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A laser: the better way to slice cheese?

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MADISON, Wis. (AP) -- A researcher from the University of Wisconsin at Madison has figured out a better way to slice cheese -- just use a laser.

"At any other university, people would have just laughed. But this is Wisconsin. It's cheese. And this is no laughing matter," said Xiaochun Li, a mechanical engineering professor and laser expert.

Traditional cheese processing has a number of shortcomings, he said.

Large cutting machines require considerable care to keep cheese from becoming contaminated by bacteria. And it's impossible to slice cheese very thin because it tears or sticks to the cutting blade.

But now Li, working with engineering graduate student Hongseok Choi, has adapted the same kind of laser used for eye surgery to slice Wisconsin's most famed food product.

At first, Li tried using a traditional commercial laser that uses heat to cut by melting or evaporating; it fried the cheese.

"It smelled really bad," he said.

Li tried again using a new class of laser that emits light in ultraviolet, and therefore shorter, wavelengths. That laser, known as a cold laser, cuts by blasting apart the molecular bonds that hold materials together.

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