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## A primer on buying, pairing cheese



Even before the Saturday opening of Atelier by JCB (see info box), Napa Valley arguably had more fine cheese per capita than any place on the planet. Paris boasts more cheese shops, of course, but it has more than 2 million residents. For our size, we are blessed. Between Napa and Calistoga lurk hundreds of admirable cheeses, from subtle to stinky.

So how do you choose when there are so many options? How do you find the cheeses that fit your palate, occasion and budget?

James Ayers has been steering Napa Valley residents to the right cheeses for more than two decades—initially at the Tripoli Market in St. Helena (a site now occupied by Dean & DeLuca), then at Sunshine Foods, where he managed the cheese counter for more than 18 years. This week, he assumes a new challenge as manager for Atelier, the new Yountville fine-foods shop from vintner Jean-Charles Boisset.

Over coffee one recent morning, Ayers shared some tips on how to be a smarter cheese shopper. Implement his suggestions and you'll raise the odds of getting home with only cheeses you love.

Ask more questions. Have a conversation with your cheesemonger. Try not to shop when you're rushed so you have time for a dialogue. Ask the merchant to show you the difference between a ripe Camembert and one that's not ready yet.



"You need to know what Brie looks like when it's young," says Ayers. "And you need to learn what bad cheese looks like."

If you show interest, Ayers may pick up a wedge of Coulommiers, a French bloomy-rind cheese in the Brie family, and point out how it ripens from the outside in. The cheese peaks when it still has some firmness at the center, he believes—information you'll never glean if you're too hurried to chat.

Don't bring a shopping list. Instead, ask the merchant, "What's good today?" or "What are you taking home tonight?" Cheeses have lifespans; they are constantly evolving. An alert monger knows what's optimum that day. Some cheeses are seasonal or highly limited, like Rush Creek Reserve from Wisconsin. Pass it up and you may not see it again for a year.

Be open-minded. Approach cheeses with a spirit of adventure. Consider your purchase as an opportunity to experience a cheese or a style you haven't had before.

"I love people like that," says Ayers. "They drive me to better myself. I know if I bring in something weird, they'll love it." It's tempting to fall back on your favorites, but you'll never develop your palate if you buy the same cheese (or wine or beer) every time.

Ask for a taste. "Some people are afraid to ask," says Ayers, "but you've got to taste." The opportunity to sample before you commit is one advantage of shopping at a full-service cheese counter. A cheese the monger loves may be too salty for your palate, or too strong. Be considerate of the monger and other shoppers and limit your sampling to cheeses you're seriously considering. You are tasting, not grazing.

Don't overbuy. It may surprise you to learn that good merchants don't want you to purchase more than you can consume in a few days. "Please don't buy so much," pleads Ayers. "I hate waste." Better to buy small amounts, but buy more often. No cheese improves after it is cut. If you're unsure about quantities for your dinner party, ask the cheesemonger's advice.

Don't be misled by pull dates. Some, not all, producers put best-by or pull-by dates on their packaging. These dates are calculated from the day of manufacture. They're a guide to ripeness, but not a deadline. Cheeses do not become unsafe the day after their pull date. Some get better. Ayers said he recently served a Vacherin Mont d'Or, a Swiss cow's milk cheese, a month past its consume-by date. "It was divine," says the merchant. Before you reject or toss a cheese with an expired date, give it a chance.

Pairing wine and cheese? Question authority. After many years of paying attention to the harmony between cheese and wine, Ayers is unconvinced that "what grows together goes together."

He's convinced that very few cheeses really complement wine. His short list of wine-friendly cheeses includes

- Nicasio Valley Foggy Morning, a young cow's milk cheese from Marin County;
- Three- to four-month-old Ossau-Iraty, a nutty sheep's milk cheese from the French Pyrenees;
- Montegrappa and Sapore del Piave, hard aged cow's milk cheeses from Northern Italy;
- Prima Donna, an aged Dutch Gouda with butterscotch scent. Taste critically and trust your own opinions about what pairings work.

Don't let cheese sweat. Your purchases should be fine from the store to your home, but don't detour for a couple of hours in hot weather. If you can't get your cheese into the refrigerator within a half-hour or so, bring a cooler or ask the store for some ice. Cheese isn't going to become unsafe if it warms up in your car, but you haven't done it any favors.

Store cheese properly at home. Extend the life of your purchases by protecting them from the drying air of the refrigerator. Most cheese wants more humidity than a refrigerator's cheese compartment provides. Ayers recommends wrapping hard cheese in wax paper and then tucking it in a Ziplock bag.

Unwrap soft cheeses like blues, Brie and triple-creams and store in a lidded plastic container—Tupperware type—with a paper towel on the bottom to absorb excess moisture.

For a washed-rind cheese like Taleggio, wrap it loosely in a dry paper towel, then tuck that inside a lidded container or Ziplock bag. If a wedge of cheese develops a little blue or white mold, cut the mold out but don't toss the whole piece. If the cheese still smells and tastes good, with no bitter flavor or ammonia aroma, it's worth keeping.