

# Celebrating Cheese

Thanks to cutting-edge cheesemakers and chefs, artisan cheese finally gets the reverence it deserves.

By Melanie Wolkoff Wachsmann

Many American cheesemakers admit that when they first produced artisan cheese, interest was so low they had to give their product away. While artisan

cheese is familiar and revered in the Old World, acceptance took a bit longer across the ocean. It's not that American consumers didn't like cheese. They did.

But the concept of artisan cheese, an often handmade, small-batch cheese crafted by a single cheesemaker—not a factory—exhibiting terroir from its milk source and unique techniques of the cheesemaker, was new.

Consumers needed to rationalize the cheese's high cost and learn how to eat it. After dessert? In lieu of dessert? As an appetizer? Then, they had to overcome Old World thinking that European varieties dominated the cheese landscape. Just because a consumer or chef wanted a cheese didn't necessarily mean that the distribution channels to get it existed. Despite all the obstacles, however, artisan cheesemakers believed in their product and persisted.

Franklin Becker, executive chef at Brasserie, prepares cheesecake with Wisconsin Crave Brothers Les Frères Cheese.



Today, cheese courses have become *di rigueur* at white-tablecloth establishments. Cheese arrives on flights, and even appears on bar menus. Restaurants boast their own cheese caves and aging facilities, and they source cheese both from around the globe and from local farms.

This is just the beginning. David Leonhardi, director of cheese education and events for the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board, Madison, Wis., feels that while U.S. cheesemaking has graduated to new levels in the last 20 years, thanks to improved

distribution, packaging and science, there's still room for growth.

"We're still just cutting-edge. We've graduated to junior high," he says.

"Cheesemakers have gone beyond understanding the art and science of cheesemaking. They're exploring new things, like artisan butter, milk and yogurt, in addition to more American original cheese.

"It's an expensive protein if it's not turned quickly. The industry recognizes this. They've become more accommodating

and smarter about distribution. They know a chef may not go through a 10-pound wheel in a week, so they'll sell him a quarter of the wheel."

Rob Murphy, co-owner with his wife Debb of Curds & Whey Cheese Company, Geneva, Ill., noticed an increased interest in artisan cheeses and local foods within the last five years. "They feed off each other," he says. "Localvores want to get as close to the food source as possible. Artisan cheese identifies the milk source and cheesemaker."

## 10 Artisan Cheeses to Consider

**1) Bellavitano**—inspired by a traditional farmstead cheese from northern Italy, Bellavitano is a hard cheese with an intense flavor and crumbly texture. Sartori Food, (920) 893-6061, [www.sartorifoods.com](http://www.sartorifoods.com)

**2) Blue Moon**—a creamy, mild sheep's-milk blue made from late summer and fall pasture grasses. It's ripened in underground caves. Willow Hill Farm, (802) 893-2963, [www.sheepcheese.com](http://www.sheepcheese.com)

**3) Capriole Farms Juliana**—an aged, raw goat's-milk cheese that is buttery, smooth, nutty and firm, with a natural rind of herbs. Capriole Farms, (812) 923-9408, [www.capriolegoatcheese.com](http://www.capriolegoatcheese.com)

**4) English Hollow Cheddar**—all-natural, shelf-cured cheddar that is hand-turned and aged 12 months. Maple Leaf Cheese, (608) 934-1234, [www.wisconsincheese.com](http://www.wisconsincheese.com)

**5) Huckleberry's Blue**—raw goat's-milk blue aged three to five months with a creamy texture and natural washed rind produced on a certified organic farm. Prairie Fruits Farm, (217) 643-2314, [www.prairiefruits.com](http://www.prairiefruits.com)

**6) Leelanau Cheese Aged Raclette**—Nine-month-old cheese that is cave-cured on hardwood boards, brine-brushed daily and made in nine-pound wheels. Black Star Farms, [www.blackstarfarms.com](http://www.blackstarfarms.com), (231) 944-1273

