Product Specification for the *'Ġbejna'* of Protected Designation Origin (PDO)

as requested in Regulation No. 1151/2012 on quality schemes for agricultural products and foodstuffs

Art. 1

Designated Name

'Ġbejna' (plural=*'Ġbejniet'*), as the name historically used to describe the specific product in the geographical area defined in Art. 4, shall be protected as a designation of origin and used for both trade purposes and in common language. In addition, the names *'Ġbejna friska'*, *'Ġbejna niexfa'* and *'Ġbejna tal-bżar'* shall be used to define the three specific varieties, as explained in Art. 2.

These names shall be reserved for those products that meet the requirements set in this product specification. These names shall not be used for any other product.

Art. 2

Product Description

The *'Ġbejna'* is a fresh cheese produced with whole raw milk from sheep (*Ovis aries*) of the 'Maltese' breed and its crosses with the Friesian breed, and that are registered in the Maltese islands, including Malta, Gozo and Comino. Sheep of the 'Maltese' breed are slender with a head that is mostly masked reddish, yellow or black, with long neck and semi lop ears. Muzzles have no wool and their long slim body with long silky coat is mostly white fleece but may have patches at any place; the patches are of the same colour of the head. Head and feet are not fleeced, while their long tail is covered with long fleece. The crossed breeds tend to retain most characteristics of the Maltese sheep breed mentioned above, though they are usually entirely white and have a wider girth.

The raw sheep milk should possess the following chemical characteristics:

- A pH ranging between 6.4 and 6.7
- Fat content ranging between 4.5% and 8.0%
- Protein content ranging between 5.0% and 6.5%
- Dry matter content ranging between 15.0% and 18.0%

The *'Ġbejna'* can be sold fresh *('Ġbejna friska'*), air-dried *('Ġbejna niexfa')* or pickled and peppered *('Ġbejna tal-bżar')*.

The ***'Ġbejna friska'*** should possess the following physical, chemical and organoleptic characteristics:

- White and glossy, with a fresh and soft core; its surface takes the shape of the motifs of the mould in which it is processed.
- Appear as a truncated cone of small dimensions, with a height ranging between 3cm to 4cm, and a weight of 65g to 80g. The base diameter ranges between 5cm to 7cm while the top diameter ranges between 3cm to 5 cm.
- The Total Protein should range between 15% and 20%.
- The Total Fat should range between 15% and 20%.
- Have an acidulous taste typical of sheep milk.

The ***'Ġbejna niexfa'*** should possess the following physical, chemical and organoleptic characteristics:

- It has a firmer consistency and varies in colour from white to off white to very light straw colour; the yellowish taint increases, and the parameters vary, as the drying and storage period increases (as described in Art. 5 below).
- Weight between 30g to 50g.
- Have a pH between 5.1 and 5.3.
- The Total Solid Content should range between 40% and 56%.
- The Total Protein should range between 14% and 30%
- The Total Fat should range between 25% and 40%.

The ***'Ġbejna tal-bżar'*** should possess the following physical, chemical and organoleptic characteristics:

- It presents itself with a varying amount of fine to rough ground crushed black pepper attached to its surface.
- Weight between 30g to 50g.
- Have a pH between 4.9 and 5.1.
- The Total Solid Content should range between 37% and 52%.
- The Total Protein should range between 14% and 30%
- The Total Fat should range between 25% and 40%.

Art. 3

Defined geographical area

The Maltese archipelago consists of three inhabited islands (Malta, Gozo and Comino) and some other uninhabited minor islands. The *'Ġbejna'* is produced in the three main inhabited islands of the Maltese archipelago.

Art. 4

Evidence that the product originates in the defined geographical area

The arid terrain typical of the Maltese islands favours the keeping and feeding of sheep, as these animals can use marginal agricultural areas unsuitable for other agricultural purposes. Historical records indicate that grazing sheep have been present on the Maltese islands since medieval times, while the earliest reports on cheese-making date back to the 15th century and again in the 17th century.

Cheese-making was a logical way to preserve the milk for longer periods of time, especially since religious beliefs dictated that dairy products could only be consumed on meat-eating days. The know-how of the cheese-making process has been passed on from generation to generation, and a recent survey on the production of the *'Ġbejna'* confirmed that most current producers learnt the process from their parents or grand-parents.

All steps involved in the cheese-making process can be and are typically carried out by the producer, and most ingredients are locally sourced. Moreover, the drying of the *'Ġbejna'* is carried out naturally taking advantage of the dry, warm and salty climate typical of this geographical area.

