

Returning the next morning from Treblinka, figuratively speaking, the Universe was appalled and wounded by what had happened billions of years in the future on Earth. Death was a part of life, but not like that! This was not the kind of story she wanted to tell. Her first instinct was to put a stop to everything, right there and then. There was still time. The canker could be nipped in the bud. The Big Bang could be aborted. Too bad if the future was stillborn. It was her right to choose.

Then she began to have second thoughts. Wasn't she throwing out the baby with the bath water? Genocide was one of the most odious crimes imaginable. But was cosmocide any better? Could she really apply THE FINAL SOLUTION to prevent The Final Solution? She thought of all the things that would not be, if she should choose to turn back the clock for good. Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Those delightful chocolate mousse desserts that she had savoured at Luigi's, probably the best restaurant in the Universe. And the cheese. The Universe recalled the vast variety of cheese that graced the table at Luigi's. "Cheese was milk's leap towards immortality," as Luigi had said to her. Her mind began to wander.

True enough, milk was to be found throughout the Universe. It was a common evolutionary solution to the problem of how to feed young that were not equipped to digest the food normally eaten by their parents. Milk was almost always a liquid, though a notable exception was to be found amongst the gas whales of Harbin. It was commonly a creamy white in colour, even if milks of virtually every colour could be found if one was willing to search long and hard enough. Those who had, foolishly looked long and hard enough, were surprised to find that the very mammals which produced exotic coloured milks were particularly savage and thus very difficult to milk. Biologists had even identified one carnivore whose diet consisted solely of foolish peasants who would come within striking range of the beast carrying three-legged stools.

All things being equal, which at the most fundamental level they are, milk was just milk. It was natural, fresh and fatty. It was a wholesome food. In short, it was an ingredient but not a creation. Essential but mundane. Cheese however, was in a quite different league. Cheese had not just evolved as a neat solution to a

biological problem. The Universe would not stop if cheese ceased to exist. Cheese wasn't necessary. But what a delight!

According to the definitive "Universal Encyclopaedia of Cheese" originally compiled by Simon de Montfort Belk, there are more than eighteen billion distinct types of cheese to be found throughout the Universe. Interestingly, only two galaxies have been positively identified to be completely cheeseless. These are to be found amongst some of the most ancient galaxies where civilisation has progressed beyond the milking of mammals and where cheese may be said to exist only in an entirely virtual form. Though even this kind of cheese may still lead to bouts of severe dreaming.

As the Universe itself is expanding, so too is the total number of known cheeses. Indeed, keeping the Encyclopaedia up to date requires a considerable effort, not just from cheese scouts out in the field, but also amongst the tasters, or "nouths" as they are known back at headquarters in de Montfort. On average, around twenty new types of cheese are added to the reference guide each day while some three or four are removed. Cheeses disappear from the Encyclopaedia for a number of reasons: new guidelines on food safety from Galactic hygiene authorities; loss of ecological niches leading to the extinction of either the milk-producing life-forms, their habitat or the cheese-makers themselves. Some cheeses prove to be transient, such as the notorious worm-infested goat cheese from Corsica, on Earth, which managed to hold its place in the Encyclopaedia for several years, only to be ruled ineligible after being judged no longer a simple cheese but an entire biosystem.

Currently, three cheeses from Earth are included in the Encyclopaedia, and a few excerpts follow to give you a flavour of what can be found in this unique reference work:

**Stilton** - known in England as the King of Cheeses, only cheese produced in the three counties of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire and made according to a strict code may be called Stilton. There are just six dairies licensed to make Stilton. It is still made in much the same way as it was when Daniel Defoe, writing in his "Tour through England & Wales" in 1727, remarked that he

“...passed through Stilton, a town famous for cheese”. And yet, Stilton was never made in the town of Stilton!

Stilton is situated about 80 miles north of London on the old Great North Road. In the 18th century, the town was a staging post for coaches travelling from London to York. Horses would be changed and travellers served light refreshments at one of the hostelrys in the town. Cooper Thornhill, an East Midlands entrepreneur, was landlord at the famous Bell Inn and it was he who introduced these travellers to a soft, creamy, blue-veined cheese which subsequently took its name from the town. Thornhill had bought the cheese from a farmer's wife by the name of Frances Pawlett who lived in nearby Melton Mowbray.

***Important note for travellers:*** most cheese connoisseurs in the Torcularis Septentrionalis star system insist on referring to Stilton as Melting Mowberry, a name they find far more poetic. And they go on to point out that as Stilton doesn't come from Stilton anyway, they can really call it whatever they like. Unfortunately the Torcularians love English cheese and apply the same sloppy terminology to other cheeses from that country. (This is known as “shooting the Brie” in the local argot, a turn of phrase that the neighbouring warlike Gurnarghians took rather too literally to heart. They developed their own equivalent of Swiss cheese by using Gruyere for firing practice. More about the Gurnarghians a little later.)