**7) Marieke Gouda**—Marieke Penterman and her husband Rolf are first-generation Wisconsin dairy farmers hailing from the Netherlands. They craft 12 varieties of Gouda, including a fenugreek version, using milk from their farm. Penterman Farm, (715) 669-5230, [www.hollandfamilycheese.com](http://www.hollandfamilycheese.com)

**8) Mezzo Secco**—a partially dry Monterey Jack that doesn't get runny yet is not super firm. Vella Cheese Company, (707) 938-3232, [www.vellacheese.com](http://www.vellacheese.com)

**9) Roth's Private Reserve**—a smear-ripened cheese made from raw cow's milk, crafted in copper vats and aged on special wooden boards. It has earthy, fruity notes and a sweet finish. Roth Käse, (608) 845-5796, [www.rothkase.com](http://www.rothkase.com)

**10) Thomasville Tomme**—a raw cow's-milk cheese, aged more than 60 days, with a mellow flavor, soft texture and buttery characteristics. Sweet Grass Dairy, (229) 227-0752, [www.sweetgrassdairy.com](http://www.sweetgrassdairy.com)

Executive chef Drew Lockett at Aquariva, Portland, Ore., says he serves artisan cheese because it is high quality, less common and more interesting. “Artisan cheeses are typically made in a sustainable, if not organic, way, which are practices we support,” he says.

### Showcasing the artistry

In addition to supporting local farmers, artisan cheese adds menu interest.

“It’s not something your next-door competitor may have,” says Leonhardi. “Tell your diners how special the cheese is.”

Murphy recommends displaying artisan cheese in innovative ways, such as roasting or flash-grilling thin slices of root vegetables to use as a vegetable cracker, with cheese perched on top. Or, serve cheese on tasting spoons.

He also encourages restaurateurs to pair European and domestic cheeses. “It shows how good U.S. cheeses have become,” Murphy says.

One sixtyblue in Chicago serves both domestic and international artisan cheeses. Seven years ago, the restaurant sold cheese via a cheese cart. “It was great,” explains Martial Noguier, executive chef. “But when the restaurant got busy, it became difficult for the staff. They’d be at one table for 10 to 20 minutes, while other customers waited.”

Not only did Noguier need to revamp the cheese program, but his boss challenged

## Morel Tart and Truffle-Poached Egg with Wisconsin Pleasant Ridge Reserve Cheese

Franklin Becker, Executive Chef  
Brasserie, New York

Yield: 4 servings

1 sheet purchased puff pastry, thawed as directed on package

1 leek

2 T. butter

1 lb. fresh morel mushrooms, cleaned, sliced

1 garlic clove, sliced

Salt, to taste

Water

1 T. white vinegar

4 eggs

2 T. truffle oil

¼ lb. Wisconsin Uplands Pleasant Ridge Reserve cheese, shaved

Sea salt and cracked black pepper, if desired

**1)** Heat oven to 400°F. Cut four (4-inch) rounds from pastry sheet.

Put 2 inches apart on ungreased baking sheet. Bake 15 minutes, or until puffed and golden-brown. Set aside to cool.

**2)** Slice white portion of leek; wash thoroughly, changing water at least twice. **3)** Melt butter in large sauté pan over medium heat. Add leek, mushrooms and garlic. Reduce heat to low. Sweat ingredients for 45 to 60 minutes, or until tender, stirring occasionally. If necessary, add a little water near end of cooking time. Season with salt. **4)** Bring 2 to 3 inches of water to just below simmering in large kettle; add vinegar. Water should be about 190°F. **5)** Crack each egg into small cup; gently slide into water. Cook until whites are set and yolk is desired doneness, about 3 minutes. **6)** Carefully remove with slotted spoon; set gently on paper towel to drain. **7)** Put puff pastry round on plate. Top with ¼ of mushroom mixture. Put egg on top. Drizzle with truffle oil. Top with cheese. Sprinkle with sea salt and cracked black pepper.

him to find a unique way to use the wood-burning oven. He created a cheese menu with “composed” cheese plates, cheese flights, single servings and “warm cheese from the oven.”

