

Curious Goats Wander Into New Cheese Categories

Cheesemakers take a playful leap into unpredictable territories with their lively goat cheeses

BY ELIZABETH BLAND

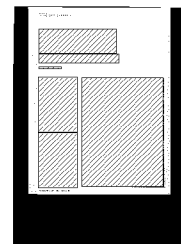
When the goats get going, the cheese gets good. Leaping from dainty Chèvre to robust aged Gouda, goat cheeses are twisting and turning in flirtatious caprioles. Today, there are feisty new does on the dance floor in both the soft and hard categories, and a long line of consumers ready to take them all for a spin. As Americans garner a taste for the classic goat tang—and as goat’s milk becomes increasingly attractive to people with special dietary needs—the U.S. market is seeing an increase in the types of goat cheeses available, both domestic and imported.

Why Goats Are Great

Popular for its exuberant tanginess, goat cheese does not rely on sass alone. Goat cheese complements the diet of consumers with lactose intolerance or allergies to cow’s milk. Although goat’s milk contains lactose, it

is lower in lactose than cow’s milk. The magic of goat’s milk remains somewhat mysterious, but the general opinion is that its digestibility lies in the goat milk’s structure. The fat globules are smaller than those in cow’s milk, and because goat’s milk is naturally homogenized, the fat does not cluster together, making it easier to digest. In addition, goat’s milk protein produces a smaller, softer curd than that of cow’s milk, which also contributes to digestibility.

Other consumer targets to consider when selecting goat cheeses are the vegetarian and kosher markets. Many soft, fresh goat cheeses are made with lactic starter, vegetable rennet or microbial rennet, and thus are suitable for vegetarians. Vegetarian goat cheeses cater to an even wider audience—and ones that are certified kosher have added marketability. Some cheese products from Meyenberg Goat Milk Products,





Turlock, CA, and Woolwich Dairy, Orangeville, Ontario, Canada, fit into this group.

Last but not least, goat's milk is lower in fat than cow's or sheep's milk. Soft, higher-moisture goat cheeses such as Chèvre or Feta are generally lower in calories than other cheeses—hard goat cheeses included. These young cheeses complement the salads and vegetables that are central to Mediterranean diets.

Goat Cheeses Firm Up

Fresh Chèvre remains the most common type of goat cheese on U.S. shelves, but as consumers become accustomed to—and enchanted by—the unique tanginess of goat's milk, they move onto other styles and textures. Hard goat cheeses are gaining ground for two reasons: the desire for more intensely flavored cheese and the melting, slicing and shredding options of firm cheeses. When soft Chèvres and goat Fetas were the primary choices, people who could not digest cow's milk had limited cheese-based recipes from which to choose. With firmer cheeses available, they now can enjoy goat Mozzarella shredded on pizza, enchiladas filled with melted goat Monterey Jack, or a simple cheeseburger topped with creamy goat Gouda or Cheddar.

Mary Keehn, owner of Cypress Grove Chèvre Inc., Arcata, CA, believes her goat Cheddars and Gouda-style Midnight Moon fulfill the demand for cheeses with broader cooking applications. "We get a lot of letters, such as, 'I'm so happy. I just wanted a grilled cheese sandwich,'" she recounts.

Salena Feit, marketing coordinator, Best Cheese Corporation, Mount Kisko, NY, also sees an increased interest in firm goat

cheeses. "Probably one of our most popular cheeses is the Hollandse Chèvre," Feit says, referring to the company's Legendairy brand of imported goat Gouda from Holland. "The cheese has a more versatile texture for cooking. It's not just for crumbling on salads. You can slice it. You can shred it. You can blend it into a casserole."

On the Canadian front, Woolwich Dairy's vast array of cheeses includes goat Gouda, Cheddar and low-moisture Mozzarella. Michael Domingues, vice president of marketing, describes the freedom that hard goat cheeses provide to people with lactose intolerance or cow's milk allergies. "It's a relief to them that they have alternatives in cheese usage," Domingues says. "One lady commented that her child couldn't have pizza or lasagna, so when you offer them goat Mozzarella or Cheddar, they can have pizza and lasagna again."

Hard goat cheese need not play second fiddle to cow cheese. A driving force behind firm goat cheese sales is the flavor alone. As a goat cheese ages, it retains its trademark tang, but acquires a distinct nuttiness. Tracy Plante-Darrimon, Meyenberg's director of

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marketing, notes the complexity that goat milk lends to aged Cheddar. "Goat milk adds a different dimension to Cheddars," she says. "It adds more sharpness compared to a typical cow Cheddar, yet it is smooth with goat overtones." Besides Meyenberg's nine- and 12-month goat Cheddars, the company's other firm cheeses include Smoked Jack and Jack with Jalapeño. "Our top-selling cheeses are Portobello Mushroom Goat Jack and Plain Goat Jack," Plante-Darrimon says.

