

One hard, one soft, one blue: the perfect middle-class cheeseboard

Always serve at room temperature and be wary of cheap stilton. Times food editor Tony Turnbull explains what you need to do to get the cheese course right

You may think of the cheeseboard as a little lactic ballast to be served before or after pudding — and what a minefield that debate is — but you couldn't be more wrong. The purpose of the cheese course is not to make your guests feel full up, but to show off. Why serve a bog-standard cheddar when you could have "sourced" your board from that delightful French chap at the market who drives it over every week in his 2CV. The trouble is, as part of the squeezed middle, who wants to blow 50 quid on cheeses? We'd all be trying to save money these days, so the real art of the cheeseboard is to spend as little as you can while giving the impression that you are an aficionado of the artisan cheese shop.

First things first, when to serve it. Do you go French and have it before pudding, or after pudding like the Brits? The most fashionable time to serve it is in fact as a canapé. This is what Brownie Percival, of Neal's Yard Dairy, recommends. A soft goat can be beautifully with sparkling wine, she says, and a West Country farmhouse cheddar can be wonderful with beer or sherry. The thing is, it's all well and good if you are the head buyer of one of Britain's best cheese shops and you are serving slivers of Stinson Hill raw milk goat's cheese made on an organic

“The most fashionable way to serve cheese is as a canapé”

farm in Oxfordshire, but newly arrived guests bring fresh palates and quality will always out. Try this trick with supermarket gouda or edam and it doesn't have the same effect.

Safer to play it old school and hide your cheese course towards the end of the meal. Soft supermarket cheeses tend to need time to ripen, so buy them a few days in advance. Hard and soft alike should be unwrapped from their cellophane and resealed in greaseproof paper, ideally in a cool place, but in the fridge if that's not possible. Bring them up to room temperature at least two hours before you serve them, unwrapped but draped under a damp tea towel so that they don't dry out. You won't achieve prize-winning levels of flavour and complexity, but, as one supermarket would have it, every little helps.

So what do you buy? The standard board comprises one hard, one blue, one soft (like ornaments on your mantelpiece, cheeses are always grouped in uneven numbers for some reason), although there's a fashion for serving one single centrepiece. Personally, I think you are better served by hard cheeses in the supermarket. Most will offer a decent farmhouse cheddar, comté or aged gruyère, and manchego is a safe bet since not enough people have tasted a really good one to compare it with. Parmesan is another good choice because it's slightly unexpected.

Be wary of supermarket brie, which can be very chalky and boring. Besides, Percival says that the tide has turned against even good-quality cheeses with a thick white rind. "If you have a soft cheese you want a rind with some biodiversity on it, with several different species of mould and bacteria to give the cheese more complexity and flavour," she says. Which perhaps isn't the way I'll sell the cheese to my children.

Stilton can be very hit and miss (especially cheaper varieties), not least because it doesn't lend itself to being presliced and can be crumbly and bitter. If I'm after a blue, I usually stick to Italy, perhaps a gorgonzola or tortu di dolcetto with its built-in ooze. It's as naff as anything, but none the worse for that.



The UK's top 15 cheese shops

Arcadia Deli, Belfast
Established in 1933, Arcadia stocks the finest artisan Northern Irish cheeses, including Dart Mountain Dusk, an ash-coated, semi-hard pasteurised cow's milk cheese made in Derry. 378 Lisburn Road, Belfast BT9 6GL; 028 9038 1779; arcadiadeli.co.uk

Cartmel Cheesemonger
This barbourish cheese shop has been named Best Specialty Cheese Retailer by the Great British Cheese Awards for stocking artisan products such as Katherine, a cider brandy-washed goat's cheese from Glastonbury. Unit 8 Cargo 2, Museum Street, Bristol BS1 6ZA; bristol-cheese.co.uk

The Cheese Man, Norwich
This well-stocked stall in Norwich's central market is the place to go for Norfolk and Suffolk cheeses such as Baron Bigod, an exceptional raw milk, brie-style farmhouse cheese. 62-63 Market Place, Norwich, Norfolk NR2 1NE; 01603 768211; facebook.com/thecheeseman

Country Cheeses, Devon
Specialising exclusively in British cheeses, this shop stocks more than 100 varieties, with a dozen made

exclusively for the shop, such as Little Stinky, a creamy washed-rind cow's milk cheese. Market Road, Tavistock PL19 0BW; 01822 615035; countrycheeses.co.uk

The Courtyard Dairy, North Yorkshire
A multi-award-winning shop in a converted stone barn in the Yorkshire Dales that specialises in British cheeses, including the firm, nutty Moorland Tomme from Whitty, Crows Nest Barn, Austwick, near Settle LA2 8AS; 01729 823 291; thecourtyraddairy.co.uk

The Fine Cheese Co, Bath
The shelves heave with fine cheeses including Westcombe, a cheddar from Somerset, awarded best cheddar at the 2017 British Cheese Awards. 29-31 Walcot Street, Bath, Somerset BA1 5BN; 01225 448478; finecheeseshops.co.uk

George Mewes Cheese, Glasgow
Chef-turned-cheesemonger George Mewes stocks Scottish gems such as Bonnet semi-hard goat's cheese from East Ayrshire, as well as artisan cheeses from Europe. 106 Byres Road, Glasgow G12 8TB; 0141 334 5900; georgemewescheese.co.uk

IJ Mellis Cheesemonger, Edinburgh
Tucked away on a cobbled street off the Royal Mile, IJ Mellis is home to some of Scotland's finest fermented finds, including Hebridean Blue, a Stilton-style cheese from the Isle of Mull. 30 Victoria Street, Edinburgh EH1 2JW; 0131 226 6215; mellischeese.net

Jericho Cheese Company, Oxford
The welcome is always warm at this specialist in British and Irish cheeses. Look out for locally made Rollright, a soft cow's milk cheese.

