

## The Kiseo Makers of Cebu



Buying cheese may simply take a few steps to one's favorite grocery store. But finding the locally made "kiseo" or native cheese will mean a one-hour thirty-two kilometer ride from Cebu City or Mandaue City to the mountain barangay of Tagbao, plus a forty-five minutes walk up a very high hill, before one reaches the house of "kiseo" maker Cordeliza Ardemer.

Now 60 years old, Cording has made "kiseo" since her teen age days. She recalls that she learned the craft from her mother, who also learned it from her grandmother, who had been making native cheese before World War II.

The milk they used was from native carabaos as there used to be carabaos in Tagbao and in the other mountain barangays of Cebu. But as the carabao population may have dwindled over the years, Cording and three other kiseo makers have made cheese out of the milk from their dairy cows which they got on loan from the National Dairy Authority.

The kiseo makers sell their cheese in Carbon or in Taboan markets in Cebu City proper. These earn them around P600 a week and close to three thousand pesos a month, if they are able to sell more. Some kiseo makers have managed to sell their cheese in some supermarkets in the city.

Another kiseo maker, Josefina Gabud, from the mountain barangay of Cobcawa related how kiseo was made.

One will need around five liters of fresh milk. This will be heated in a pot, but should not reach boiling point, removed from the fire and cooled. To curdle the cheese, one gradually adds vinegar, constantly stirring the mixture until it gels or until "mo unod" curds form.

Fully formed "unod" or curds are separated from the water (or whey) and are left to form further in molds. A mold is the round plastic lid of a

Nescafe glass or of some other brand.

When ready, the kiseo in the molds are transferred to a deep saucer that contains a small amount of salt. After this, the cheese is transferred back to the saucer and several pinches of salt are strewn on the top portion, after which each piece is wrapped in fresh young banana leaves.

Surprisingly, the kiseo makers seldom leave some of their cheese for home consumption as these are for sale and because, as Josefina explained "maka pa taas sa cholesterol" (it increases one's cholesterol". Yet, most of those who buy their kiseo belong to the older generation and don't care much about cholesterol, but simply want to enjoy kiseo as one of the gustatory treats of a simpler era.

The walk back to our vehicle made us hungry. Since Cording kindly gave us some cheese as samples, we decided to try the kiseo and found it delicious but quite salty indeed. With no refrigerator, the kiseo makers depend on salt as a preservative.

We noted that another product of Tagbao and of the other mountain barangays is sweet corn. Thus we bought several ears of corn and had these steamed, topping the steamed corn with our supply of kiseo. It was a delicious lunch to

three hungry researchers and a new discovery for these people; a new way to eat sweet corn topped with kiseo, for those who made native cheese but saw no other way to enjoy their produce.