

Text: Roberta Muir



The Cheese Renaissance

From washed rinds to blue moulds, cheese is best when it comes of age.

Cheese. It is such a large subject that we needed more than one issue to cover it! While last month we looked at mild white cheeses, this month we are fortunate enough to meet some of their more mature, colourful cousins.

White Mould

Though you wouldn't know it from some of the rubbery Australian versions, brie and camembert really are quite different cheeses. Brie, traditionally a large thin 1-3kg wheel made near Paris, smells mushroomy, with a sweet soft smooth buttery texture, while the smaller, thicker 150-250g camembert from Normandy has a milder flavour and more of a sticky, supple texture. Both start life firm, until the surface coating of penicillium candidum works its magic, sending root-like filaments into the centre, breaking it down. It's okay for the rind to be wrinkled and uneven in mature white moulds, just as it's ok to scoop the luscious filling out of the rind if it's become too ammoniated for your taste.

Serve it at home: Cut a small wheel of camembert into six wedges, dust in flour, dip in egg and breadcrumbs and deep-fry. Serve with red currant jelly. Sure it's retro – but it's gooooooood!

Eat it at: Café Sydney – 31 Alfred Street, Circular Quay, 02 9251 8683 (with pear chutney and pepperines)

Washed Rind

Taleggio, epoisses, pont l'evêque, livarot, and munster with their aroma of sweaty locker rooms, are cheeses that people either love or hate. They're ripened by a bacteria, *brevibacterium linens*, that thrives in humidity, and imparts a distinctive orange colour and strong aroma. Generally flat discs or squares to give maximum surface area on which the bacteria can grow, these cheeses, dating back to medieval monasteries, are washed regularly during maturation with water,

brine, wine or ale to encourage rind formation and control bacteria.

Serve it at home: Make a plain risotto with just onion and chicken stock, and stir through diced taleggio through before serving.

Eat it at: Bentley Restaurant and Bar – 320 Crown Street, Surry Hills, 02 9332 2344 (Epoisses with maple syrup and capers)

Blue Mould

Roquefort, stilton, gorgonzola, cabreles, and other blue 'vein' cheeses ripen from within as introduced moulds grow towards the surface along channels created by spiking the immature cheeses with long needles. Made since at least Roman times, legend has it that the first blue mould cheeses occurred accidentally when left to mature in caves containing blue mould spores.

Serve it at home: Serve small conchiglie (shell-shaped pasta) with a sauce of gorgonzola dolce melted into a little pouring cream mixed with some chopped walnuts.

Eat it at: Emmilou – 413 Bourke Street, Surry Hills, 02 9360 6991 (Baked brioche with Milawa Blue, dates, chestnuts and truffled honey)

Cheddar

Originating in the rolling green hills of south-western England, the term 'cheddaring' refers to the process of cutting, stacking and turning slabs of drained curd to extract more whey. Many Anglo-Saxon Australians grew up on squeeze tubes, plastic-wrapped sausages and shelf-stable blocks of 'cheddar', a far cry from the traditional cloth-wrapped, rich, nutty, cow's milk cheese with an open, moist texture (slightly crumbly if aged properly), and earthy aroma.

Serve it at home: The best cheese sandwich is slices of sourdough bread spread with good salted butter, fruit chutney and thick slices of cloth-matured cheddar.

Eat it at: Bondi Trattoria - 34 Campbell Parade, Bondi Beach, 02 9365 4303 (Pyengana cheddar with candied citron)

Parmesan

The name 'parmesan' can refer to any Italian-style grating cheese, though there's a world of difference between the stuff in the cylinder on the supermarket shelf and Parmigiano Reggiano made only in designated provinces of northern Italy.

It takes 570 litres of milk to make one 35kg wheel of this cheese, which is aged between 14 and 36 months. A superbly sweet, nutty table cheese when young, it's better used in cooking as it gets older. Other hard cooked granular cheeses include Grana Padano, an excellent grating cheese also from northern Italy, and the various pecorinos, ewe's milk cheeses ('pecora' is Italian for 'sheep') made throughout Italy.

Serve it at home: Every domestic fridge needs a block of wax-paper wrapped reggiano ready to grate over pasta, stir through risotto, shave into salads or plonk on the table with a parmesan knife, a loaf of bread and a bottle of Italian red wine.

Eat it at: Otto Ristorante – 8/6 Cowper Wharf Road, Woolloomooloo, 02 9368 7488 (Reggiano with marinated leccino olives and hand-made gressini)

Swiss style

There are many different smooth cooked cheeses typically made in Switzerland, they tend to be more elastic and pliable than other cheeses due to the heat used in making them and some (such as Emmentaler), but not all, have holes from the carbon dioxide produced by bacteria during production. Gruyere, raclette, tilsit and appenzeller are all popular cooking cheeses as they tend to melt without becoming oily.

Serve it at home: Mix matchsticks of Emmentaler with chopped chives, finely diced red onion and a good whole-egg mayonnaise and serve on crisp lettuce leaves.

Eat it at: La Brasserie – 118-126 Crown Street, Darlinghurst, 02 9358 1222 (Twice-baked gruyere soufflé with artichoke, fennel and parsley salad)

Best Cheese selections

Too few restaurants offer a wide selection of perfectly ripe cheeses served, at room temperature, by knowledgeable staff. Indulge your cheese craving at:

- Guillaume at Bennelong, Sydney Opera House, Bennelong Point, 02 9241 1999
- Bécasse, 204 Clarence Street, Sydney, 02 9283 3440
- Bilsons, 27 O'Connell Street, Sydney, 02 8214 0496
- est., 252 George Street, Sydney, 02 9240 3010



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