



## What's in a cheese? Just look at label

I noticed it says “natural cheese” on the label of my favorite cheese. Isn't all cheese “natural”?

It all depends on your definition. In the world of cheese, the word “natural” differentiates your favorite cheese from its “processed” counterpart.

Natural cheeses are made by separating milk into curds and whey. The watery whey is drained off, and, with the help of bacteria, enzymes and, often, rennet, the curds ferment and sooner or later become cheese. Natural cheeses include fresh, or unripened, cheese such as ricotta, cream cheese and cottage cheese, and ripened cheese, which ranges from soft (including brie and camembert) to very hard (such as parmesan and romano) to everything in between (including cheddar, swiss, gouda and muenster).

Processed cheese, also called “process cheese” or American cheese, is made by blending natural cheeses, both aged and unripened, pasteurizing them, and adding emulsifiers for smoothness. For longer shelf life, salt and preservatives are also added. The texture of processed cheeses is much smoother than that of natural cheese, and it depends on your personal preference whether that's a good or bad thing. Processed cheeses melt easily, slice easily, keep for a long time, and

are uniform in texture, flavor and appearance.

You also will see products labeled “pasteurized processed cheese food” or “pasteurized process cheese spread.” They contain additional liquid, such as milk or whey, and stabilizers for softness. Food and Drug Administration standards say these products must contain at least 51 percent cheese. Processed cheese food has a maximum moisture content of 44 percent, while the spread has a moisture content of between 44 percent and 60 percent.

If you're really interested, the FDA's U.S. Code of Federal Regulations (Title 21, Part 133) lists specific standards for more than 70 different cheese products, from asiago to swiss, including the precise definitions for products such as pasteurized process cheese food.

According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, one serving of natural cheese is a mere 1.5 ounces. Because of its higher moisture content (and thus lower calorie count per ounce), you can have a full 2 ounces of processed cheese for a serving.

*Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or [filipic.3@osu.edu](mailto:filipic.3@osu.edu).*

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For the week of  
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### Editor:

This column was reviewed by Valente Alvarez, dairy specialist and food scientist with Ohio State University Extension in the Department of Food Science and Technology.

**Note:** The USDA-Agricultural Marketing Service Quality Standards have information on the most common natural cheeses. You can find them at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/standards/standair.htm>.

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