

The Cheesy Business Lunch

BY SHANNON SIMS

BRIE TO CHEBRIS, BE READY TO KNOW YOUR CHEESES.

Imagine yourself sitting down to a business lunch at one of the more esteemed restaurants in Milan or Paris. Inside, the walls are lined with premium wines, the tablecloth is ironed, the silver polished. You peruse through a wine list with your colleagues, and then, just when you thought the decision-making was finished, a waiter pulls up beside you with a cart of 50 different cheeses. With a napkin draped over his forearm, he asks you to choose a few.

The trouble begins. To you, the cheeses all look pretty much the same, like stacked beige and yellow wedges. Not only can you not tell the difference between them—or why some are priced more than others—you can't even identify what language their labels are written in. Époisses? Sottocenera? Chebris? Harbison? Suddenly, despite years spent refining your palette and developing an acumen for fine wine, you feel like you're out of your element.

From top to bottom: Colston Bassett Stilton (cow, England); Casatica Di Bufala (Buffalo, Italy); Délice du Poitou (goat, France); Époisses de Bourgogne (cow, France). Opposite: Juvindale (cow, France); Mimolette Vieille (cow, France).

Photography: Randall Cordero / Styling: Daniel Botero

You aren't alone. More diners are finding themselves in similar bins, overwhelmed by snooty-sounding cheese names while trying to order a cheese plate at a fine restaurant. In fact, many people become so flummoxed with the cheese choices that they often end up punting the choice to the waiter.

And that's a shame, because cheese is going the way of wine. Justin Trosclair, one of the top cheese experts in the world and a former winner of the Cheesemonger Invitational, notes that over the past couple decades, "the cheese market has gotten a lot more sophisticated and knowledgeable, and as a result, the cheese industry's standards have risen."

The cheese industry has experienced a recent boom, and these days cheese is big business. According to the Specialty Food Association, in the United States today, the average American consumes 34 pounds of cheese a year, representing a more than 40 percent increase in cheese consumption over the past 25 years. In the U.S. alone, the specialty cheese market hit \$17 billion in 2015, growing nearly 5 percent on the year over the past few years. And globally, the cheese market is expected to exceed \$100 billion by 2019.

The increased demand has, of course, put cheesemakers around the world to work, and as a result, the number of artisan cheeses consumers can choose from in restaurants continues to increase. And these cheeses are not the deli-bound options of the past. Today, some of the cheeses available in fine restaurants are aged for years in caves, some are flavored with truffles and coffee grinds, and some are sweeping awards around the world for their complexity of taste.

Not surprisingly, the prices are starting to match the effort, with some even clocking in anywhere between \$50 to \$500 per pound. It may sound like caviar pricing for cheddar, but from the grass the cows eat to the washing of the rinds, cheesemaking has become a fine and highly profitable art.

All of this means that now is the time to go ahead and brush up a bit on your cheese knowledge before you sit down to that business lunch.

"If you're out to eat with people you'd like to impress, it's definitely in your interest to know how to navigate a cheese menu," says Trosclair.

The easiest and tastiest way to break into the world of cheese is by visiting a well-stocked cheese shop with well-trained cheesemongers (yes, that's what cheese curators are called). If you are lucky enough, you'll find your way to Murray's in New York, La Cave à Fromage in London, Formaggi Ocello in Sydney or De Kaaskamer in Amsterdam. In the store, you'll be overwhelmed by options, so you should focus on finding a type of cheese you enjoy. Do you like the tongue-tingle of raw cow's milk cheeses, or the crystal-like crunch of aged hard cheeses? Do you prefer your cheese pure and light like fresh goat cheese, or stinky and heavy like gooey triple-cream brie? Sample liberally, and if you find one cheese you love, sample the other cheeses from that cheesemaker. And be sure to try the expensive stuff, since that's often what shows up on fine-dining restaurant menus. Take notes, and even consider buying a cheese journal, which, like a wine journal, helps cheese lovers keep track of their favorites.

"Just like no one expects you to know every wine on the menu, no one expects you to know every cheese," observes Trosclair. His advice: "Stick to styles, just like you might with wine, because having a basic knowledge of styles will go a long way." Especially at that next expense-account meal. ●

DID YOU KNOW...

Like wine or even beer, there are now magazines aimed at the cheese lover. Pick up a subscription to *Culture: The Word on Cheese* or *Cheese Connoisseur* to make learning about cheese easy.

Most major cities, from Denver to Dubai, have at least one great cheese shop where a cheesemonger is happy to help interested cheese newcomers learn more.

 **At the 2016 World Cheese Awards**, a Norwegian cheese called Kraftkar took first place. At the 2016 American Cheese Society Awards, a Wisconsin cheese named Little Mountain won best in show.

Two of the most expensive cheeses in the world are Swedish moose cheese and Serbian donkey cheese. Both cost around \$500 per pound.