

The National **Culinary** Review®
OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN CULINARY FEDERATION

*Cheese
Art*

THE PICTURE OF CLASS

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The Art of Cheese

ARTISAN CHEESE DRESSES UP THE PLATE AND EXUDES CLASS.

By Jody Shee

In decades past, when grocery stores and chefs wanted to impress with cheese and wine, they looked through catalogs and marveled at the faraway choices, ordered, and waited for the goods to arrive from across the pond.

But around the turn of the century, a rumbling began in Northern California, the heart of the state's dairy industry. "Small family farms began turning to artisan cheese as a value-added product they could develop to keep those family farms in existence," says Lynne Devereux, owner of Butter Communications, Pleasant Hill, Calif., who previously was with the California Milk Advisory Board and founded the California Artisan Cheese Guild. "We were experiencing a renaissance in the dairy industry."

California ranks second in U.S. cheese production behind Wisconsin, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Thus, it's only natural that those two states are leaders in the artisan cheese movement, with information, ideas, programs and resources readily available to chefs.

Much of the appeal of artisan cheese comes from its natural, sustainable and local food moorings aptly supported by the burgeoning farmers-market movement.

"Americans' love affair with artisan cheese is growing stronger," says Heather Porter Engwall, director of national product communications for the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board, Madison. "As restaurants and retailers start to carry more of these specialty products, consumers' palates are getting used to it. And consumers never eat backward, so the demand continues to grow."

Those aged 30-50 show the greatest interest in artisan cheese, based on attendee demographics at California's Artisan Cheese Festival, Devereux says. The annual weekend festival, which she formed in 2007, drew more than 4,000 people this year to Petaluma, Calif. The event features educational seminars, chef demos, cheesemaking, grand dinners and an artisan marketplace for consumers to buy cheese from the producers.

Up to the minute

Artisan cheese trends are evolving, partly as a result of competition among producers and partly because the American palate is ready to take the next flavor step forward. The availability of mixed-milk cheeses is high on the trend list. "We don't have a big tradition of sheep's milk cheese in the U.S., but that's starting to come along," Devereux says. She describes it as divinely rich and unctuous with an elegant flavor. But sheep don't produce a lot of milk, so it is expensive. For example, she knows of one cheesemaker who has started a flock of sheep, and the resulting cheese costs \$45 a pound, which appeals to only the finest restaurants. Thus, some cheesemakers are producing sheep's milk/goat's milk mixtures or cow's milk/sheep's milk mixtures.

Adding flavors to cheese, whether mixed in or rubbed on, also is evolving. "Right now, the trend is about very high-quality cheese and delicate use of flavors that complement it," Devereux says. In Oregon, a cheese producer is adding fennel seeds to goat's milk cheese. A Utah cheesemaker rubs cheese with coffee and lavender. "It's just not your usual pepper cheese," Devereux adds.

Around the holidays, the cheese may include cranberries and dried fruit as a covering/coating rather than served on the side.

The fastest-growing category in the annual American Cheese Society competition is washed-rind cheeses. "The public

This cheese plate features aged cheeses from Laura Chenel's Chevre with almonds and figs.



is becoming more curious about those types,” says Devereux. It’s a fact that is remarkable given that washed-rind cheeses are the stinky cheeses. To make it, the rind is periodically washed with any of a number of liquids during ripening and kept moist to encourage bacteria growth, which comes out orange-red and smelly. Think Limburger.

Meaningful on the menu

Percy Whatley, CEC, executive chef at The Ahwahnee Hotel in California’s Yosemite National Park, supports California cheesemakers, mindful of the carbon footprint and wanting to support the local economy. “Plus, it’s a much more natural process, with 18 months of aging, wrapping the cheese in cheesecloth and turning it on a schedule. It’s a slower process,” he says.

In addition to naming producers, the right-hand column on The Ahwahnee Hotel menu features local, sustainable messages, sometimes highlighting one of Whatley’s favorite cheesemakers, Cowgirl Creamery, Point Reyes Station, Calif. “We’re in people’s

Above, Pura Vida by Brandt Evans in Cleveland offers daily cheese boards featuring select artisan cheeses. The restaurant also provides the opportunity to order cheese boards for larger groups.

Right, Toma cheese is one for which Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Co. is known. Made from cow’s milk, it is said to have a buttery flavor and subtle, grassy, tangy finish.

LINK UP

It’s common for chefs who are sold on artisan cheese to make pilgrimages to cheesemakers’ operations to get to know the people and, sometimes, their animals. Thus, part of the artisan cheese renaissance that began around 2000 includes educational programs, facilities tours and relationship building.

On opening its artisan cheese doors in 2000, Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company, Point Reyes Station, Calif., began giving farm tours and tastings to retailers and chefs. Overwhelming interest led to expansion, and in 2010, the company opened The Fork, a culinary and educational center—an event space with a hospitality center, commercial kitchen and outdoor patio with an edible garden.

Visiting chefs can have all levels of experience, all the way from a simple tour and cheese-tasting to bringing along restaurant staff for a retreat filled with hands-on cheesemaking experience and recipe development, with or without the help of The Fork’s executive chef, says managing partner Jill Giacomini Basch.

For one of its organized programs, Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese brings in partner purveyors to highlight how well artisanal cheese pairs with other product produced by those with similar sensibilities, such as wineries, craft brewers, the California oyster industry and local row crop



farmers, as well as other cheesemakers, Basch says. Once a month, they conduct culinary classes led by popular chefs.

