

Great American Cheeses

Domestic delights and where to find them

BY ARI WEINZWEIG

Same beginning, different results. Dry Jack (left) actually starts as a very flavorful Monterey Jack (right). It's first air-dried, then its rind is coated with unsweetened cocoa and black pepper, and finally it's aged at least six months. The result is a hard, golden cheese with a nutty flavor.

Now, I know that a lot of folks snicker at the mere mention of American cheese—they can't get those thin, square, processed, and dyed slices out of their minds. But in buying cheeses for my shop in Ann Arbor, Michigan, I've discovered that we have a long tradition of great cheeses that are as distinctive, as flavorful, as interesting as the finest Europe has to offer.

I'd be surprised if you've tasted more than one or two of the cheeses on my list. You certainly won't have found any of them in supermarkets, where imported Roquefort, Parmesan, and Swiss get all the attention.

Some of these American cheeses began as recreations of cheeses from the old country, but they long ago became distinctive originals in their own right. I've yet to find anything in Europe like a Dry Jack, a Teleme, or a piece of well-aged Crowley. If you're looking for cheese with





Traditional Teleme is a soft, runny cheese with a delicate flavor that deepens as it ages.

flavor and character, cheese that's nourishment for the soul and the palate, you'll find that my choices deliver on all counts.

There's more flavor in a bite of great cheese than in a pound of the industrial stuff. Put a sliver of a great cheese on your tongue. Let it melt. Like one of those nesting Russian dolls, it has flavors within flavors within flavors.

Great cheese knows where it comes from. It has roots, an identity, a connection to the area in which it is made, even to the pastures in which the animals graze. It's never defined by trends. To the contrary, it survives in spite of trends.

Great cheese has character. Imagine a vine-ripened, succulent tomato from the farmers' market. It doesn't taste exactly like every other tomato at the market. I look for that character in a cheese.

Great cheese changes with the seasons, its age, the weather, the animals' food, the mood of the maker. The tremendous variety in cheese makes me approach a sample from each new wheel with the eager anticipation of a kid in front of a pile of chocolate—with no adults in sight.

Finally, I like supporting the people who make the little-recognized fine cheeses of America. Making great cheese is a tough job. Your hands are "in the curd" six or seven days a week—turning wheel after wheel, rubbing rind after rind. These people have stayed true to their craft and contributed to the richness of this country's character.

Dry Monterey Jack—To my mind, this is the greatest of American cheeses. Dry Jack dates back to World War I,

when a San Francisco grocer had his supply of aged grating cheese from Italy cut off for the duration. Desperate to satisfy his customers, he came upon a pallet of Monterey Jack that had been forgotten in the shop's cellar. Amazingly, what had started out mild and soft had turned into an incredibly delicious, firm-textured, and full-flavored cheese.

At one time dozens of dairies in northern California made Dry Jack. Today there are only two. My favorite is Vella Cheese in Sonoma. The Vellas have been handcrafting and carefully aging Dry Jack since 1931. Thousands of wheels stand on edge, supported by wooden racks, in their aging rooms. The cheese is aged anywhere from six months to six years. I prefer Dry Jack that's twelve to fourteen months old, which the Vellas refer to as their *Special Select*. It has a golden cast and a rich, nutty flavor.

Dry Jack is mild enough to appeal to novices, yet complex enough to satisfy demanding cheese lovers. It's also a wonderful grating cheese, an all-American alternative to Parmesan.

Teleme—The name is Greek, the maker is Italian, but Teleme is strictly American. The Pelusos are the only remaining makers of traditional Teleme. Franklin Peluso is the third generation (his grandfather got things going in 1925) to craft Teleme in the central California town of Los Banos.

A slice off a young (four- to six-week-old) Teleme is soft, but not runny. Its flavor is mild, delicate, with a nice touch of tartness on the tongue—great with fresh fruit, or sliced on sandwiches. I prefer a

An overview of how cheese is made

Although there are hundreds of different cheeses made round the world, nearly all of them are variants of one basic procedure.

The process starts with fresh milk. The milk is warmed, and starter bacteria cultures are added to help develop flavor. The cheesemaker then adds rennet, which is made from the stomach lining of grazing animals, or a microbial "vegetarian" substitute for rennet. Rennet causes the milk to separate into solids (known as curds) and liquid (or whey). The cheesemaker drains off the whey, and then begins making the curd into cheese.

