

“...granting the female figure ... both the role of guardian of food knowledge and that of custodian of sexuality.” - Massimo Montanari, *Food Is Culture*

The Montanari quote sparked my research in 2021, I opened my 2022 DZRA presentation with it, and it's how I began my talk today at MOFAD<sup>1</sup> for Women's History Month, 2023. It's an affirmation for myself and the audience—women are powerful. Today's discussion was the best yet and I couldn't have asked for a more perfect environment in which to launch the release of my book, *Milkmaid: A Global History of Women in Dairy*. It was an intimate and engaging group: NYU Food Studies graduates, women's studies students, historians, Art Historians, food enthusiasts and of course members of the cheese community. We were all gathered for the same reason, to support and celebrate women and explore the cultural impact of the relationship between women and dairy.

The significance of the role women have held in the human relationship to ruminants and in the culture surrounding dairy is undeniable. Look at the etymology of *dairy*<sup>2</sup>, it stems from words that meant “female servant” and later “woman in charge of making butter and cheese.” The very word we use to describe a whole food group and industry is tied to women. The relationship between women and dairy is inherent—it is natural, instinctual, maternal, powerful, sexual and sexualized. Every woman I've met in the cheese world has been inspiring, strong, and intelligent and it was my desire to learn more about this deep connection between women and dairy that led me to do my research.

Classic gender roles follow as such, in the domestic realm or “Sphere of Domesticity”<sup>3</sup>, *woman* is hobby keeper, homemaker, family cook; in the professional world *man* is expert, money earner, chef, so on and so forth. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution and as men sought to mechanise cheese production, women were essentially mined and stripped of their *expertise in* and *authority on* dairy and cheesemaking. Classic history is that of the male experience, the work of men, their accounts and points of view, their triumphs and tribulations. The female voice in history is often missing. Save for brief sections and biographies in larger publications, highlighting usual key figures, there was no one resource to learn about the history and role which women have played in the dairy industry and the culture surrounding it. I wrote *Milkmaid* to be a singular and comprehensive response to this void. The research documents women's significance starting from early human history, spanning the globe and cultures; it explores influences on art, literature and popular culture, and examines how women have led the way in traditional and contemporary dairy practices.

My work began where the story of cheese began, using texts from Mark Kurlansky and Paul Kinstedt to guide my path. I investigated further how dairy's early role in religion and goddess worship created an everlasting bond with women. I followed the history from pastoral societies all the way to industrial ones; the partial removal of women from dairy and the eventual return.

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<sup>1</sup> The Museum of Food and Drink

<sup>2</sup> Old Norse, *deigja*. Middle English, *deie*, *daie*.

<sup>3</sup> The Sphere, or Cult of Domesticity was an ideology upheld by white upper and middle class Americans and the English. It was a value system that promoted ideas of proper femininity and a woman's role within the home and the balance of work and family life.

Broadening my scope to include more than just literal cheese production, I looked at the way dairy has been linked to the feminine in myths, art, and advertisement. Feminist texts regarding women's bodies and labor and capitalism became essential for applying critical thinking to all of my findings. Seeking information outside the predominant scope of central Europe and America, I found myself ever more excited as I learned about women in dairy in Africa, South America, Eastern Europe and Asia—places and people that are often overlooked in the white, Euro-centric world of dairy.

After months of research I eventually steered my work towards the numerous women I have encountered or read about in today's world of cheese. I conducted hours of interviews with women in the industry—cheesemakers, business owners, cheesemongers; not only to gather their knowledge, but to tell their stories and learn how they came to be part of this culture. It came as no surprise that many were pioneers in their own rights, and just as original female cheesemakers passed down their knowledge, so too had these women been both recipients and givers of a sisterhood of knowledge. It is in fact women who have been an incredible driving force in the resurgence of traditional cheesemaking practices and for breathing new life and excitement into all aspects of the industry; women's expertise and influence is unquestionable and enduring.

I've been giving talks and leading panels like the one I gave today for over a year now and every time I am delighted to meet my audience. While I specifically set out to create a resource for women it has brought me such joy to know that you don't have to work in the industry, or be a woman to appreciate and learn from my findings. At its most basic level the research resulted in a single comprehensive go-to resource for anyone seeking to learn more about women in dairy. More broadly speaking though, it has given recognition to those who may not have received it; it has ignited deeper conversations around the work women do; and it has aided and inspired more women and young girls to seek careers and lives in the world of dairy. The interviews I conducted provided insight into what it takes to start your own company, become a cheesemaker, or enter the industry at any level. Having this resource made it easier for those interested to seek out key figures and learn about the immensely important role women have played and still continue to play. As I continue to speak on my findings and more people read *Milkmaid* I hope to see more women cheesemongers, women-owned shops, and women cheesemakers and farm owners. I hope that young girls recognize that they are part of an amazing story, and are inspired to carry on family farm traditions/companies or start new ones of their own.

Dairy is a profound and persistent presence in human history and culture. It is a testament to human ingenuity and resourcefulness and representative of the importance of the bond between people, the land, and animals. *Milkmaid* has helped those who may be dismissive of the consumption of dairy products and the industry at large to recognize why it is an important and vital tradition to be carried on and supported. The importance of dairy is a story that deserves to be told and upheld and if the role of women is not fully recognized then it is not a story fully told.