

# FLAVOR & THE MENU

FLAVOR TRENDS, STRATEGIES & SOLUTIONS FOR MENU DEVELOPMENT

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GLOBAL Gateways  
Varietal PRODUCE

PROTEIN  
with Passion

# American CHEESE

Our big cheese culture holds its own against  
its international predecessors

By Robin Schempp

Giving new meaning to the term “American Cheese,” the United States is not only a cheese consumption capital, it is a natural cheese destination producing dairy products rivaling its international counterparts. Innovative and legacy cheesemakers offer a plethora of classic and unique, natural, domestic cheeses—not only in fancy-pants specialty shops like Fromagination, in Madison, Wis., but where adventurous Americans explore: in restaurants. Cheese and value-added dairy producers are evermore aware of how important foodservice is in exposing and marketing their products, and they’ve responded with products, packaging and distribution to prove it.

Market demand has been energized, thanks in part to national and state organizations like the American Cheese Society (ACS), Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board, California Milk Advisory Board, Vermont Cheese Council and others who protect, promote and reward good American milk production and cheesemaking.

Specialty cheeses produced in almost every state continue to grow with a dramatic increase in new and heritage styles of artisan, farmstead, sustainable, organic, flavored, seasonal and terroir-specific cheeses. A trip to the ACS conference in Madison, Wis., last fall gave even this cheesehead pause. The leader in promoting and supporting American cheese, the ACS showcased the flourishing world of cheese and dairy culture, culminating with the national competition and awards. Based on a handful of ACS categories, we’ve highlighted those trending and emerging styles that are influencing cheese’s role on modern American menus.

## **CRAVEABLE CHEESE CURDS**

Until now, squeaky cheese curds have been linked to dairyland farms, particularly among the upper Midwest and Québécois cultures. Typical to Wisconsin, cheddar curds are classically eaten quite fresh, out of hand or battered and fried. In Quebec, curds known as “la fromage qui fait kwick-kwick” are critical to the culturally significant poutine—a



SARUTO CHEESE USA

Nowadays, American cheesemakers rival European originators in the production of artisan cheeses like Gorgonzola, here, combined with potato and bacon atop a flatbread.

quick and satisfying dish of frites topped with curds softened with hot gravy. Québécois-style curds are typically made and aged more like mozzarella—the better for melting on the poutine.

This was the first year the ACS included cheese curds in its notable awards (it's no surprise the winners were Midwestern). The new ACS category signifies a breaking of traditional boundaries for cheese curds. Perhaps due to the rise of cheese in any form, but in particular, “melty” forms, both Midwestern fried curds and poutine have expanded far beyond their regional borders. Not only do we see poutine on many high-profile menus, but craveable cheddar curds are also popping up on chain menus. Both are perfectly paired with that popular pour—craft beer.

### — On the Menu —

- **BUFFALO CHEESE CURDS:** Wisconsin cheddar curds, Black River blue cheese dressing & celery—*Murray's Cheese Bar, New York*
- **POUTINE:** Frites topped with cheese curds (from Pineland Farms, Maine) with Saus gravy and add-ons for extra deliciousness: deep-fried egg, bacon gravy, truffled mushrooms, bacon and stout-braised beef or pork belly—*Saus, Boston*

- **ALE-FRIED CHEESE CURDS:** Brown-ale battered and fried cheese curds served with spicy ancho chile sauce—*Capital Ale House, Richmond, Va.*
- **VERMONT POUTINE:** Crispy fries, Maple Brook cheese curds, fried herbs topped with duck gravy—*Leunig's Bistro & Cafe, Burlington, Vt.*

### DISTINCT NICHE: RAW MILK CHEESES

Historically, most cheeses were made with unpasteurized milk; today, it has become a designation. Raw milk cheeses are classified as those made with milk heated to no more than 100°F. This allows beneficial bacteria to flourish and the foundational milk character to shine through, imparting deeper, more expressive flavors. The FDA limits the distribution of raw cheeses to those that have been aged at least 60 days. Accordingly, American producers have found a niche in creating exciting, distinctive aged raw milk cheeses that compete with those of countries with fewer restrictions.

Certain cheeses are less prone than others to contamination: those from smaller farms or farmsteads, and generally semi-firm and firm aged cheeses like the blues, Swiss, cheddars and most Italian styles. Given that they are more naturally formed, raw milk cheeses can be less



CALIFORNIA MILK ADVISORY BOARD

An unexpected twist on poutine, “kimcheese fries” balances pungent, spicy kimchi with a creamy cheese topping on a bed of crisp fries.

consistent, so reliability for melting is lower. Since they are more nuanced, it's better to use them simply—uncooked and where they can be highlighted for their rich flavor and character.

### — On the Menu —

- RAW MILK CHEESE PLATE: Ascutney Mountain (Cobb Hill Cheese, Hartland, Vt.) raw Jersey cow's milk: firm, Alpine-style, nutty, complex; Txiki (Barinaga Ranch, Marshall, Calif.) raw sheep's milk: firm, Basque-style, sweet, milky; Rogue River Blue (Rogue Creamery, Central Point, Ore.) raw cow's milk: soft, wrapped in Syrah leaves macerated in pear brandy—*Farallon, San Francisco*
- “FRIED BOLOGNA” SANDWICH: Egg, raw milk cheddar, Dijon aioli, frisée, pickled red onion, English muffin—*Lola Bistro, Cleveland*

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### FARM FRESH CHEESES

This category of cheese includes unripened ricotta, impastata, quark, fromage blanc, mascarpone, cream, cottage and farmers' cheeses, as well as the aforementioned curds. By all accounts, fresh cheese is one of the most exciting dairy developments in foodservice. These curdy cheeses represent a wide variety of cheese and recipe traditions, from France's low- to no-fat fromage blanc to the Germanic quark to oh-so-Italian ricottas and mascarpone—plus the newly popular artisanal curdy cheeses made from a diversity of milk sources. They all have their own fresh, sweet-tart identities, yet similar applications.

