



The Fromage

BY HEATHER OPOLONY

If your idea of French cheese is only brie, camembert, Roquefort or 'the stuff that looks like cheddar or Gouda,' then you've been cheating your customers and their taste buds! And you've been missing out on incremental sales in your fresh cheese department. The KeHE Fresh team has a whole world of cheese available to you. French cheeses come in a wide variety of shapes, textures and most importantly, flavors. Adding French cheese can add a new twist on old favorite dishes. Ever had a burger with Bleu d'Auvergne? How about macaroni and Morbier? Or simply a nice smear of truffle-infused Brillat Savarin on a nice warm slice of crusty, toasty bread...ah, heaven!

Every region of France has its own particular cheeses. Even back during the time of Charles de Gaulle, France had around 246 cheeses – today, the number is closer to 400! As we delve into French cheeses, they can be broken down into four different styles: Soft, Semi-Soft, Hard, and Bleu.

LET'S TALK STYLE.

First there's **SOFT CHEESE**. There are literally hundreds of soft French cheeses; each region has its own specialties. Many of these - notably those with appellation contrôlée - are manufactured in small batches – they are very "artisanal." The most popular are Camembert and Brie.

There are two types of Brie, Brie de Meaux and Brie de Melun, both are appellation contrôlée (AOC) cheeses named after two nearby towns in the country some fifty miles south east of Paris. Brie comes as a thin round cheese about 20 inches in diameter, with a soft white crust. This crust is eaten, not cut off! Brie is a very mild creamy cheese that should appeal to anyone who does not enjoy strong tasting cheese.

Brie has been called the "king of cheese," but have you tried Brillat Savarin? This is a type of Brie that I would call the "god of cheese!" It is so creamy and flavorful, one taste and you'll think you're gone to cheese heaven. Brillat Savarin is a cow's milk, triple-crème brie-style cheese and just thinking about the truffle Brillat Savarin in our line-up makes my mouth water. If you are attending our Holiday show, you must stop in to the Fresh Pavilion and sample this heavenly delight. If you're not attending our, well, you're missing out. It's just that good!

Hailing from Normandy, Camembert is perhaps the most famous French cheese, and is known and imitated worldwide. A ripe Camembert should be just soft on the inside, but not too runny. A young Camembert will tend to be hard and dry, and rather tasteless; an overripe Camembert, going yellowish on the outside, will tend to smell quite strongly. Like brie, the crust of a Camembert is usually eaten. Beware of substitutes – there are tons of Camembert lookalikes, since any similar cheese that is not manufactured in the appellation contrôlée area in Normandy cannot call itself Camembert. These lookalikes tend to be sold young; therefore they do not have the same wonderful, distinctive flavor as a true Camembert. To test a Camembert or a lookalike, open the box (not the protective wrapping paper!) and press gently. The cheese should be just soft, but not spongy.

A little-talked-about, soft French cheese is Epoisses. Epoisses is a fairly strong "rind-washed" soft cheese from the Burgundy region. It is thicker than a Camembert, and like

other rind washed cheeses, is yellowish on the outside, and white on the inside. The white centre is often almost crumbly, while the cheese under the skin remains very soft. This is a great cheese to substitute into potatoes au gratin. It'll bring tears of joy to your eyes. Your customers will really appreciate it if you introduce them to this.

I can't talk about French cheeses without talking about Munster. Munster is a fairly strong rind-washed soft cheese from the Vosges Mountains in Eastern France. It is definitely not a cheese for those who do not like strong tasting varieties. Munster generally has a thicker rind which some eat, others cut off. Even an unripe Munster is tasty; a ripe one - which may well be quite hard on the inside - will be very strong. It's stinky and strong, but it is delicious!

SEMI-SOFT CHEESES have a texture which is only slightly firmer than the soft category. These cheeses contain relatively high moisture contents, though they typically have longer shelf-lives than softer types. Two popular, and two of my favorites, are Morbier and Raclette.

Morbier's bark is worse than its bite. Although it is strongly aromatic, it has a surprisingly mild flavor with a nutty aftertaste, making it an ideal dessert cheese or as a replacement for cheddar in macaroni and cheese; or any other dish that you may have cheddar in. At the end of this article, I have a great recipe that you can share with your customers – it's Morbier and Cucumber Sandwiches. Trust me, they'll thank you for it!

