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Cheese or No Cheese: A Critical Examination

Few culinary debates have endured with as much passion, cultural weight, and unnecessary intensity as the question of whether cheese belongs on a burger. At first glance, this issue may appear trivial, even laughable, particularly when measured against more pressing global concerns such as climate change, economic instability, or the correct pronunciation of “gyro.” However, beneath the melted surface of this debate lies a surprisingly complex conversation involving tradition, identity, regional loyalty, sensory perception, and philosophical views of food purity. This paper argues that the cheese-versus-no-cheese debate reflects broader human tendencies toward tribalism, nostalgia, and the pursuit of perceived perfection, all expressed through a single, grease-stained bun.

The hamburger, in its earliest documented form, did not include cheese. Food historians trace the burger’s origins to late nineteenth-century America, where ground beef patties were served plainly between slices of bread for convenience, portability, and economic efficiency. These early burgers emphasized meat quality and simplicity, aligning with a cultural preference for hearty, unadulterated fare. Cheese, though widely available at the time, was typically reserved for separate consumption rather than integration into meat-based dishes.

The addition of cheese to the burger occurred in the early twentieth century, coinciding with the rise of diners, drive-ins, and mass-produced processed cheese. According to Meltman, “cheese was initially added not for flavor enhancement, but as a practical solution to

inconsistencies in meat quality and cooking techniques” (Meltman, 103). Melted cheese concealed dryness, uneven seasoning, and overcooking, creating a more uniform eating experience. What began as a culinary workaround eventually became a cultural expectation, giving birth to the modern cheeseburger. Even Christians would agree that the Bible shows the world that God likes flavors bursting and pleasure in what humans consume (Det. 8:7-10; 1 Tim. 4:4-5, NIV).

Cultural identity plays a significant role in shaping opinions about cheese on burgers. In many Midwestern regions, the cheeseburger is considered the default configuration, and ordering a burger without cheese is often met with confusion or concern. In contrast, certain culinary circles in Texas and California emphasize beef purity, arguing that high-quality meat requires no embellishment. These regional distinctions are rarely the result of personal experimentation and more often reflect inherited food traditions.

Sociologist Patty Bun suggests that “burger preferences are frequently passed down through generations, functioning as a form of culinary inheritance” (Bun, 137). Family cookouts, local diners, and childhood memories reinforce specific expectations about what a “real” burger should include. As a result, choosing cheese or no cheese becomes an act of loyalty rather than taste. As Grillsoin states, “To reject one’s inherited burger style is, in some cases, to reject one’s roots” (Grillison, 99). From a sensory science perspective, cheese offers undeniable advantages. Fat enhances flavor perception, salt intensifies taste, and melted cheese contributes to textural cohesion by binding the patty to the bun. Studies from the Umami Institute demonstrate that the combination of fat and protein activates reward centers in the brain associated with satisfaction and comfort. For many eaters, a burger without cheese feels incomplete because it lacks these neurological triggers (Umami Institute, 44).

Despite these advantages, critics argue that cheese can overwhelm subtler flavors. When paired with premium beef, excessive toppings—including cheese—may obscure the meat's natural profile. Philosopher Leonard Plain famously argued that cheese is “the loudest voice in the room” (Plain, 299). That voice dominates the conversation and prevents the burger itself from being heard. From this perspective, cheese is not an enhancement but an interruption.

Burger purists maintain that restraint is essential to authenticity. A true burger, they argue, should highlight beef quality, seasoning, and cooking technique without distraction. Cheese introduces unnecessary complexity and serves as a mask for mediocrity. Without cheese, flaws in preparation become immediately apparent, forcing accountability upon the cook and honesty upon the eater. This philosophy aligns closely with minimalist food movements that prioritize essence over excess. Psychological factors also influence the cheese decision. Research indicates that individuals gravitate toward familiar food combinations, particularly in high-stress or time-constrained environments. This tendency explains the dominance of cheeseburgers on fast-food menus, where predictability is valued over experimentation. Ordering a burger without cheese requires intentional deviation from the norm, which some interpret as risk-taking behavior.

Additionally, cheese functions as a symbol of indulgence. For many consumers, choosing a cheeseburger represents permission to indulge, while declining cheese may signal health consciousness or self-discipline. In this way, the burger becomes “a moral canvas upon which individuals project their values” (Dairyton, 32). The presence or absence of cheese communicates meaning far beyond caloric content. Ethical considerations further complicate the debate. Cheese production involves dairy farming, which carries environmental and animal welfare implications. Some argue that omitting cheese represents a small but meaningful step

toward more sustainable eating practices. Others counter that focusing on cheese distracts from larger ethical concerns within industrial meat production, rendering the debate performative rather than substantive.

Philosophically, the cheese debate reflects a timeless tension between enhancement and purity. Should food strive to become the best possible version of itself through additions, or should it remain unaltered in its original form? This question mirrors broader debates in art, theology, and human identity. There is no universally correct answer, only preferences shaped by values, experiences, and context.

Ultimately, the question of cheese or no cheese on a burger cannot be resolved definitively. Both positions are grounded in legitimate arguments supported by history, culture, science, and psychology. What appears to be a trivial culinary disagreement is, in reality, a reflection of human behavior itself. Whether one chooses cheese or abstains, the true value lies not in the topping, but in the meaning we assign to our choices.

Beyond explicit references to food, Scripture consistently presents eating as a communal, relational, and celebratory act. Meals in the Bible are rarely about mere survival; instead, they function as spaces of fellowship, covenant renewal, and joy. From Genesis to Revelation, food is woven into moments of divine encounter and human connection, suggesting that enjoyment of food is not incidental but intentional within God's design (Eccl. 9:7, NIV). One of the most striking patterns in Scripture is the association between food and peace. In the ancient Near Eastern context, to share a meal with someone implied safety, reconciliation, and trust. This dynamic is evident in covenant meals throughout the Old Testament, where agreements were sealed not merely with words, but with shared eating in God's presence (Exod. 24:9–11, ESV).

Food thus becomes a tangible expression of harmony—both between people and between humanity and God.

Wisdom literature further reinforces this idea by linking simple food with contentment rather than excess. Proverbs contrasts lavish abundance with joyful sufficiency, implying that greatness in food is shaped by gratitude and context rather than quantity. A modest meal eaten in love is valued above abundance consumed in conflict, reframing “great food” as nourishment enjoyed rightly rather than indulgence pursued selfishly (Prov. 15:17, NIV).

The ministry of Jesus amplifies this theme through repeated table-centered encounters. Many of His most significant interactions occur around meals—at weddings, in private homes, and in public banquets. These scenes highlight food as a means of inclusion and grace. Jesus’ willingness to eat with social outcasts elevated ordinary meals into moments of redemptive significance, demonstrating that food can carry spiritual meaning without losing its everyday appeal (Luke 5:29–32, NIV).

Finally, Scripture concludes not with scarcity, but with abundance. The biblical narrative ends with imagery of feasting, satisfaction, and shared joy in God’s presence. This closing vision affirms that delight, celebration, and good food are not temporary concessions to human weakness, but enduring elements of God’s future restoration (Isa. 25:6 NIV; Rev. 19:9, ESV). In this way, the Bible presents great food not as a distraction from spiritual life, but as a reminder that creation itself is meant to be received with thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4:4 NIV).

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