The *'Ġbejna'* is an integral part of the Maltese culinary heritage, and has also made its way into several Maltese expressions and idioms, highlighting the linkage between the *'Ġbejna'* and Maltese culture.

Art. 5

Description of the production method and required packaging

The sheep farms of production should be located in the geographical delimited area described in Art. 3 above and be compliant with other relevant national and European legislation.

The sheep are fed locally sourced hays of leguminous and cereal plants for at least 55% of their intake (including barley, lolium, wheat, vetch, fava, sulla, maize, sorghum, alfalfa, ryegrass and clover amongst others), supplemented with concentrates produced from raw materials and distributed by the major feed mills. Depending on availability, sheep may also be fed locally sourced plants such as carobs, cladodes of prickly pears and vetch.

The sheep are milked at the farm, and the milk is then transformed within 1-2 hours. The milk is first filtered through a very fine strainer to remove any animal hairs that may have fallen in the milk during the milking process. While the milk is still warm (or, if necessary, after re-heating to 37°C), '*qtar tat-tames'* (i.e. the rennet produced on the farm using the stomach lining of a suckling lamb or kid that has not yet been weaned) or other commercially available milk coagulating enzymes is added to the milk.

Following the addition of the curdling agent, the milk is left to coagulate, and after approximately 20 to 30 minutes the curd (*'baqta'*) is formed. The curd is collected into small moulds (*'qaleb'*) which are then placed in a stainless steel or plastic tray and left to drain. The moulds were originally made of rushes but, for hygienic purposes, these have been replaced with plastic drain moulds.

To facilitate draining, the *'Ġbejna'* are turned over inside the mould once or twice, after which they are usually sprinkled with a pinch (i.e. 2 to 5mg) of locally sourced sea-salt (obtained locally from the natural drying of sea water in salt pans close to the shore) and then placed in a refrigerator at a temperature of 7 to 12°C to allow them to set in the traditional shape. The *'Ġbejna friska'* is normally processed and sold within 24 hours of production. This is normally sold in whey or exuding whey.

To obtain the *'Ġbejna niexfa'*, the *'Ġbejna'* is dried in the *'qanniċ'*, a wooden or metal frame cupboard covered in wire or nylon mesh with a mesh size ≤2 mm. The *'qanniċ'* is placed outside in a ventilated area, normally on a rooftop, to air dry the *'Ġbejna'* in a natural environment in rural areas of the Maltese Islands. The time required for complete drying depends on the wind direction; northerly blowing wind (*'riħ fuq'*) is considered better than

southerly blowing wind (*'riħ isfel'*). Once the *'Ġbejna'* has dried sufficiently, it can be sold as *'Ġbejna niexfa' (Appendix A).*

The *'Ġbejna tal-bżar'* are obtained by pickling the *'Ġbejna niexfa' (Appendix A).* The latter is left in locally-sourced vinegar (derived from the fermentation of grape wine) for up to 24 hours, after which they are coated with coarse freshly ground black pepper.

The '*Ġbejna friska'* can be preserved for up to three days *(Appendix A).* The '*Ġbejna niexfa'* can be preserved for up to six weeks, while the *'Ġbejna tal-bżar'* can be preserved for up to six months. The preservation times are based on shelf-life studies which were conducted by a nationally-accredited laboratory, and certificates are attached within the *Single Document*.

All ġbejniet are sold in their entire form. The *'Ġbejna friska'* is sold solely by quantity, while the *'Ġbejna tal-bżar'* and the *'Ġbejna niexfa'* are sold by either weight or quantity. The *'Ġbejna'* is packed either singly or in small groups, in various transparent plastic or glass containers, each sealed with a band sticker and labelled as described in Art. 8 below.

Normally 1 kilogramme of ġbejniet at 24 hour drip are produced from 6.8 to 8 litres of sheep milk depending on season and diet. This works out as 125 to 147 grams of ġbejna (i.e. 0.125kg to 0.147kg of ġbejniet) at 24 hour drip per litre of sheep milk.

Art. 6

Link between the product and the geographical environment

The characteristics of the *'Ġbejna'* are inextricably linked with the Maltese islands, and are due to inherent natural and human factors found in this geographical environment.