There are other ways to learn more about artisan cheese. Visit these websites:

www.eatwisconsincheese.com

Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board, Madison, Wis.

www.cheesesociety.org

American Cheese Society, Denver

www.cacheesguild.org

California Artisan Cheese Guild, Oakland, Calif.

www.cowgirlcreamery.com

Cowgirl Creamery, Point Reyes Station, Calif.

face with our interpretation,” he says, adding that naming the source “is the best way to increase the value-added scenario to the menu.”

Macaroni and cheese is a perfectly acceptable dish to highlight artisan cheese in Whatley’s opinion. He has used Cypress Grove Chevre’s Truffle Tremor™, in which a layer of summer truffles runs through the goat’s milk cheese.

One of the hotel’s most popular menu items is the Sierra Nevada Pale Ale and Fiscalini Farms Cheddar Cheese Soup. The award-winning cheese comes from Fiscalini Cheese Company, Modesto, Calif.

The starter section of Whatley’s vegetarian menu lists Wild Mushroom Flatbread, which combines seasonal mushrooms, Laura Chenel goat cheese, arugula, crispy onions and California olive oil—for \$14.75. The spinach salad has cold poached farm egg, Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company’s Original Blue™, red onion, radish and sherry vinaigrette for \$12.50.

Whatley is frank about the hefty price of artisan cheese. “You need to be prepared for the cost implications,” he says. However, he has learned that a little of the cheese goes a long way. A cheese-tasting dessert platter does not need 6 ounces of cheese for one person. “It shouldn’t be more than an ounce each of three kinds. Only two bites of each cheese is plenty.”

How to highlight

It's easier to highlight cheese in the European tradition of eating, where the main course is usually followed by a cheese course, and then dessert. "We didn't grow up that way. Not many of us have that experience," Devereux says. But she encourages chefs to try to incorporate a cheese course, with staff training as the key to success.

Let the staff taste the cheeses, then pronounce the names for them, tell them the stories and explain who made them. "So when they go to the table and take the customer's order, they can say, 'By the way, we have really beautiful cheese we want you to try, so save room,'" Devereux says.

With the cheese, include local bread or crackers, local honey, or a simple fruit and nuts. The other way to gear up diners for a cheese course is to have a beautiful cheese cart highly visible when guests walk into the restaurant, Devereux adds.

Brandt Evans, chef-owner of Blue Canyon Kitchen & Tavern in Twinsburg, Ohio, and Pura Vida by Brandt Evans in Cleveland, is especially keen to support local cheesemakers, valuing the relationships he builds with them. He develops themes for the cheese plates he offers. He may stay with several types of cheddar—for example, a two-year, four-year and eight-year aged cheddar—so guests can taste the difference. He also has gone with goat cheese from Wisconsin, New York and Ohio and encouraged guests to taste the different processes and the different grasses and herbs the goats have eaten.

For goat cheese accompaniments, this summer Evans included spiced almond brittle and fig purée marmalade on the cheese plate. "If I'm featuring hard blue cheese or aged cheddar, I'll go with more pickled vegetables or grain mustard," he says.

Chefs who prefer not to offer a cheese course can highlight artisan cheeses as a first-course appetizer, "because that's what we do. Offer artisan cheese in an amuse-bouche, in a salad or a first course where chefs can be imaginative," Devereux says. "It's where Americans look for cheese." She suggests a crostini topped with melted cheese, and jam or chutney, pesto, roasted tomatoes or some other seasonal topping.

An appetizer fondue is a great way to use up cheese odds and ends. Serve it with vegetables or bread as a dip. "It's fun. Call it the house blend. It changes. Add a little white wine in there and it's a delicious appetizer," says Devereux.

Evans keeps his eye on the end pieces of his Widmer cheddar (from Widmer's Cheese Cellars, Theresa, Wis.) and makes his own pimento cheese out of it to serve with housemade bacon and pickled



vegetables with toast points. "It's a great snacking appetizer. The guest can make bacon pimento cheese sandwiches out of it."

For a flatbread appetizer, he uses a Widmer spreadable brick cheddar to top the flatbread instead of tomato sauce, and adds chorizo sausage, maple bacon and Granny Smith apple slices. "It's a top seller at Blue Canyon," he says.

Other restaurants may want to highlight their artisan cheeses on the bar menu, going with a wine-and-cheese-pairing theme. "This would be great for restaurants with a wine-by-the-glass program," Devereux says. In that case, she advises drawing up a menu that suggests different types of cheese for different types of wine.

Even the dessert menu presents an opportunity to highlight artisan cheese and exude a quality image, which is important at Pebble Beach Resorts, Pebble Beach, Calif. As the corporate pastry chef for the three hotels at Pebble Beach Resort, John Hui, CEPC, AAC, is captivated with the better flavor of artisan cheese versus mass-produced cheese. He mainly works with such soft cheeses as mascarpone, ricotta, cream cheese and, occasionally, brie.

For a Crave Brothers Farmstead Cheese (Waterloo, Wis.) competition, he created a recipe for Vanilla Bean Mascarpone Cake with Orange Mascarpone Gelato. "The cake is nice and moist, served with a warm strawberry compote and the nice, cold, smooth orange flavor of mascarpone gelato. The whole thing tastes great together," Hui says.

He previously worked at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, where he would incorporate artisan cheese into artisan bread he created without the use of commercial yeast, made, rather, from natural starters. One bread combined blue cheese with green olives and walnuts.

Artisan cheese has a bright future on restaurant menus, Hui believes. "Everything is about uniqueness. Just like with artisan bread, everyone is looking for something different." ■

Using Crave Brothers Farmstead Cheese, John Hui, corporate pastry chef for Pebble Beach Resorts, created this Vanilla Bean Mascarpone Cake with Orange Mascarpone Gelato.

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