

A place at the table

Want easy, elegant entertaining? Cheese can cut it!

By Ashley Brown, cheese/food enthusiast

I truly believe I am fortunate to have grown up in a home where the “good china” wasn’t reserved just for holiday dinners and special occasions. Quality foods that are effortless to prepare and pair easily with the right wines can give guests a warm, welcomed feeling; particularly when those foods are served in or on beautiful dishes. Cheese is one of those foods.

Cheese, for lack of a better term, really cuts it when it comes to pleasurable, elegant pairings. It is one of the simplest, tastiest and attractive ways to please everyone, and to demonstrate that you really care about what and how you serve your guests. *Whether you like a super thick and creamy Camembert, or a firm and flavorful Cheddar; it’s easy to taste why cheese should have a permanent place at the table.*

Like wine, the world of cheese is rich, diverse and fun to explore. However, the beauty of cheese is that there are just seven fundamental styles which, once remembered, can easily make you appear the most informed cheese lover on the planet.

The main thing you want to remember is this, most cheese is made from cow’s, sheep, or goat’s milk, or a combination of these milks. *The only cheese made from something other than these three is mozzarella di bufala, which is made from the milk of water buffalo.* The type of milk does not determine the style of cheese, as various milks are found in each of the following categories:

Fresh refers to cheeses such as cottage cheese and I might be wrong, but pairing wine with cottage cheese just seems a recipe for a bad night. Ricotta, cream cheese and chevre also fall into this category.

Bloomy cheese has a white rind and is soft and creamy from the outside in. Bloomy cheeses soften, not harden, as they age and are often referred to as “ripened.” Brie, Camembert, and triple-crèmes are classic examples of bloomy cheese.

Semi-soft cheese is a good melting cheese even though it tends to be chewy and smooth in texture. Examples include Fontina, Gruyere and Havarti.

Firm cheese is the largest category of cheese. Firm cheeses typically have a buttery and nutty flavor with a fairly dense texture, and include Cheddar, Edam and Manchego.

Hard cheeses are drier and more crumbly than any other type of cheese. Hard cheeses have been aged for several months and can have a biting sharpness like Provolone, or super nutty taste like Parmigiano-Reggiano.

Blue cheese gets its blue, veiny ripples from the *Penicillium roqueforti*-bacteria that thrives in cultured milk if air is present. Blue cheeses, especially Gorgonzola and Stilton, are delicious when served with honey. The sweetness of the honey cuts through the strong, salty flavor of blues.

Washed-Rind cheese is cheese that is washed repeatedly with brine, beer, wine or spirits during the maturation process which creates a moist surface impervious to mold but friendly to flavor-enhancing bacteria. This is the category of notoriously “stinky” types may be best to reserve this cheese for your “private” pleasure!

Cheese is a natural pleasure; a craze and craving that will never go away. *So, get on (the cheese) board!* The next time you grocery shop, take time to truly review the rows of variety, color, textures and diversity of animal milk cheeses available. Sure, cheese tastes delicious, but it's also a beautiful way to show your guests that you care about what you serve. When garnished with something other than just crackers like honey, nuts and fruit, it also shows you care about how you serve.

When entertaining, remember this simple rule of thumb: *prettiness without purpose has no place at the table, and cheese cuts a beautiful form with delicious function!*

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Ashley Brown, food-enthusiast, is a professional special events and catering consultant who enjoys entertaining friends and family, traveling, teaching and learning everything she can about food, wine, and (of course) cheese. Brown holds an undergraduate degree in English Communications and a graduate degree in Education with certificates of completion from the former U.S. Military Defense Information School in Ft. Benjamin Harrison, IN. Brown lives in Lake Ozark with her husband, Mark, and her beloved beagle, Puddin' Pie.