

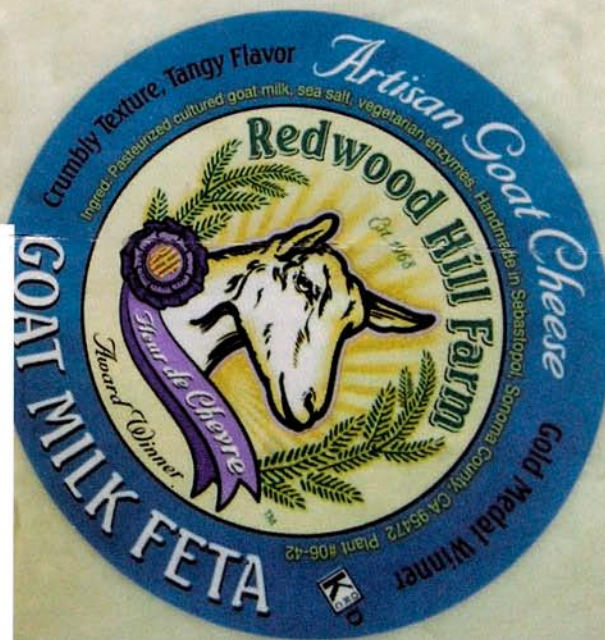
A SAVORY SLICE

Artisanal cheeses take their place at the head of the table.

By ANN PARKER

In a sunny corner of the Aptos Farmers Market, people crowd around Andrea London's Cheese Market booth, eager to sample some of the 20-plus California artisanal cheeses she carries. One woman eyes the snowy, organic cream cheese from Sierra Nevada Cheese Company, then nibbles a little spoonful tentatively and her eyes widen.

"It melts in your mouth," she says wonderingly.



Artisanal cheeses like these are what draws people to Andrea London's booth at the Aptos Farmers Market each Saturday.

That's one reason the cream cheese took Best of Show at the last California State Fair.

Cheese has become a destination in itself, not just a vehicle for Ritz crackers. People once thought of cream cheese, for instance, as little more than the main ingredient in cheesecake. But modern artisanal cheeses, like all of those at London's Cheese Market booth, have become edible works of art.

THE BIG CHEESE

These days, specialty cheeses are being savored alone, paired with fine wines and featured in sophisticated recipes. They're combined with heirloom fruit, wood-fired bread, rustic crackers and organic chutneys. Increasingly, restaurants are offering cheese plates on menus. Cheese tastings and classes are all the rage. And both classic and new cheeses are being appreciated and admired for their artistic and gourmet appeal.

It's a cheese revolution.

Cheesemonger London loves introducing people to specialty cheeses and speaks passionately and knowledgeably about the world of artisanal cheese. The cow, goat and sheep cheeses she carries at her booth come from throughout California and nearly all use raw milk; many are organic and/or kosher.

"There has been a huge surge of consumer interest in farmstead, small creamery and artisanal cheeses," says London, explaining that farmstead cheesemakers raise their own milk producers (cows, etc.) and craft the cheese on-site, whereas creameries import milk. Artisanal cheeses are primarily handmade in small batches, with traditional techniques and minimal mechanization.

"People are becoming more educated about food," says Chef Nicci Tripp, "especially organic, home-grown, genuine food."

The executive chef at Theo's restaurant, Tripp also makes his own cheeses, serving them at the celebrated Soquel restaurant.

"For me, cheese is an awesome thing," he enthuses. "I

grew up making cheeses, starting with mozzarella. Making your own cheese takes care and effort and pleasure – like winemaking or charcuterie."

He declares a "cheese Renaissance" is taking place as people look for healthier, more natural ways to eat. "And more people are eating raw cheese," he says. "It's readily available and I think it's better for you."

London agrees, saying she believes raw cheese can help build consumers' immunity since pasteurization kills beneficial, as well as harmful, bacteria. She also supports substituting vegetarian alternatives for coagulating milk rather than using animal-based rennet.

Like chef Tripp, London discovered cheese in her youth – aided by an enlightening trip to France.

"I had a cheese epiphany," she says with a laugh.

In 1985, she decided to start her own cheese marketing business and says, "I've never turned back."

London marketed cheese on the Internet, ran the Carmel Cheese Shop for four years and helped found the California Artisan Cheese Guild. A two-time judge at the American Cheese Society's annual competition (now the largest in the U.S.), she also teaches classes – including several upcoming cheese and wine pairing workshops at Soif Wine Bar in Santa Cruz.



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MILK FROM A MOOSE?