How the curd is handled determines the final form of the cheese. Break it into tiny pieces, add salt and cream, and you'll have cottage cheese. Mill the curd into even finer pieces, salt it, press it in large wheels or blocks, age it for a year, and you've got a cheddar. Form it into bricks, let the right kind of natural bacteria grow on the rind to ripen it, and you have smear-ripened Brick cheese.

Of course, the process isn't quite that simple. A good cheesemaker is intimately involved with hundreds of details that go into crafting a fine traditional cheese. But you get the idea.—A.W.



Real Brick (left) and Limburger (right) both have full, authoritative flavor.

Teleme that's been allowed to age longer, up to four months. Ripe Teleme is a truly luscious, creamy, almost runny cheese that far surpasses any factory-made Brie or Camembert the French send over here. Its flavor is complex, never strong, but highly distinctive, with an aroma of fresh cream and a hint of wild mushrooms. Teleme is a treat spread on crusty sourdough bread and accompanied by a glass of chardonnay. I love to melt it over boiled, forked-open new potatoes.

The Pelusos make two versions, so be sure to ask for the traditional one, whose thin, natural rind is dusted with rice flour, *not* the plastic-sealed, rindless cheese made for the supermarket trade.

Real Brick—This cheese, as opposed to the supermarket variety of the same name, is wonderfully full flavored. “Invented” in Wisconsin in 1877 by Swiss immigrant John Jossi, real Brick is what's known as a *washed-rind* cheese. The Swiss-German community in Wisconsin call it *smear ripening*. Young Brick cheeses are “smeared,” or washed by hand, with a special bacterium that ripens them from the inside out, leaving the cheese with a reddish-brown natural rind. The bacteria break down the paste of the cheese. The older it gets, the softer the cheese and the fuller the flavor.

At one time, Brick was made all over the state. Today there are only a handful of traditional makers. Chalet Cheese in Monroe, Wisconsin, has been making Brick since the early 1900s. Each wheel is hand-salted, hand-turned, and aged on traditional wooden shelving. It's at its best at three to four months old, when its

full flavor has had time to develop. I love to eat this cheese with an American microbrew, either a Pilsner or a light ale, and slices of dark bread. Chalet makes a “commercial” variety as well, so be sure to ask for the traditional, smear-ripened cheese, preferably a well-aged piece.

Crowley—Crowley cheese has been made in Healdville, Vermont, since 1882 at the oldest continuously operating cheese factory in the country. Once, cheeses like Crowley were made all over New England, called *store cheese*, and sold in every shop. Today Kent Smith, Crowley's current owner, is one of only a couple of people who make this traditional New England specialty.

Crowley is not a cheddar, although it is similar. Crowley is more open-textured,

moister, softer, and tangier than a cheddar. Smith still works with the original recipe, using only unpasteurized milk and traditional techniques. I prefer Crowley that has been aged for about a year—what they refer to as *sharp*—when the cheese's full flavor is at its most distinctive. This is a great eating cheese, and it's also good on sandwiches.

Maytag Blue—Yes, this cheese is made by the same folks who started the washing-machine company. But while they long ago sold off their interest in washing machines, the Maytags have held onto their cheese. They've been making Maytag Blue in Newton, Iowa, since 1939. Although they recently sold their herd of Friesian dairy cows, they continue to use only the finest locally produced, unpasteurized milk. The cheese is made into eight-pound wheels and then cave-aged to develop its distinctive blue veining.

Maytag Blue is wonderfully rich and creamy, with a sweet, nutty flavor. I like it best on salads, but it's also great on burgers and with apples or pears.

Shelburne Farms Vermont Cheddar—Cheddar has its origins in southwest England, but American cheddars have been made so long that they've taken on a character of their own, distinctive from their English ancestors.

Shelburne Farms, built in the late 19th century, has been making superb cheddar since 1981. They use only the



Two Vermont specialties—Crowley (large and small wedges, right) and Shelburne Farms cheddar (left)—share some characteristics but differ in texture and flavor.