Dutch goats also are claiming their corner of the pasture. Not only does a goat cheese add balance to a cow-driven category such as Gouda, but it also boosts sales. Jana Foods LLC, Secaucus, NJ, takes great pride in its award-winning, one-month-old Cablanca, a goat Gouda from Friesland, an area in northern Holland famous for its agriculture and black-and-white Friesian cows. Jana Foods' Dutch category grows by double digits every year, with goat Gouda contributing to the line's success. "The goat keeps going up," says David Voremberg, president and owner of Jana Foods. "People are looking for something different."

Mature Goudas are known for their intense nuttiness, and when made with goat's milk, the flavor is even more complex. Best Cheese's Feit has a passion for aged goat Goudas, especially for Legendairy's 12-month Gold Chèvre imported from Holland. "As the cheese ages, the flavor just gets nuttier," she says. "It doesn't get stronger and saltier like the cow Goudas. I can't resist it. It's not sweet, but since I like to eat it so much, I call it candy."

Back To Basics

Fresh, fluffy Chèvre still reigns supreme. Once a foreign novelty, Chèvre is now a common site on retail shelves and restaurant menus across the United States. Thanks to Laura Chenel, fresh goat cheese has become

standard fare. Chenel is not only a pioneer of artisan goat cheesemaking in the United States, but she is also responsible for promoting this style in the American market, beginning in the 1970s when she first started experimenting with cheese.

Although retired from cheesemaking, Chenel still runs a farm of 500 goats. And her namesake company, Laura Chenel's Chèvre Inc., Sonoma, CA, lives on, creating original boutique cheeses and supplying food-service and restaurants with high-quality, creamy Chef's Chèvre. "I've even seen our Chef's Chèvre used to make a strawberry cream cheesecake," says general manager Marie Lesoudier. "That was perfect for Chef's Chèvre because it is so creamy."

From Couturier North America, Warwick, RI, comes Soignon's new Crumbled Goat Cheese made with no preservatives. "Sometimes when people do crumbles, they crumble logs and it's not perfect," says Dominique Pénicaud, CEO, Couturier North America, Inc. "We do the crumble from scratch, straight from the curds. It's just been launched. It's a very good combo, and it's very nice packaging." Next year Couturier North America will introduce cubed goat cheese to the U.S. market.

Imported Chèvreline Goat Feta is produced in Poitou-Charentes, the goat cheese capital of France where the weather and soil combine forces to create ideal goat farming conditions. Katia Boulay, marketing manager, Lactalis USA Inc., New York, NY, recommends this clean, tangy Feta for a variety of cooking applications, including pizza, bruschetta and salads.

One of fresh goat cheese's charms is its ability to whet the appetite with its crisp, clean acidity. Françoise Magis, sales manager, Valcrest America Corp., New York, NY, promotes a goat cheese line of Chèvre appe-

tizers that are as pretty as they are mouth-watering. Chèvre Feuille de Brick is a fresh goat cheese rolled up in tubes of North African-style brick leaf—a pastry similar to phyllo dough, but lighter and more delicate. “We are very innovative with goat cheeses,” Magis says of the baked appetizer line. “It is something that’s selling in Europe and is going to become very big. They are refrigerated, ready to be cooked. They are a great solution for parties to serve with cocktails and drinks.”

Another popular favorite is Valcrest America’s Chèvre à Dorer, a breaded goat cheese. “That has become a hot item,” Magis enthuses. “You would typically serve it with a salad.”

The American Palate Matures

Through cheese, America is truly becoming the “home of the brave.” Where once even the meekest little Chèvre raised eyebrows, now U.S. consumers seek out the robust flavors of aged cheeses and surface-ripened cheeses, including Brie types and washed rinds. “In the past, it was really the fresh cheeses that were very popular,” says Laura Chenel’s Lesoudier about the shift in tastes. “I’m seeing that more and more people are attracted to aged cheese.”

Couturier’s Pénicaud gives an explanation for the trend. “People travel,” he says. “They go to Europe. They try them. They like them. They want the same kind of things here, in general and in the goats especially.”

Cheesemakers and importers are responding with a broader range of choices, primarily in the soft-ripened category. Both Laura Chenel’s Chèvre and Cypress Grove Chèvre will release new bloomy goat cheeses in 2008, and Woolwich has designed a soft-ripened, ashed goat log with a line of ash running through the center.