The *'Ġbejna'* is produced with whole raw milk of the 'Maltese' breed sheep and crosses. The cheese-making process is part of the traditional Maltese lore and heritage. It relies heavily on locally sourced ingredients such as sea-salt and vinegar, and the salty dry warm climate typical of these islands, particularly for the dry and peppered forms.

Most ingredients used in the production steps (rennet and salt) are locally sourced and since the cheese is made from raw whole milk it retains a distinctive flavour. This flavour is further augmented by the fact that the sheep are fed locally sourced hay forage and plants typical and unique to the Mediterranean climate, such as cladodes of prickly pears, carob and vetch, for at least 55% of their intake.

Art. 7

Authorities verifying compliance

The Malta Competition and Consumer Affairs Authority (MCCAA) or any other authorized third party auditing group shall be responsible for verifying compliance of the *'Ġbejna'* with the provisions set in this product specification.

Art. 8

Labelling rules

The product shall carry a rectangular label indicating:

- The product name

'Ġbejna friska', ***'Ġbejna tal-bżar'*** or ***'Ġbejna niexfa'***

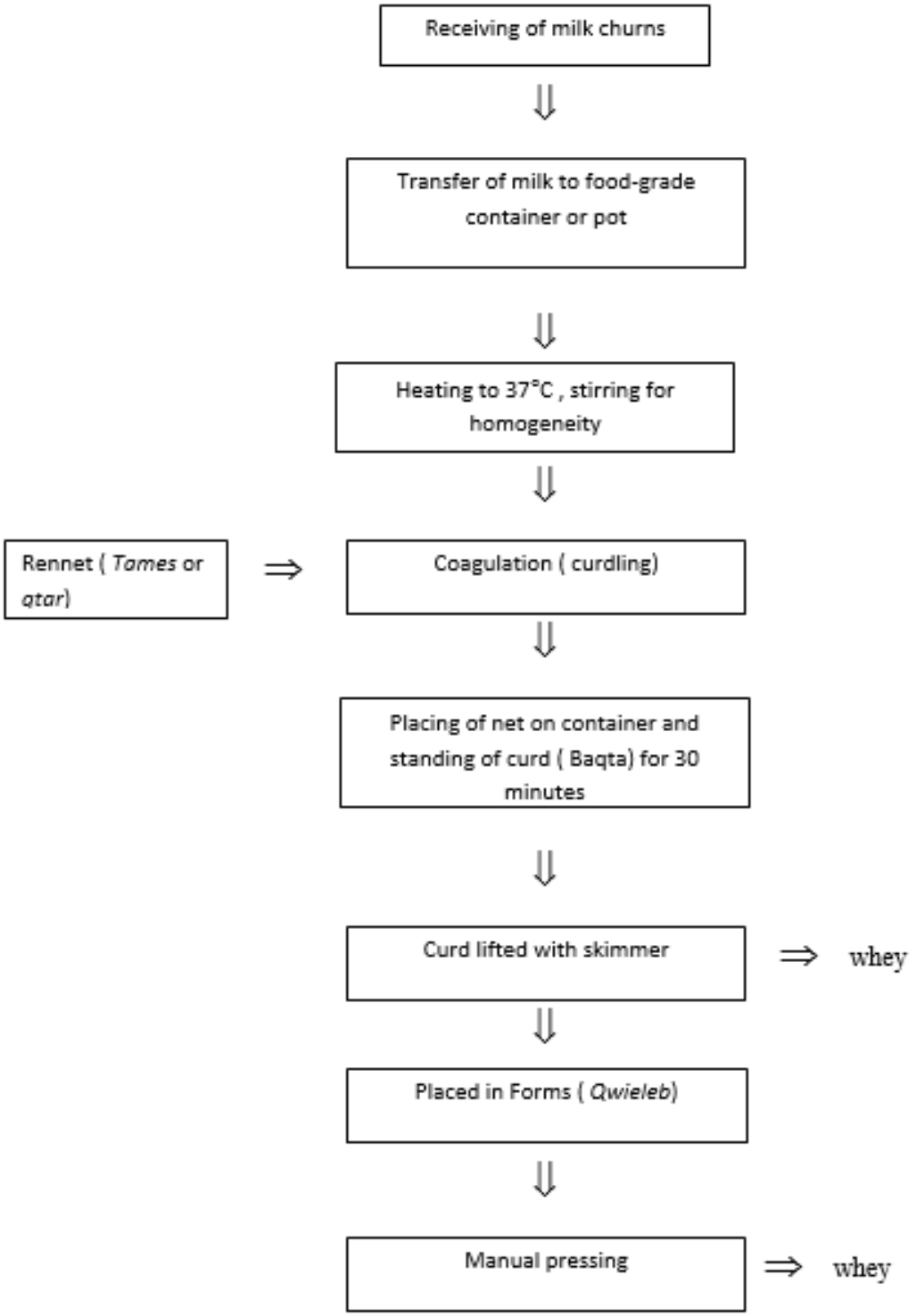
- The European Union symbol for Products of Designated Origin
- The logo of the certifying control authority