Noguier warms cheese placed in individual cocottes and enhanced with olive oil, spices, herbs or produce in the wood-burning oven, and plates it with salad. Capriole Farm herb goat cheese warms up

with sun-dried tomato, lemon confit and blanched garlic. It arrives with a frisée salad. Nancy’s Hudson Valley Camembert warms with dried Michigan apple and candied walnut, and is served with mizuna salad.

Served at room temperature, a composed cheese plate may consist of a *pave d'affinois* with roasted shallot purée, dried pear, candied walnut, brioche crouton and an endive salad.

Noguier's boss and the restaurant's diners love the new menu. "After we introduced the cheese program, the average check was up \$10 to \$12," Noguier says.

Franklin Becker, executive chef at Brasserie in New York, owned by the Patina Restaurant Group, enjoys artisan cheeses because, he says, "the cheesemakers use so much care. They're more driven to create the best product than make a profit"

In addition to a cheese course, Becker incorporates artisan cheese in many dishes. A morel tart and truffle-poached egg showcases Pleasant Ridge Reserve, while a baby-beet salad receives a splash of Humboldt Fog goat cheese. Becker has paired cod with a SarVecchio emulsion, and created a cheesecake using Les Frères. For one event, a truffle-and-leek *pierogi* with Widmer's Brick cheese was paired with filet mignon.

As corporate chef of Mafiaoza's Pizzeria in Nashville, Tenn., Brett Corrieri works with artisan cheese daily. As the owner of Corrieri's Formaggeria, which sells international and domestic cheeses, he's on the cusp of the latest fromage discoveries.

At Mafiaoza's, artisan cheese takes center stage in Piccolo Morsi, build-your-own antipasti. "It's like Italian tapas," Corrieri says.

The formaggi plate includes four cheeses and accoutrements such as honey, preserved black truffle and strawberry jam. Corrieri also serves a tasting of dips, including Parmigiano-Reggiano, roasted

A "composed" cheese plate from the cheese menu at one sixtyblue in Chicago includes *pave d'affinois* served with a roasted-shallot purée, dried pear, candied walnut, endive and brioche croutons.

red pepper and Bulgarian feta, and artichoke/mascarpone.

#### Classic delivery

Fuego restaurant at La Posada de Santa Fe Resort and Spa, a RockResort in Santa Fe, N.M., started a cheese program four years ago. "It took two years to get where we are today," says Maxime Bouneou, executive chef. Bouneou worked with *fromagier affineur* Herve Mons to come up with a collection featuring 12 to 20 cheeses.

Cheese is introduced to diners on a traditional cart. "We call it 'Chariot of Cheese,'" says Patrick Bell, Fuego's lead captain. "We give a classic old-school presentation where I explain each cheese." Thirty percent of the tables order the cart.

Fuego hosts cheese-themed dinners and seminars, and cheese and wine tastings for resort guests. "It's an added-value," says Bouneou.

#### Cheese hurdles

While artisan cheese can boost revenue, it does pose some obstacles. Finding a source was a trial for Bouneou. "Not everyone carries ready-to-eat cheese," he

says. "Swallowing the shipping cost was another challenge."

Not only is shipping expensive, but so is the cheese, because of the labor-intensive production involved in making it. And artisan cheese comes and goes based on availability and season. Supply is not limitless.

"Cheesemakers make what they feel they can make. Sometimes it's not ready when they say it will be," says Murphy.

Noguier has experienced that firsthand. "That's why we change our cheese menu every day," he says.

The cheese's delicateness becomes both a blessing and a curse. "There may be inconsistencies. How it's handled, aged and stored dictates how it ends up tasting," Becker says. However, Becker feels it's worth the investment. "The future of artisan cheese and the cheesemakers will only get better," he says.

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