

New Ways to Say Cheese

You'll find a growing selection of the handmade kind at green markets, on the Net, and even at the local grocer. **BY JANE BLACK**

Twice a month at New York's Artisanal Cheese Center, two dozen food fanciers pack a gleaming classroom for Cheese & Wine 101. In front of each student are four wine glasses and an immense plate of aromatic cheeses, including perhaps a Hoja Santa, a spicy Texas goat cheese laced with coriander, or a nutty Comté from the Jura Mountains in Switzerland.

Students come to get an overview of cheese types, textures, and flavors and to learn to match cheeses with the wines that best suit them. They've come to the right guy: Their teacher, Max McCalman, maître fromager at New York's celebrated restaurant Picholine and dean of curriculum at the center, is on a self-proclaimed mission to get cheese "the respect it deserves."

Perfect timing. After years of stomaching processed yellow substitutes for real cheese, Americans can find a huge selection of domestic and imported handmade kinds at farmers' markets, on the Internet, and even at their local grocers. The Artisanal Cheese Center, which opened in May on West 37th Street and 10th Avenue, has a Web site, artisanalcheese.com, that sells more than 100 cheeses, perfectly ripened in one of five high-tech caves. They range from \$8 a pound to \$32 a pound.

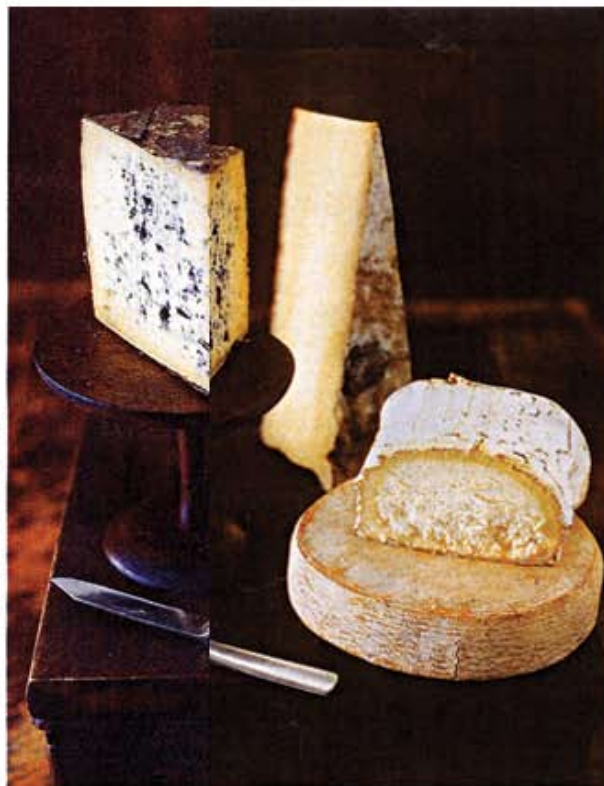
Americans' newfound interest in cheese stems in part from a growing desire for fresh, natural, locally grown foods, a cause long championed by Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif. and other respected chefs.

The trend has helped dozens of small U.S. dairies, which have discovered that \$150 worth of milk can bring in \$800 to \$1,000 when sold as cheese. "Cheese is appealing because it's

handcrafted and, like wine, unique to the farm it came from," says Sue Conley, founder of the Cowgirl Creamery in Point Reyes, Calif. Conley turns out 3,000 pounds of the stuff each week, including fresh cottage cheese for \$7.25 a pound and St. Pat, a mellow, buttery cheese wrapped in nettle leaves, for \$17.50 a pound. Conley sells to consumers and restaurants via cowgirlcreamery.com and in her new store, Artisan Cheese, in San Francisco.

With so many new cheeses available, how do you know where to begin? Aficionados divide cheeses into goat, sheep, or cow, depending on the milk used. Within each group are various kinds of rinds, including natural rinds, which form as the cheese is exposed to air; bloomy rinds, the soft cases found on Camembert or Brie; and washed rinds, created by spraying on brine, wine, or beer, and usually found on stinky cheeses.