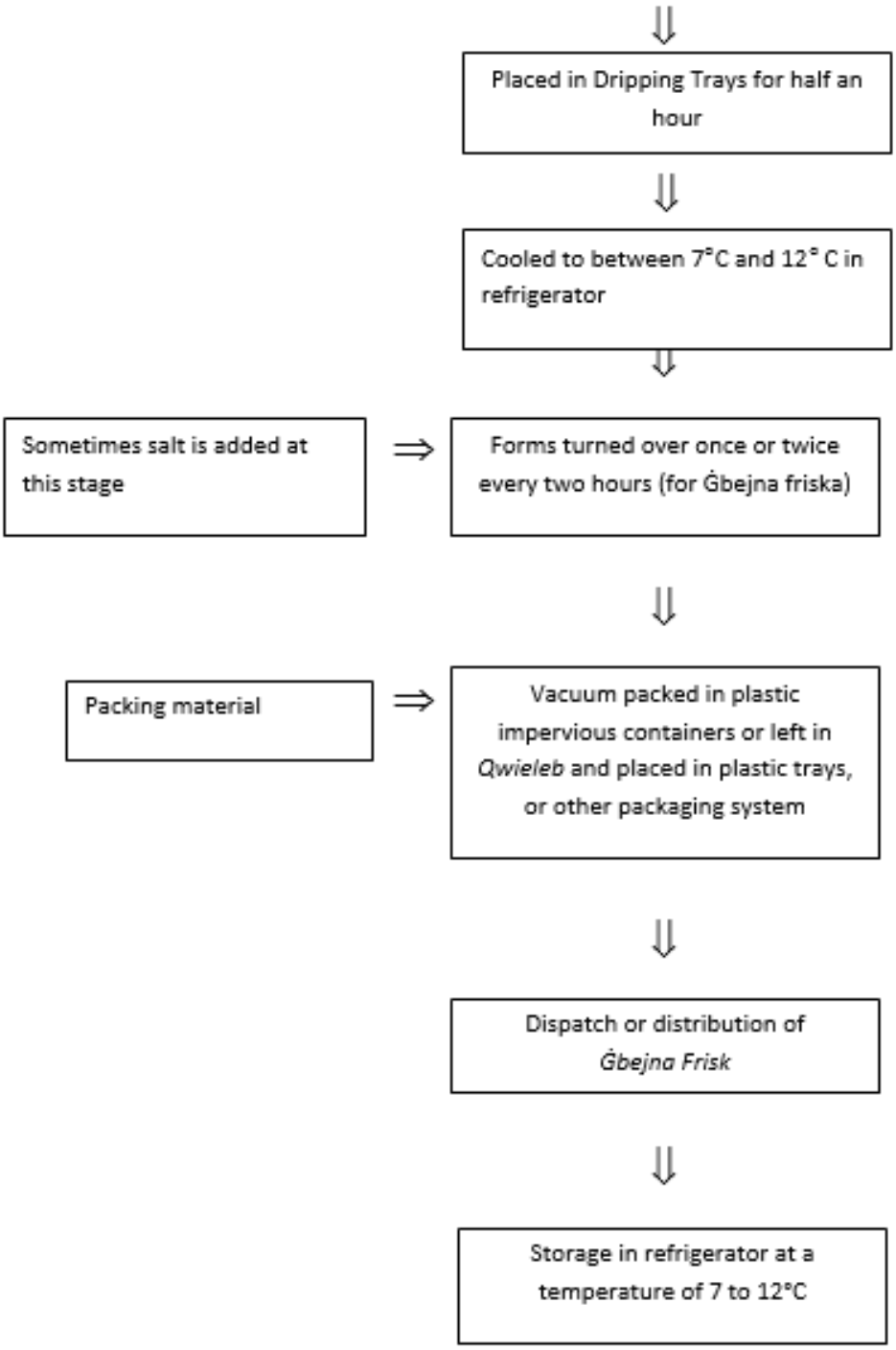
Appendix A: Flow diagrams for the preparation of the three types of Ġbejna

These Flow Diagram are intended as a guide. Flow Diagrams may vary slightly between different Cheeselet Producers, given that there may be minor differences both as regards the process steps, but also the method of wrapping and packing the final product and the delivery system. Such deviations must be taken into account by each individual Cheeselet Producer and the Flow Diagram changed accordingly.