From the French word *racler*, which means "to scrape," Raclette is often heated and then scraped onto a plate. With a salty, nutty flavor and silky, smooth texture, Raclette is delicious melted and served with bread, atop mashed potatoes, roasted root vegetables, or cured meats.



The next category is **HARD CHEESES**. The French hard cheeses are wide-ranging and come in complex flavors from nutty to piquant. They are the cheese we turn to for cooking and melting. These cheeses, typically large and very heavy, fall into two distinct sub-groupings: hard table or grating cheeses, and mountain-style cheeses. Both start from the same process. The curds, after forming, are cut up into smaller pieces, and then further heated to cause the release of excess moisture. The end result is some of the world's most popular cheeses. Some of my favorites that are in the KeHE line-up are Emmental, Bethmale and Cantal.

Emmental has a light, sharp tastes and is perfect for a sandwich, burger or even cooked into an omelette. One of the most popular uses for Emmental is melted for a cheese fondue. The Bethmale is the best-known cheese of the Pyrenees region and dates back to the time of the Moors. The first mention of Bethmale is from the 12th century, when King Louis VI of France is said to have tasted it during a visit to the region. It is creamy, light and slightly sweet; and during the processing of Bethmale, the wheels are washed and turned regularly and as they mature, they develop a dense rind that encases its rich, mild flavor with hints of wildflower.

Cantal is really a distinguished, semi-hard cheese, dating back about 2,000 years to the time of the Gauls. It is a heavy, moist mountain-style cheese crafted in large, cylindrical shape that's one foot in diameter. A young Cantal has the sweetness of raw milk; a well-aged one has a stronger flavor. This is another cheese that is great for melting as a fondue...or can even be baked into a cheese chip.

Now, I bet you thought the best bleu cheeses only came from England. Well France does have some. And we carry the best! Bleu d'Auvergne. Discovered by mistake in one of the caves of Auvergne, when a round of cheese was laid to age next to a piece of rye bread. The distinctive blue veins are a reflection of the wild environment where the cheese matures. If you like a slice of bleu on top of your steak or burger, then this is the cheese for you! It is creamy with spicy, earthy flavors and makes a great steak or burger just perfect! Again, if you are reading this while attending our Holiday Show, then you absolutely must stop in to the Fresh Pavilion and sample some of these wonderful cheeses. If not, you're truly missing out; however, you can always contact me for a category review and, if we have time, I'll be sure to bring some of these wonderful cheeses for sampling! I can be reached via email at heather.opolony@kehe.com <end>

SOURCES CITED: WWW.CHEESEOFFRANCE.COM; WWW.ARTISANAL.COM; FRENCH CHEESE CLUB: TERROIRS & TRADITIONS, JANUARY 2013.

BURGERS WITH BLEU D'AUVERGNE



French cheese can be used as "the" cheese in your favorite cheesy dishes. Here's some of my favorite recipes courtesy of www.cheesesoffrance.com:



MORBIER AND CUCUMBER SANDWICHES

INGREDIENTS

4 croissants
2 T mayonnaise or zero calorie Greek yogurt
8 oz Morbier
1 head of leaf lettuce
½ cucumber
1/8 c olive oil
1/8 c vinegar

PREPARATION

Split croissants in half and spread on mayonnaise or Greek yogurt. Cut Morbier into 1/4" slices and place about 2 oz on each croissant. Place (washed) leaf lettuce on sandwiches. Peel cucumber and slice thin; place across lettuce leaves. Whisk vinegar and oil; drizzle over sandwiches. Place top of croissant and serve.

INGREDIENTS

3 lbs lean grass-fed ground beef
4 oz crumbled Bleu d' Auvergne cheese
½ c minced chives
¼ t hot sauce
1 t Worcestershire sauce
1 t black pepper
1 ½ t salt
1 t dry mustard

PREPARATION:

Mix ground beef, Bleu d'Auvergne, chives, hot sauce, Worcestershire, pepper, salt and mustard. Cover and refrigerate for 1 - 2 hours. Preheat grill to high. Form the beef mixture into 10 -12 patties. Oil grill. Grill patties 3 - 10 minutes, depending on your liking. Add a slice of Bleu d'Auvergne on top if you like, and any other garnish you enjoy,