If you order Wensleydale in a Torcularis hostelry, it is just as likely you will be served Lancashire, which can revive age-old rivalries; a request for a slice of double Gloucester can lead to the arrival of two chunks of Cheddar instead; and anyone asking for Sage Derby is at risk of getting nothing more than a wedge of smelly Basildoncaster, (named after a new town planning disaster on Torcularis which sought to combine the easy shopping facilities of a dormitory suburb with the dour sense of identity of a mining community). Planners throughout the galaxy are unanimous in considering Basildoncaster and its cheese, the worst of both worlds.

**Reblochon** - was the first cheese of the Savoie region of the French Alps to be granted European certification, in 1958. The cheese is made by mixing the milks

of three different breeds of cow : abondance, tarine, and montbéliarde. The birth of this fascinating cheese is due to the ingenuity of the Savoie herdsmen. In the 13th century, the farmers were completely dependent on landowners who insisted that all the herd's milk was their property. At milking time, the herdsmen did not quite complete the milking. After the controllers had left, the herdsmen finished the milking. They “re-blochaient”. From this the cheese was named Reblochon, made with the creamy milk of a second milking. The cheeses are put into a cellar to dry, and are turned every 2 days and washed with whey. From this process, the rind turns an orange-yellow with a velvety texture. Reblochon is a well-proportioned cheese with a nutty after-taste that contrasts with a strong odour of the cellar. The creamy cheese often has a herbal aroma.

***Historical note:*** this shining example of rural revolutionary action offered by the Savoyard peasantry became the guiding light for downtrodden masses under the rule of Gurnarghian feudal lords on the planet of Demesne. Groups of rebellious serfs would break out of bondage (those left behind were described as “vassalating”) and form guerrilla units, rampaging around the countryside to extract their pound of flesh from wealthy landlords, normally from just below the knee. (This retribution was known colloquially as tugging the shylock). Their slogans were various; Milk the Rich, The Whey is the Path, Stop Treating Us Like Chattel or Free the Curds. Members of the underground movement were known as Rebolshheviks and their leader was said to be named Renin, (apparently he came from the east and milk would curdle during his longest speeches).

A minority faction of radical pig farmers, inspired by the Rebolshhevik lead, tried to apply the same techniques to their swine. They would cut the feet off their pigs at night and equip them with short painted stilts in the hope that their lords and masters would not notice the difference in the daylight. Their slogans were more urbane; Save Our Bacon, Stop Hamming It Up or Buddy Can You Spare A Rib and inevitably, they were termed Trotterskyists.

**Roquefort** - the Earth's greatest blue cheese, produced entirely from ewes that feed on the uplands of Causses, a limestone plateau ringed by cliffs found in the Aveyron region of France. It is the quality of the milk, the processing of the curd, the adding of “penicillium roqueforti” and finally the ripening in naturally damp

and airy caves under the village of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon that give us this unique and remarkable cheese. The exterior aspect of a Roquefort should be white and faintly shiny. The “pâte” should be cohesive and at the same time slightly crumbly. The texture is buttery with blue veins of mould extending to the edges. The smell has a subtle register of sheep’s milk. The taste is complex, but quite outstanding..... soft, creamy, slightly salty, with an after-taste that leaves the palate craving for more. A good Roquefort should never be aggressive. Roquefort marries extremely well with nuts and figs.

**Technical note:** the often accidental introduction of mould spores during the production of cheese has given rise to a whole genera of cheese families grouped under the name of “Blue,” not to be confused with the Marecillian Toad cheese of the Elnath system, which due to the presence of strands of algae running through it, has been classified as a “Blue-Green.”

The sub-type of prophylactic blue cheese merits a mention in this context too, along with the discoverer of its antibiotic qualities, Madame Gasm. She was the founder and moving force of a renowned brothel on the outskirts of Sin City, nerve centre of Hedon, the pleasure planet of the Yed Posterior binary star system. When asking for directions, visitors should be aware that locals refer to the city’s outlying erogenous zones as “the underskirts” or the “Yed Light District.”

Madame Gasm noticed after long experience that if she served appetisers of local blue cheese in her vestibule, then none of her customers were subsequently infected by syphilis. A director of one of the major transgalactic pharmaceutical companies, who was a frequent visitor to Hedon, though he denied ever actually visiting Madame Gasm's establishment, heard of this breakthrough and had the idea of developing a range of anti-bacterial cheeses for all kinds of common diseases. The company's marketing department came up with what proved to be a catastrophic delivery channel. The company set up a chain of fast-food burger restaurants where all the sandwiches came heavy on the cheese. The venture went down like an over-capitalised start-up, the culinary delights were snubbed by the target customers who said that the cure tasted worse than the disease and the experiment is now featured on the syllabi of a number of business schools as a "how-not-to" case study. Madame Gasm commented after the debacle that she had never said anything about the cheese being eaten and was quoted in the local

tabloid press urging that “businessmen need to be hard-sighted but with a bit more foreskin.” She has since denied this, adding that it was “a bangled mastardisation.”