If you're not a connoisseur, start with goat cheese; it might surprise you. Many people think of it as the soft, benign, bright-white Montrachet often served in a fancy salad along with a bit of apple and some walnuts. But goat cheese is as diverse as the more familiar cow's milk variety. Taste a firm Mont St. Francis, from Capriole



CHEESE TIPS

You'll enjoy cheese more if you're smarter about buying, serving, and storing it. Rob Kaufelt of Murray's Cheese in New York City offers these suggestions:

- **BUY FRESHLY CUT CHEESE.** Cheese, after all, is alive with bacteria, molds, and other microbes. It must be stored appropriately and sold when ripe. If you buy prepackaged cheese, beware of chemical additives, preservatives, and hydrogenated oils.
- **TASTE BEFORE YOU BUY IT.** No two handmade cheeses are the same. Weather and seasonal rainfall affect the flavor. A parmesan made in the spring might taste grassy, a winter cheese more nutty.
- **SERVE AT ROOM TEMPERATURE.** You need to give the cheese time to develop its flavor.
- **TO STORE, WRAP IN WAX PAPER AND COVER WITH PLASTIC WRAP OR FOIL.** Use new paper and plastic each time you open it. Fresh cheeses, such as a ricotta or chèvre, will keep five to eight days. Aged ones like parmesan or cheddar can be stored for a month or more.

PRICY IMPORTS (From left) Spain's Valdeon Blue and Switzerland's Vacherin Fribourgeois, Buche des Causses, and Reblochon.

U.S. but offer great diversity in texture and flavor. Most widely available are the pecorinos (pecora is Italian for "sheep"). These aged cheeses, which vary in quality, are hard, salty, and hearty. Pecorino Toscano hails from Tuscany, Romano from Rome, and Sardo from Sardinia. Look for pecorinos that have been aged at least four months and check labels to make sure you're buying pure pecora, or pure sheep's milk. For something lighter, try brin d'amour, a soft, sweet Corsican cheese coated with fresh thyme and rosemary. It's delicious served with summer fruit and chilled white wine.

Cows'-milk cheese includes everything from a classic Double Gloucester Cheddar to the famous Stilton Blue, which comes from Central England and is often called the king of cheeses. It's hard to recommend just a few, but here are some that are a cut above what's found on the average dinner-party cheese plate. Cheddar lovers might sample Llangloffan, an aged Welsh cheese similar to a classic Cheshire. It's flaky without losing its buttery, luxurious taste. For a decadent treat, nibble Reblochon, a smooth, creamy cheese with a 75% butterfat content and a bloomy rind, from Alpine

Farms in Greenville, Ind., available in fine shops and on specialty Web sites. It's a strong aged cheese with a pale orange rind. Or try a hard, fruity chèvre noir from Quebec. The firm white paste encased in signature black wax is slightly sweet but similar to a full-flavored cheddar. If you still prefer Montrachet, trade up to an exquisite French Buche des Causses. This cheese has a bloomy rind and a fluffy, mellow center.

Sheep's milk cheeses are the least well-known in the

France. McCalman calls Reblochon the "bacon and eggs" of cheeses because of a subtle eggy flavor in the milk and a bacon-like saltiness in the final product. Even those who think they hate blue cheese can appreciate a tender, rich Bleu D'Auvergne from France. The taste is grassy with hints of wildflowers. Any one of the above will impress your guests and perhaps kindle a taste for cheese. It's one more way, as Max McCalman likes to say, to "spread the curd."

PERFECT PAIRINGS

The sweetness and chalky texture of **Bonde de Gatine**, from Loire Valley, is what this crisp **Kalin Cellars Sauvignon Blanc** demands



Grand Vin de Leoville du Marquis de Las Cases, a Bordeaux with cedar and black currant notes, is complemented by a hearty, nutty **Vacherin Fribourgeois** from Switzerland



The floral, milky **Durrus**, from County Cork, sets off the apricot and spice notes of this silky **Domaine Weinbach Alsatian Riesling**

