



Spoilt for cheese

by Kobus Mulder

Every single cheese in the world belongs to a family or category and being able to categorise a cheese will tell the consumer enough to be able to use it for the correct application. The French maintain they need ten categories to classify all their cheeses, whereas the Americans think only four are enough. The new breed of South African cheese maker has given us a wide variety of cheeses to enjoy and it is therefore necessary to develop a list of categories specific for their types.

Extra hard cheeses

The texture of these cheeses is very dense and firm and appears to be grainy. A 3-5 mm discolouration under the rind is normal and is a good indication of the 10-24 months maturation. They are used as a food ingredient in soufflés and sprinkled over pastas, but can also be enjoyed as a table cheese with fruit and white wine. The strong and pronounced salty flavour is designed to lend flavour to food and will also linger on the palate. Italian Parmigiano

Reggiano and Swiss Sbrinz are the best-known types in this category.

Hard cheeses

Due to their versatility, more than half of all cheese produced, falls into this group. The texture ranges from closed to slightly open and although the pâté will be firm, it will still have a slight spring between the fingers. Cheeses in this category are equally popular as an ingredient or as a table cheese due to their pronounced flavour. The best examples are Cheddar and Gruyère, which are matured between 2-12 months.

Semi-hard cheeses

A more open texture with small uneven holes or slits is the most important characteristic of this large group of cheeses. The higher moisture content lends pliability to the pâté and a portion can easily be worked between forefinger and thumb. These cheeses are matured for 1-3 months and are mostly used as a table cheese due to their softer pâté and milder, but rich, flavour. The best-known examples are Gouda and Ladismithier.

Semi-soft cheeses

This smaller group of very flavourful cheeses is identified by their buttery appearance and small uneven holes. Many of them will be washed rind cheeses, which are known as the “smelly ones”. They are table cheeses and their colourful appearance makes them excellent cheeseboard cheeses to enjoy with fruity white wine. Maturation is between 1 and 3 months and good examples are Taleggio and Drakenstein Salut.

Soft cheeses

Soft cheeses have a soft and flaky texture and a clotted cream appearance when fully ripe. Flavour can vary between mild and creamy to pungent, depending on the manufacturing method and maturation period, which can be from 1-2 months. Many of these cheeses can be mould-ripened of smeared cheeses, such as Camembert and Le Beryl, and are used as table cheeses.

Fresh cheeses

Fresh cheeses are not matured and can be eaten from one to three days old. The flavour is very mild and the moist *pâté* has a melt-in-the-mouth quality, which makes them good table as well as ingredient cheeses. They are useful as a snack or single portion cheeses, and are definitely the healthiest fast-food available. Cottage and cream cheese are well-known examples.

Pasta filata cheeses

These Italian words are used to describe this unique group of cheeses, which has a very different manufacturing method. After the curd has been formed, it is kneaded and stretched in hot water to obtain the required melting and stretching abilities required in the texture. Pasta filata cheeses are also fresh cheeses, but their unique manufacturing method qualifies them for a separate category. Mozzarella, the best-known cheese in this group, is subdivided into the rich and milky Fior de Latte balls, made from water buffalo milk or pizzarella, the rubbery and bland version used on pizzas. Halloumi is a popular member and is almost always enjoyed with a batter and grilled in a pan.

Whey cheeses

This is the smallest category, but due to the popularity of its most important example, Ricotta, and its unique manufacturing method, warrants its own group. Ricotta is made by cooking the whey, a by-product of cheese making, thereby recovering the milk solids, such as protein and minerals, in this grainy and wet looking cheese. It is a fresh cheese and can be enjoyed as an ingredient in pasta, egg dishes, desserts or cakes. The lesser-known Norwegian Gjetost has an outstanding fudge-like flavour and appearance and is a great favourite with children.

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Blue cheeses

These cheeses can be either soft, semi-soft or semi-hard but due to the wide variety of textures and flavours, deserve their own category. They are all descendants of the original Roquefort cheese, which was discovered by accident when a young cheese was left in a cave to mature, only to be transformed by the *Penicillin roquefortii* mould in the cave, into a glorious sharp and robust cheese. Enjoy it as an excellent food ingredient or as a table cheese in the company of a good Gewürztraminer wine.

Processed cheeses

These could be considered the Cinderella of cheeses, which nevertheless play a very important role in the food and diet requirements of many nations. Not made from milk but by melting one, or a variety, of cheeses into a homogenous *pâté*, which is ready to eat as soon as it has cooled down, it is a cheese with great attributes, such as adaptability to any shape, size, texture or flavour for specific ingredient or consumer preferences. Vast quantities are consumed in the fast-food industry, where it plays an important role by making the main food more attractive, palatable and healthy. **M&J**