Photos: Susan Kahn



Rich, tangy Maytag Blue goes well with the sweetness of apples and pears.

exceptionally rich, unpasteurized milk of their Brown Swiss cows, and traditional cheddar-making techniques. As a result, the cheese has none of the bite or bitterness that often mark mass-produced cheddars. Shelburne's is one of the richest, creamiest, most intensely flavored cheddars you'll find. It makes the best grilled cheese sandwich I've ever had.

Real Monterey Jack—I long ago gave up on the bland stuff I saw in supermarkets, but real Monterey Jack is a delicious cheese. I love to watch people's reactions when they find out that Monterey Jack can actually have flavor. A couple of dairies still make real Monterey Jack; I prefer Vella's.

Monterey Jack has its roots in the cheesemaking traditions of Spain. As Spanish Franciscan friars moved their way up the coast in the 18th and 19th centuries, establishing the missions that still dot the California countryside, so did their recipe for *queso blanco*, the fresh, white cheese of their homeland. In 1882, a Scot named David Jacks began to produce large quantities of this traditional cheese for the growing community of gold miners. His cheese grew so famous that it came to be known by his name, *Monterey Jacks*. The "s" got lost along the line, but the cheese remained.

Made by hand and aged only a few weeks, real Monterey Jack is mild but flavorful, with a delicate milky taste. Aged a few weeks longer, it becomes softer, creamier, almost spreadable, and more pungent. A tasty melting cheese for omelets, pizzas, and sandwiches, it's also great for Mexican dishes.

Limburger—Cheese lovers who think they have to buy French cheese to get full flavor ought to try this. While Limburger is of Belgian origin, it was once one of the most popular American cheeses, made by dozens of small dairies. Today only a couple of producers are left. Chalet Cheese is my favorite. Their Limburger has a creamy, tongue-pleasing, spreadable texture and an assertive, tangy flavor. Don't be put off by its strong aroma. Its flavor is mellower than its scent indicates. I love to snack on Limburger with a heavy-bodied ale, add it to a roast beef sandwich, or eat it with German salami and pumpernickel.

Serve at room temperature. I can't overstate the importance of serving cheese at room temperature (about 70°F). The difference in flavor between two wedges of the same cheese, one at room temperature and one right out of the refrigerator, is remarkable. The colder the weather and the harder the cheese, the longer it takes to warm up. A well-aged cheddar in Wisconsin in January may take five hours to warm up, while a piece of Teleme in the heat of the summer might require a mere 30 minutes.

Ari Weinzweig has loved cheese for as long as he can remember. One of his favorite childhood treats was a couple of slices of American, peeled right off the stack. As co-owner of Zingerman's Delicatessen in Ann Arbor, Michigan, he has been honing his cheese-tasting skills for over ten years. A native of Chicago, Weinzweig studied Russian history before veering off in the direction of the kitchen. ♦

RESOURCES

The **American Cheese Society** is a grassroots, nonprofit organization whose members are cheesemakers, retailers, chefs, consumers—anyone with an interest in American cheeses. The ACS puts out a bimonthly newsletter and holds an annual conference where cheese lovers from around the country gather to talk and taste cheese. For information on joining, contact the ACS at 34 Downing St., New York, NY 10014; 212/727-7939.

Mail-order sources

Dean & DeLuca, 560 Broadway, New York, NY 10012; 800/221-7714, stocks most of these cheeses.

The Pasta Shop, Rockridge Market Hall, 5655 College Ave., Oakland, CA 94618; 510/547-4005, stocks most of the cheeses and will special order the others.

Zingerman's Delicatessen, 422 Detroit St., Ann Arbor, MI 48104; 313/663-3400, regularly stocks all of these cheeses.

You can also order directly from the cheesemakers mentioned in the article. Contact them for information.

Chalet Cheese Co-op, N4858 Cty. N, Monroe, WI 53566; 608/325-4343. Ships mid-September to mid-May only.

Crowley Cheese, Healdville Rd., Healdville, VT 05758; 802/259-2340.

Maytag Dairy Farms, Inc., PO Box 806, Newton, IA 50206; 800/247-2458.

Peluso Cheese, Inc., 429 H St., Los Banos, CA 93635; 209/826-3744.

Shelburne Farms, Shelburne, VT 05482; 802/985-8686.

Vella Cheese, PO Box 191, Sonoma, CA 95476; 800/848-0505.