The pleasure planet of Hedon proved to be fertile ground for many commercial ventures however. Take for example, the little-known Intergalactic Association for the Creation of a Universal Language (IACUL), which happens to mean “there's a bottom” in French, (it would, wouldn't it?). The Association found, after extensive research, that there were only seven words that were common to all languages throughout the Universe. And that five of these words were concerned with sex. Only one commercial establishment fully supported the IACUL initiative, but what a success story was spawned as a result. This was the universally famous Trappingville Discotheque and Sex Change Clinic, the pulsating heart of Sin City and the only venue on Hedon to proudly proclaim in all its advertising, “Where there's IACUL, there's a way.” The basic premise of the Disco was that sex was, in fact, already a universal language, (it was to be found in every nook and cranny of every galaxy), and that biology should not be allowed to spoil a good night out. Couples, or indeed any other combination of individual organisms, who had spent the evening drinking a wide range of alien cocktails, dancing and chatting using the seven words of IACUL, on leaving to go back to one of the many surrounding seedy hotels, could have an express sex change operation to equip them with whatever appendage(s) were required to fully consummate a night of lust with the partner(s) of their choice.

The clinic, despite its somewhat doubtful ethical underpinnings, succeeded in attracting some of the most talented surgeons from far-flung star systems. Nowhere else in the Universe were so many ambitious and exotic surgical interventions carried out on such a routine basis. Young surgeons would queue up to obtain a post at the clinic, in order to cut their operating theatre teeth in challenging circumstances. One notorious surgeon, who was renowned for his scalpel-sharp dentition and bucal operating technique, literally cut his teeth whilst trying to equip an Arcturian armadillo with the spring-loaded phallus appropriate only for coital coupling with a female Canopian coelacanth.

While the young hopefuls were queuing up, inevitably some of the most promising were tempted into the Disco and were lost forever to the medical profession.

While we are on the subject of queuing, sociologists from a number of galaxies have produced conflicting theories that seek to explain why queues are so prevalent in Post Offices throughout the Universe. One school of thought has suggested that there may be a secret society of dim philatelists which is trying to corner the market in common stamps. Inevitably, a rival school of thought, backed by almost no survey data, it has to be said, has protested that this sort of conspiracy theory should not be taken seriously by professional sociologists. Their more liberal ideology has encouraged them to look in detail at the strategic locations of Post Offices on high street intersections, a research programme they have dubbed "The Market for Corners." Yet another school of thought has proposed that there may exist a form of time-travelling chameleon-sheep that is congenitally unable to make up its mind. By constantly flitting back and forth between Post Office queues at different epochs, the species has found that it is possible to avoid reaching the post office counter at all and therefore no decision ever has to be made. According to the theory, the almost perfect chameleon-like qualities of this organism makes it virtually impossible to distinguish it from the native population, conveniently making the theory almost impossible to disprove. This did not stop one researcher from suggesting that the chameleon-sheep might be shocked out of its camouflage if an air-filled paper bag was burst just behind its left ear. Field trials of this theory had to be curtailed after several elderly women suffered heart attacks while queuing at the Post Office. Another influential member of the same faculty countered that chameleon-sheep could be forced into the open if somehow all the indigenous members of a Post Office queue could be persuaded to simultaneously leave, thus obliging the chameleon-sheep to confront its genetic indecisiveness at the Post Office counter. This approach has foundered however on the stubbornness of genuine Post Office queue members, who refuse to leave the queue, especially when near the front.

As a further footnote, it is worth mentioning here that a group of meta-sociologists (sociologists who study the social behaviour of sociologists) has been formed to study the herd-like qualities of the various schools of thought that have

sprung up around the fertile issue of Post Office queues. One group has put forward the thesis that the various schools of thought may be likened to schools of fish swimming through some kind of higher-dimensional ocean of concepts. Another rival group has countered that, in fact, the different schools of thought may be situated vis-à-vis educational establishments relative to high streets and Post Offices. Finally there is a minority anarchist tendency arguing that the seemingly fertile ground of schools of thought for studies in sociology is only fertile because of the large quantities of manure that are spread about, metaphorically-speaking, by sociologists. There are now rumours circulating that an academic from Betelgeuse may be seeking research funding for a project to investigate the relationship between sociological fashions, the growth of plant-like schools of thought and the fertility of the societal terrain that underpins all social discourse. Etc, etc.