The simplest applications of fresh cheeses are often the most satisfying—as a topping, in traditional baking or as pasta and protein fillings. But menu developers are now stirring fresh curds into vegetable purées or potatoes in place of cream or other fats to create texture and flavor. A dollop atop a bowl of grains or salad adds creaminess and sustenance. Applications can be as simple as a goat cheese impastata ice cream, a healthy schmear of fromage blanc, or quenelles of quark with fresh fruit, honey, nuts or dark chocolate. Wholesome fresh cheeses are also debuting on breakfast menus as fillings, spreads or toppings.

### — On the Menu —

- FROMAGE BLANC  
Local fromage blanc tartine, fresh herbs, scallions, radish and black pepper—*Le Pain Quotidien, multiple locations*
- QUARK  
Brioche French Toast: Thick-cut brioche stuffed with Clock Shadow Creamery maple quark cheese, pure Wisconsin maple syrup and fresh strawberries—*Zak's Café, Milwaukee, Wisc.*
- MIXED MILK RICOTTA  
Old Chatham sheep's milk ricotta gnocchi with tomato, basil and Buffalo mozzarella—*Esca, New York*
- MASCARPONE  
Potato purée with mascarpone and Parmigiano—*D.O.C.G. Enoteca, Las Vegas*



VERMONT CREAMERY

## WHAT'S ABUZZ IN THE CHEESE WORLD:

Cultured butter

Big audacious blues

Bound: cloth bandage, wood and leaf

Mixed milks

Washed rinds: draft beer, wine, spirit and spice

Grass-fed/seasonal

Sustainable

Pairings: Cheese & chocolate

Pairings: Cheese & cocktails

Pairings: Cheese & cider

Rich and creamy cultured butter is enriching all manner of menu items and allowing for a great backstory.

### EMERGING VARIETIES: AMERICAN-MADE INTERNATIONAL STYLES

Of the cheeses modeled after or based on recipes for established European types, the most prolific are the aged Italians, including mozzarella, hard grating and grana types—many of which are a singular focus for cheese companies. Along the same lines are the aged cheeses based on Hispanic, Spanish, South and Central American recipes, as well as Europeans, including Alpine or Emmental; Scandinavian, Monastery and English cheese styles.

Access to authentically styled cheeses has increased opportunity for trial and adoption. Once-exotic Asiago, fontina and Gouda now

can be ordered on sandwiches in QSRs and fast casuals such as Wendy's, Panera and Starbucks.

We know about the rise of burrata, Havarti, manchego and Muenster, and now there is agreement that U.S. producers can pull off an alternative to Parmigiano-Reggiano and pecorino in its American granas and they are also giving Swiss, French and Italian Alpine classics a run for their money.

On the trend horizon, watch for American versions of authentically styled grilling cheeses such as: Juustoleipa (or bread cheese), a Scandinavian cheese once made with reindeer milk; halloumi, Kasserli or kefalotyri (Cypriot/Greek sheep's milk cheeses); or Italian Montasio. Also trending: better melters; more Alpine types (Comté, Gruyère, Beaufort, raclette); more Basque sheep's cheeses and German Butterkäse; and authentic Spanish and Hispanic fresh and aged cheeses.

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### — On the Menu —

- BUTTERNUT SQUASH GNOCCHI, pasilla chile mole, cotija cheese, compressed apples, candied pumpkin seeds—*Longman & Eagle, Chicago*

THE BLUE ROOM



- ▶ NARRAGANSETT CREAMERY BUTTERKÄSE, Arancini Endive, hazelnut-cream sauce—*Castle Hill Inn, Newport, R.I.*
- ▶ PORTOBELLO WITH HAVARTI: Julienne strips of portobello mushroom caps rolled in panko bread crumbs served with creamy Havarti cheese sauce—*Billy's Restaurant, Lincoln, Neb.*

#### CLOSE TO HOME: AMERICAN ORIGINALS AND FARMSTEAD CHEESES

"American Originals" are those recognized by the ACS as original to the United States (i.e. Monterey Jack, brick cheese, Colby) or those unique in their recipes and techniques. To be considered "farmstead," cheeses must be made with milk from the producer's own animals, on the farm where they are raised.

American originals are a terrific way to increase or develop your regional, local or locale-based menu placements. In addition to being delicious, heritage picks like Colby, Dry Jack, brick and Teleme have all-American stories, which make them smart menu-marketing additions.

Likewise, farmstead cheeses are made in a specific place, generally in smaller batches, which leads to development of terroir-specific,

seasonally distinctive flavor profiles—as well as a handmade, artisanal character. These cheeses and cheesemakers offer a terrific farm-fresh marketing opportunity.

#### — On the Menu —

- ▶ HONEY GEM LETTUCE, Rogue Blue Cheese, hazelnuts, radish, rye croutons, buttermilk dressing—*Restaurant Roux, Seattle*
- ▶ GRAFTON BULL HILL CHEESE, Fig and d'Anjou Pear Strudel: fresh pear and dried fig compote melted in a phyllo crust—*The Dorset Inn, Dorset, Vt.*
- ▶ ARTICHOKE AND GREEN GARLIC FLATBREAD with pancetta and Teleme cheese—*The Chapel, San Francisco* ☞

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Visit [getflavor.com](http://getflavor.com) for a list of ACS award winners.

At The Blue Room in Cambridge, Mass., the dessert menu showcases One Perfect Cheese, served alongside housemade confiture.