

CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

BOX TO MAKE BUTTER

Pinewood

H 22 x W 17 x L 33, 5 cm

Terceira Island, 19 / 20th cent.

MAHR19001000

Previously to the first decades of the 20th century, butter was just a domestic and artisanal product, based in a rather simple and accessible technique, consisting in leaving the milk to rest, creating butter by arising it, shaking this cream in such a way that fat granules were obtained and extracting whey. The main problem was to have enough milk to get this delicious grass that, among us of for the most of us, remained for a long time, overall, as component or a food for ceremonial use that, in fact, was always connected to the richest and most exquisite cookeries.

Therefore, the means used in the butter production were basic and even improvised; a common bowl could be used to shake a small amount of milk cream or just the *legenaria* fruit, appropriately prepared, i.e. a gourd. This method was registered by Capt. Edward Boid, a British military who came with the liberal expedition led by D. Pedro and has carefully observed life in Terceira Island in 1832, leaving us this curious description:

Whilst taking refreshment at the rude cottage of a farmer, we were amused by witnessing the novel mode of making butter adopted in Terceira. A quantity of cream is put into a calabash, and shaken by women who, whilst walking and chattering, keep the calabash in a constant rotatory movement until the butters forms, when, as from the churn, it is separated, and immediately mixed with salt; and I really think I never tasted sweeter in my country; attributable to the superior pasture of Terceira, which, although quite left to the efforts of nature, is extremely fertile and rich. (*A Description of Azores or Western Islands*. Londres, 1834).

In 1943, Luís da Silva Ribeiro, sustained in his late 19th and early 20th centuries memories, published the following ethnographic note about the same subject:

Milking the cows, they would let the milk to rest in wooden pots (*celhas*) or in clay pots (*alguidares*) for 24 hours, to make the milk cream emerge and join at the surface, forming a crust (*cabeçada ou cabeçalho*). The milk cream was then poured into a big gourd, detailed ahead and shaken, holding the gourd in both hands; next, it was emptied and the butter flakes (*godilhões*) and whey (*troca*) would come out. The flakes were kneaded by hand and washed for 4 or 5 times, to clean it from the whey; with the dough they would make small cakes or breads (*pêlos*) weighting around ½ kg that were sold through the town, door-to-door, accommodated in winged baskets and wrapped in cabbage. The butter was delivered fresh and not salty.

Well, this small wooden box, that is part of the MAH Ethnography collection, with a cross axis including four blades and a handle, represents an improvement in the skills needed to make butter at home, probably not that much different from the gear used in the Alfa Laval cream separators, the main industrial equipment at Terceira island milk washing stations or *engenhos*, in the first decades of last century.