE ART OF MAKING cheese is thousands of years old, but the food most Americans have grown up calling cheese is a twentieth-century invention. A hundred years ago, America lagged far behind Europe in cheese consumption. Dairy scientists and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) officials resolved to do something about it. The problem, they believed, was the erratic nature of domestic cheese. Even a master cheese-maker couldn't consistently produce batch after batch of top quality. Countless variables shaped the final product, and scientists

thought they could help by applying industrial techniques based on scientific principles.

It wasn't that simple. Most food we eat is dead, save for the bacteria and molds we fend off with canning, refrigeration, and chemical preservatives. But the microbes we seek to eradicate from other foods play an essential and extremely complicated role in transforming milk into cheese. Dairy scientists developed what they thought was an ideal bacterial brew for making first-class cheese. USDA field agents urged cheese factories to pasteurize their milk to

kill the indigenous microbes and substitute a laboratory-produced culture. But the mysteries of cheese did not yield so easily. The USDA's recommendations failed to ensure predictable results and often produced inferior cheese. A field agent reported that a certain amount of "natural contamination" improved quality at one factory. This earned him a stern rebuke from Washington.

American cheese-making gradually improved, but finding better methods to produce what people weren't buying anyway did little to enhance America's meager appetite for cheese.

The man who did more than anyone else to change the situation was not a scientist but a salesman. James L. Kraft (1874–1953), a native of Ontario, Canada, moved to Chicago in 1903 and founded an empire with \$65. He invested in a horse and wagon and began peddling cheese to Chicago grocers. Cheese-mongering didn't look like a promising line for an ambitious young man, but Kraft saw an opportunity.

He understood that the problem wasn't bad cheese, but simply cheese. Like wine, cheese improves with time. But it ages fast, and a cheese

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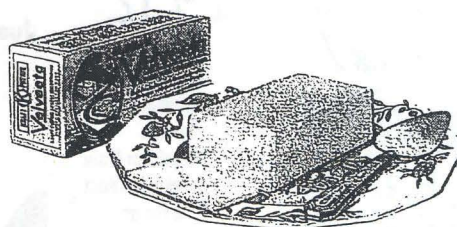
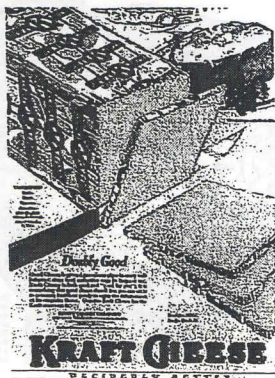


1800s

Workers in a nineteenth-century Netherlands factory use traditional methods to cure their tasty but highly perishable cheese.

1925

Early advertisements played up Kraft cheese's nutritional value—a subtle way of saying that it wouldn't give you food poisoning.



1928

Kraft boasted that its new and highly processed Velveeta cheese food was as "digestible as milk itself!"

1934

A worker puts lids on cans of Kraft cheese spread at the company's factory in Jersey City, New Jersey.