FLOW DIAGRAM for the production of *Ġbejniet.*

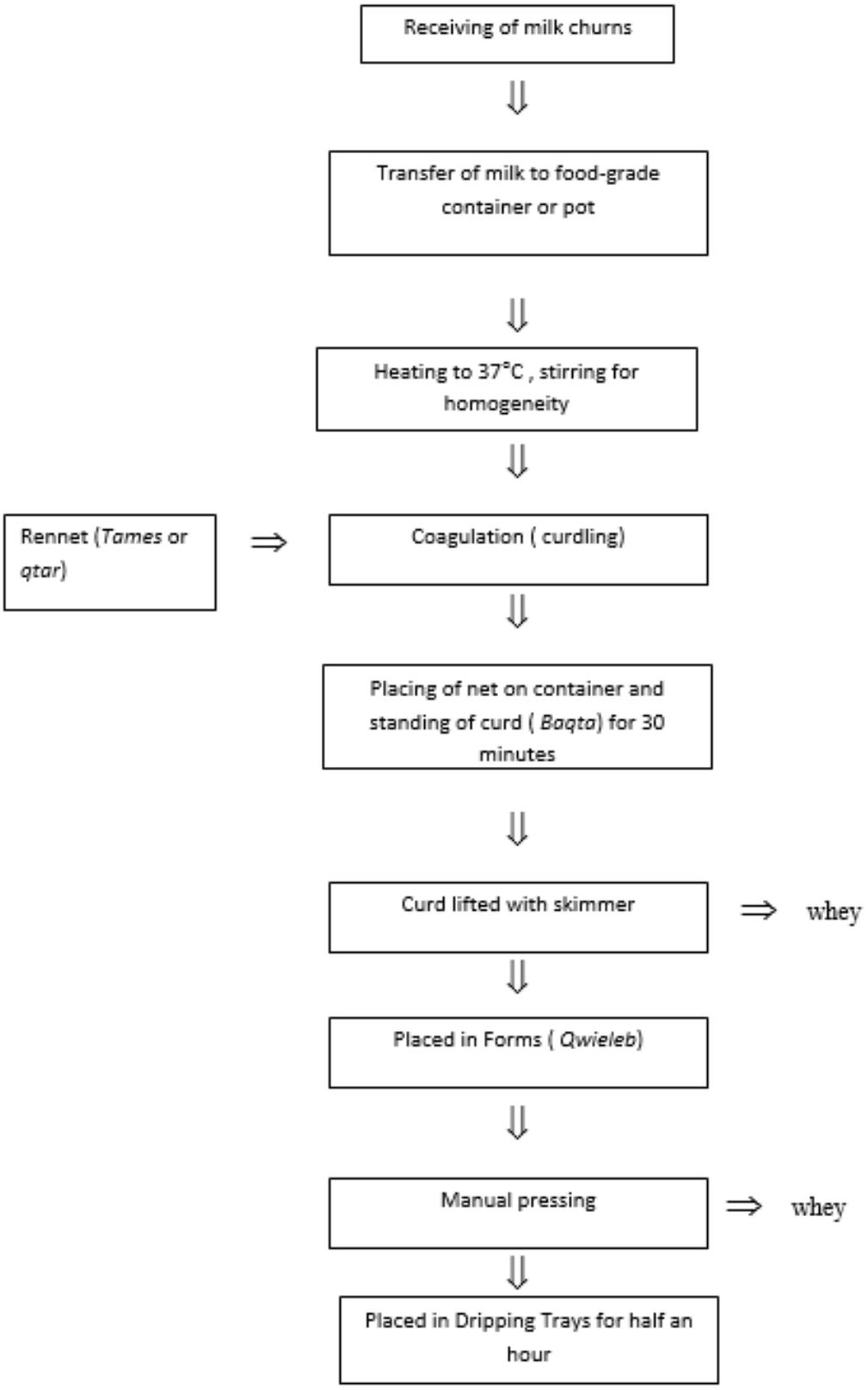
Ġbejna Friska

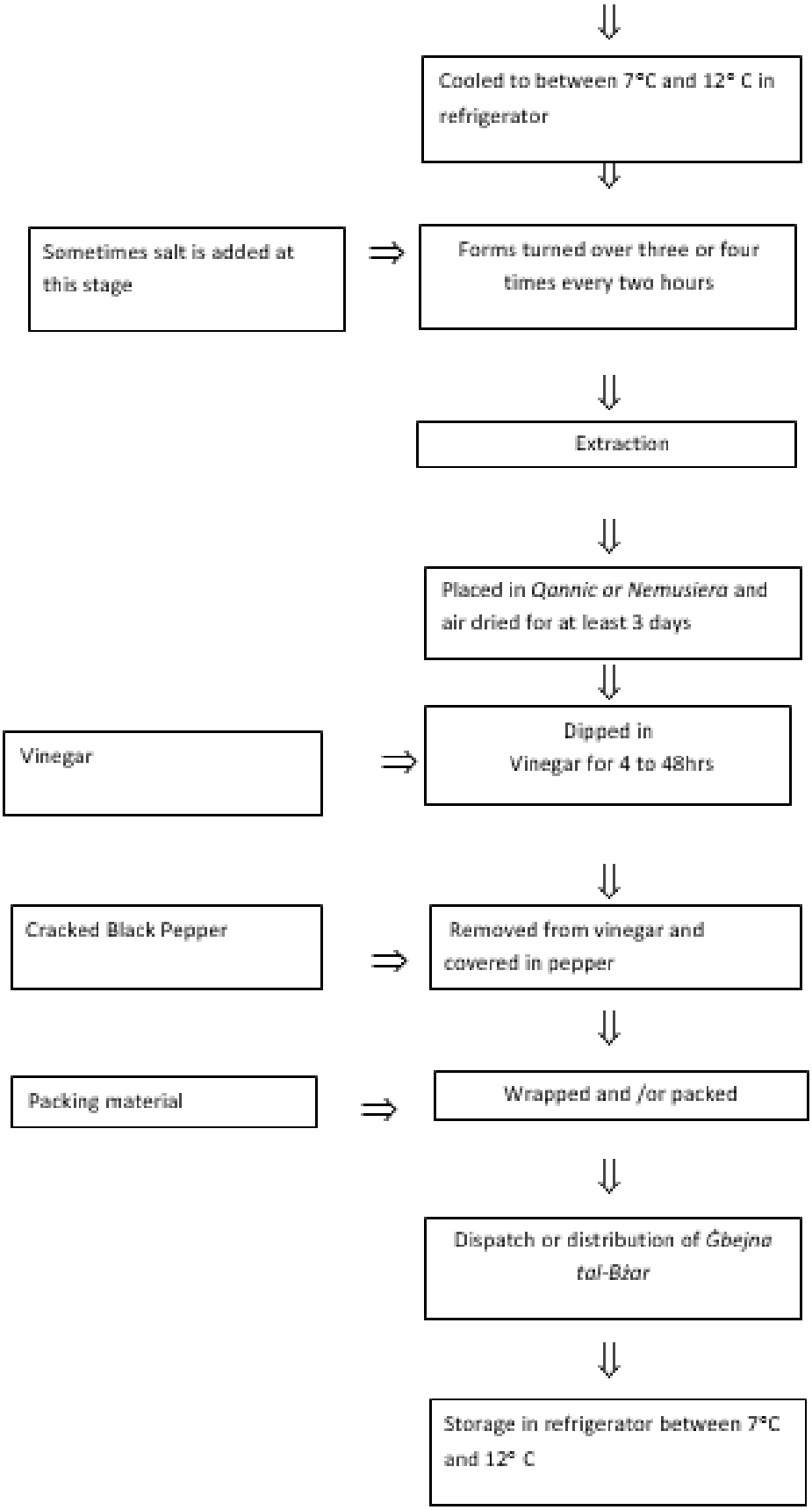



Placed in Dripping Trays for half an hour
Cooled to between 7°C and 12° C in refrigerator
Sometimes salt is added at this stage
Forms turned over once or twice every two hours (for Ġbejna friska)
Packing material
Vacuum packed in plastic impervious containers or left in Qwieleb and placed in plastic trays, or other packaging system
Dispatch or distribution of Ġbejna Frisk
Storage in refrigerator at a temperature of 7 to 12°C