In the realm of smelly cheeses, Wisconsin is a national leader, and this washed-rind style has spilled over into the state’s goat category. La Valle, WI-based Carr Valley Cheese Company Inc. now boasts an aromatic goat cheese.

“People want the aged, the complex and the washed rind,” says Sara Hill, Carr Valley’s national sales manager. The cheesemaker at Carr Valley, Sid Cook, responds to this demand with River Bend Goat, a cheese ripened with a host of ravenous bacteria.

“Sid ages it for 12 weeks and then rinses the bacteria off or else it would continue to eat away at the rind,” Hill explains.

Rolling Hills, CA-based Montchevré, whose cheese plant is located in Belmont, WI, offers Bucheron, an aged goat cheese with an ivory-colored center surrounded by a white bloomy rind.

A Bite Of Blue

Goats love to bite and so do Blue cheeses. Blue veining adds an extra dimension to the already distinctive goat’s milk. Best Cheese’s Feit uses crumbly Gouda-style Blue as an example. “Our Blue Chèvre is popular because it has the typical goat milk flavor that people like and also the bite of the Blue,” she says. “It is one of our fastest growing cheeses.”

Domestic cheesemakers have success with goat’s milk Blues as well. Carr Valley’s Hill raves about Billy Blue, a four- to six-month-old Blue cheese made of 100 percent goat’s milk—a rarity in the United States. “Billy Blue is our star,” Hill says. “People say they don’t like goat’s milk and don’t like Blue, but it’s not overly salty. It has a little bit of that goaty tang and a clean finish. It is just a wonderful salad cheese with candied walnuts. Blend it with butter and put it over a steak.”

Spirited Cheese For A Daredevil Country

The experimental side of domestic cheesemakers shines through in goat cheeses, and the name Purple Haze says it all. Cypress Grove’s famous Chèvre blended with lavender and fennel pollen is one of many quirky American goats on the market.

New, exotic flavors appear every day—goat cheeses with peppers, spices and fruit. Montchevré, for instance, offers a tangy goat cheese made with Peppadew, a unique piquant pepper from South Africa as well as goat cheese logs infused with spices. Three new flavors include cranberry cinnamon, lemon fig, and sun-dried tomato and basil.

America has become enamored not only with goat cheeses, but also the animals, the dairy farmers and the cheesemakers who make these cheeses possible. The general fascination with all things goaty is apparent in the literary world, too. With the publication of a goat cheese travel memoir, *The Year of the Goat*, by Margaret Hathaway, and an illustrated children’s book by Kelly Doudna,

called simply *Goat Cheese*, consumers are no longer just eating goat cheese; they are also studying it and even visiting goat farms. Just like goats, inquisitive Americans are always looking for something new to chew on, with the most playful of all cheeses leading the way—the goat. **DB**

You're Entering Goat Territory

Just like wine, cheese has a *terroir*—a broad term used to reflect the influence of plants, soil, environment and local tradition on a cheese's flavor. The world truly belongs to the goat; smaller than cows and much less grass-dependent, goats wander through pastures eating grasses, herbs and flowers.

Curious and hardy creatures, goats have a penchant for climbing and head into rugged—even rocky—territories in search of interesting sprigs. Since goats can dine in so many unusual places, their milk takes on increased complexity to give the cheese lover a gustatory glimpse into the life of a curious goat.

Contrary to popular belief, goats do not eat garbage, tin cans or clothing. Goats explore with their mouths, tugging on everything from low-hanging tree branches to clothing and purses, hence their unfortunate reputation. They do, however, eat anything in the botanical world. Because their digestive system can break down nearly any organic substance

into nutrients, and because they are immune to elements in certain plants that are toxic for cows, goats are sometimes used to clear out underbrush and make fields safe.

Not surprisingly, the notion of *terroir* comes from France. "In France it's all about *terroir*," says Cécile Delannes, ambassador of the French Cheese Club, College Park, MD. "All the food specialties that you have are extracted from the land, the roots of the vineyard, the milk of the goat. It picks up the flavor of the land."

One well-known territory is the *garrigue* of Provence, a dry, rocky shrubland dotted with aromatic plants such as lavender, sage, rosemary and wild thyme. The French Cheese Club's newly available *L'Étoile du Sud* line includes a creamy delicacy that exemplifies *terroir*—*Le Rove des Garrigues*, an aromatic fresh goat cheese made by Francis Verdier and named for the *Rove* breed of goats with ram-like horns that thrive in the arid provençal countryside. **DB**