There are hundreds of types of cheese in the world, most made from cow, goat and sheep milk. But exotics exist, like \$500-a-pound Swedish moose milk cheese. Buffalo mozzarella

is made from water buffalo milk, primarily in Italy – although California cheese producer Bubalus Bubalis (Latin for water buffalo) now markets water buffalo mozzarella made with milk from its own herd.

Aging characterizes cheese types:

- Fresh cheeses (like mozzarella) are non-aged or lightly cured.
- Soft-ripened cheeses (Brie, Camembert) have an edible rind.

- Semi-soft cheeses (Harvarti, Colby) age less than six months; they're generally creamy with minimal rind.
- Semi-hard cheeses (Gouda, most cheddars, Gruyere) are aged six to 12 months.
- Hard cheeses (Parmesan, Romano, dry jack) age more than a year.

California cheeses, like California wines, are at the cutting edge of production; both often take top places in national competitions. And, like wine, the taste of cheese can be affected by when, where and how it's produced. London notes that cheese flavors vary by geography, soil and what milk-producers consume, as well as the season and climate.

This concept of terroir, a winemaking term meaning "of the land," is a selling point used by Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company to promote its subtly salty, creamy blue cheese – made on a coastal Tomales Bay farm where cows graze organic pastures.

CHEESE TRENDS

What's the latest in cheeses?

"Lots of new blue cheeses, some very creative," London says. "Washed-rind cheeses like Cowgirl Creamery's Red Hawk. Bandage-wrapped cheddars – one of Fiscalini Farmstead's won 'Best Cheddar in the World' at the 2007 World Cheese Awards. Raclette, a delicious cheese meant to be heated and scraped."

Where to find great cheeses locally?

"The River Café & Cheese Shop has great variety," says chef Tripp. London advises, "Try Walter Bulk's wonderful Gouda at the Santa Cruz Farmers Market."

Several area markets also have dedicated cheese buyers and excellent cheese sections, including Deluxe Foods, Shopper's Corner, New Leaf Community Markets, Staff of Life and Scotts Valley Market.

There's no excuse not to say "cheese."

Some to try

▲ Chipotle Cheddar (Bravo Farms, Traver)

A mild, raw cheddar (cow) veined with chipotle, creating a subtle, smoky heat. Think gourmet grilled-cheese sandwiches.

▲ Creme Fraiche (Kendall Farms, Atascadero)

The New York Times described Kendall's pasteurized cultured cream as "silk and cream." Magical for cooking or with berries and champagne.

▲ Bucheret (Redwood Hill Farm, Sonoma)

This French-style goat cheese is aged three weeks to create a silky texture and robust flavor. Drizzle with local honey for an excellent after-dinner treat.

▲ San Joaquin Gold (Fiscalini Farms, Modesto)

An award-winning semi-hard cheese (cow) with a buttery, sweetly nutty flavor. Grate on Caesar salad or create gourmet mac-and-cheese.

▲ Red Hawk (Cowgirl Creamery, Point Reyes Station)

Washed-rind cheese (cow) bathed with brine solution to encourage bacteria that tint the rind red. Robust, aromatic. Serve alone, or try with quince paste.

▲ Smoked Scamorza (Bubalus Bubalis, Gardena)

This smoky aged mozzarella is made by the only California producer of water buffalo mozzarella. Perfect for pizza or melted on a burger.

Now you're cooking with cheese

Gougere

(from Annaliese Keller)

A French baked savory pastry, a gougere is typically paired with red Burgundy wines. It's traditionally made with Gruyere but flavorful California cheeses – such as Fiscalini's San Joaquin Cheddar or Point Reyes Blue – work exceptionally well.

- 1 cup whole milk
- 4 Tbsp. unsalted butter
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 1/8 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 1/8 tsp. cayenne*
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 4 large eggs, room temperature
- 1 cup lightly packed shredded San Joaquin cheddar or 1/4 pound Point Reyes blue cheese

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

In a large saucepan, combine milk, butter, salt, black pepper and cayenne over medium-high heat. Bring to boil; remove from heat. Add flour all at once, stirring briskly until mixture leaves sides of pan and forms a ball, about 1 minute. Return to medium-high heat and cook, stirring constantly, for 1 minute. Remove from heat and add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each. Add cheese and beat until mixed well and soft dough forms.

Drop the dough by spoonfuls (a rounded tablespoon or so) on the baking sheet. Bake 10 minutes, then reduce the temperature to 350 degrees and bake until golden brown, about 20 to 25 minutes.

Remove puffs from the oven; serve immediately or at room temperature.

*Be imaginative: vary spices to create a "signature" appetizer of your own – use toasted, freshly ground cumin seed or creole seasoning with cheddar, or a dash of nutmeg with Gruyere.