FLOW DIAGRAM for the production of *Ġbejniet.*

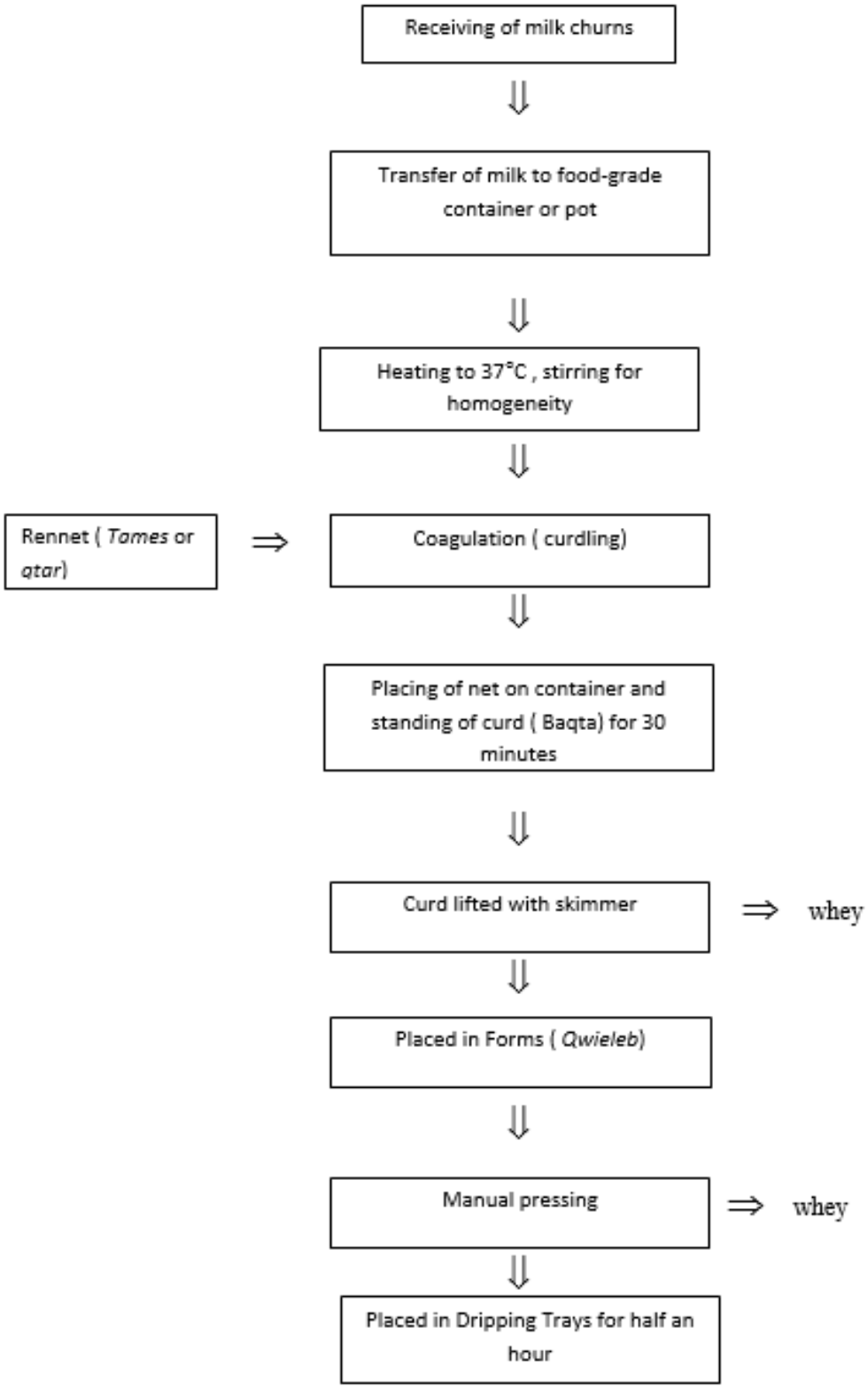
Ġbejna Tal-Bżar

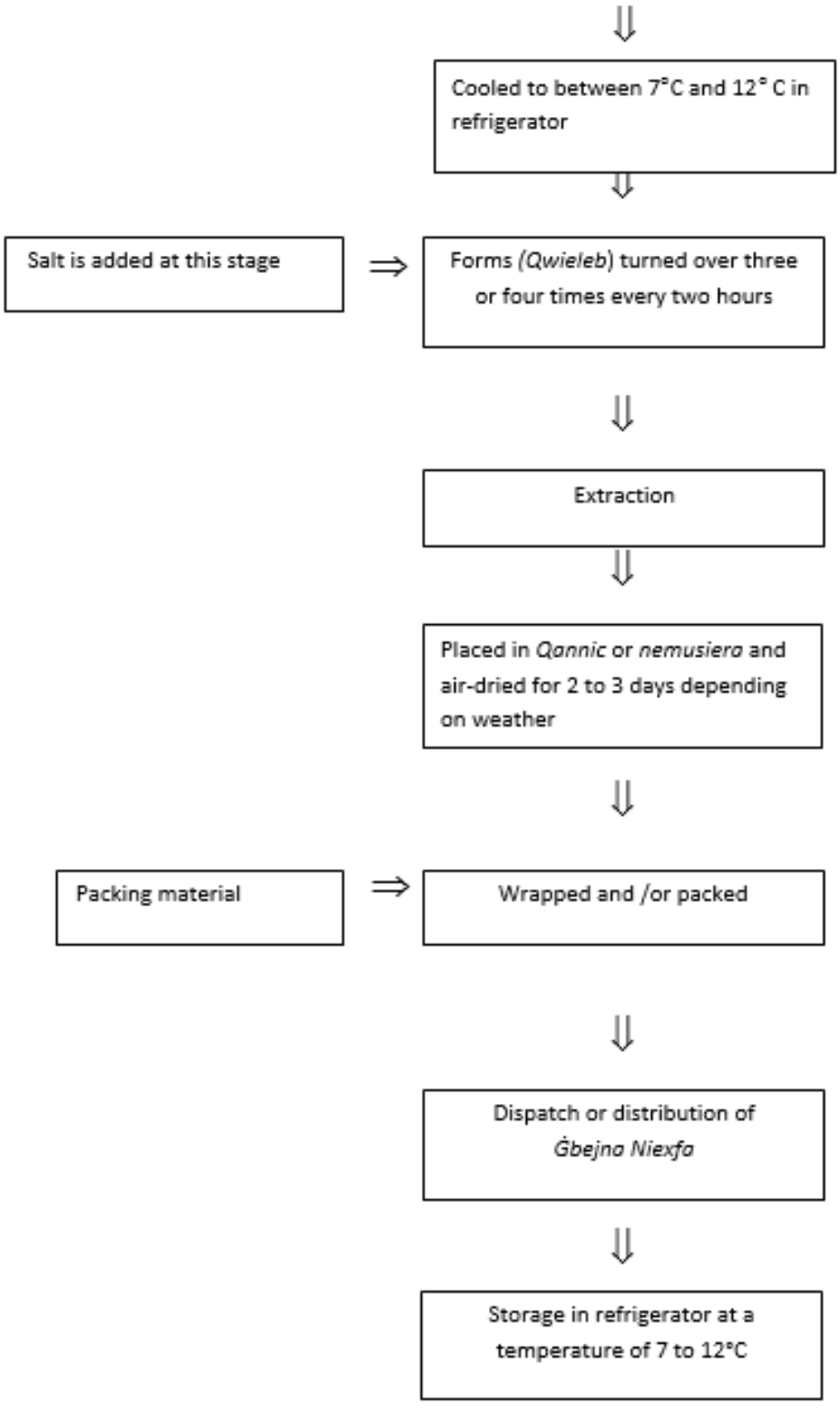



Cooled to between 7°C and 12° C in refrigerator
Sometimes salt is added at this stage
Forms turned over three or four times every two hours
Extraction
Placed in *Qannic or Nemusiera* and air dried for at least 3 days
Vinegar
Dipped in Vinegar for 4 to 48hrs
Cracked Black Pepper
Removed from vinegar and covered in pepper
Packing material
Wrapped and /or packed
Dispatch or distribution of *Ġbejna tal-Bżar*
Storage in refrigerator between 7°C and 12° C

FLOW DIAGRAM for the production of *Ġbejniet*.*

Ġbejna Niexfa




Cooled to between 7°C and 12° C in refrigerator
Salt is added at this stage
Forms (*Qwieleb*) turned over three or four times every two hours
Extraction
Placed in *Qannic* or *nemusiera* and air-dried for 2 to 3 days depending on weather
Packing material
Wrapped and /or packed
Dispatch or distribution of *Ġbejna Niexfa*
Storage in refrigerator at a temperature of 7 to 12°C