25 Little Clarendon Street, Oxford OX1 2HU; 01865 516000; jerichocheese.co.uk

La Cave à Fromage, Hove
The platter of six cheeses with a glass of wine is a great way to sample the range at this French-owned shop and wine bar. 34-35 Western Road, Hove, East Sussex BN3 1AF; 01273 725500; la-cave.co.uk

La Fromagerie, London
Patricia Michelson is the big cheese of the London scene and her flagship shop features a stunning glass-fronted room that houses beer-washed Vermont Winnimere wrapped in spruce bark, among other splendid offerings. 2-6 Moxon Street, London W1U 4EW; 020 7935 0341; lafromagerie.co.uk

Madame Fromage, Cardiff
This deli stocks about 150 cheeses, from Bavarian Blue to Norwegian Gjetost, plus a selection of Welsh examples, including Gorydd Caerphilly. 21-25 Castle Arcade, Cardiff CF10 1BU; 029 2064 4888; madamefromage.co.uk

Neal's Yard Dairy, London
No trip to London's Borough Market would be complete without a visit to this British and Irish cheese specialist. Try St James, a soft sheep's milk from Holker Farm Dairy in Cumbria. 6 Park Street, London SE1 9AB; 020 7367 0799; nealsyarddairy.co.uk

By Andy Lyons

Taste test Supermarket cheeses

Who has the best (and worst) on the high street

Parmesan



Aldi Parmigiano Reggiano 200g, £2.69
A top-notch parmesan. It's full bodied, has a good depth of flavour and a lovely nuttiness. It crumbles nicely and has a satisfying granular crunch — the sign of a well-aged cheese. ★★★★★

Marks & Spencer Parmigiano Reggiano 200g, £6
Pale in colour, but the fruity, nutty flavour really packs a punch. The fine grain delivers lovely pops of saltiness. ★★★★★

Tesco Parmesan 100g, £2
A lovely golden colour is let down by the almost plasticky sheen. The flavour is rich and round, though, making it ideal for the cheeseboard. ★★★★★

Waitrose Parmigiano Reggiano 200g, £5.75
Lacks the granular texture of some and the flavour is sweetly mellow. An inoffensive crowd-pleaser. ★★★★★

Lidl Lovillo Parmigiano Reggiano 200g, £3.25
A bit rubbery. The saltiness is there, but there's not a lot of other flavour coming through. Perfectly nice on top of pasta, though. ★★★★★

Sainsbury's Parmigiano Reggiano 200g, £4.50
Outstandingly shiny, and rather perfumery. It has a pleasingly fine grain and crunch from the crystallisation, but there's no depth or long finish. ★★★★★

Cheddar



Sainsbury's Mature Barber's Cruncher Cheddar Cheese 400g, £2.50
I like a bit of crumble in my cheddar and this delivers, alongside just the right balance of sweetness and tanginess. Very nice. ★★★★★

Aldi Specialty Selected Vintage Reserve Soft Country Crunchy Cheddar 250g, £2.29
So mature, it has turned a bit angry and sour. You'd need to soften this with some fruity pickle, but it would be great in a macaroni cheese. ★★★★★

Marks & Spencer Cornish Cruncher Cheddar 300g, £5
Nutty and fruity, but with just enough acidity to balance it out. Parmesan fans will like the crunchy nuggets of saltiness too. ★★★★★

Waitrose Essential Cheddar 750g, £4.50
This has a nice ripe twang, but the texture is too smooth and creamy for my tastes. ★★★★★

Lidl Deluxe Somerset Crunchy Extra Mature Cheddar 250g, £1.99
It's not the most appetising to look at, with its shiny sheen, but the flavour has a pleasingly long finish. ★★★★★

Tesco Finest Cave-Aged Cheddar 150g, £2.15
A very yellow, buttery colour that I wouldn't expect in a cave-aged cheese. Tastes mainly of damp, with a hint of toffee. Not to my taste at all. ★★★★★

Goat's cheese



Aldi Emporium Welsh Goat's Cheese 150g, £1.59
Creamy and mild, but with enough goatly tang to cut through the richness. I'd be happy with this at the start of a meal. ★★★★★

Marks & Spencer Goat's Cheese Log 125g, £2.50
Soft and fluffy, with a subtle lemony taste. A very clean-tasting cheese that no one could object to. A champagne-friendly choice. ★★★★★

Lidl Chêne d'Argent Soft French Goat's Cheese 150g, £1.59
It has a lovely, solid, almost crumbly texture. A rindless goat's cheese, it is very mild in flavour. Good for canapés, but it's not quite cheeseboard level. ★★★★★

Essential Waitrose Goat's Cheese 100g, £1.90
The rind is a bit thick and the texture of the cheese within is too crumbly. The flavour is good enough, but this needs another week's ripening. ★★★★★

Sainsbury's Taste the Difference Brie de Meaux 120g, £2
The rind tastes of damp cardboard, but the middle is creamy and salty, if a bit sticky. ★★★★★

Tesco British Goat's cheese 125g, £1.60
So soft that it's almost moussey, and lacking any real depth, this could easily pass for cream cheese with a fine, spreadable sandwich cheese. ★★★★★

Brie



Tesco Ripe and Ready Brie 190g, £1.25
The mottled golden rind and oozing centre mean that this would easily pass for an artisanal cheese. And the taste stands up — it's ripe, strong, complex, yet still mellow. ★★★★★

Aldi Specialty Selected Brie de Meaux 172.5g, £1.99
Beautifully ripe and creamy, but with acidity too. I'd be happy to put it on my cheeseboard. ★★★★★

Sainsbury's Taste the Difference Brie de Meaux 175g, £2.75
Looks the part as it oozes across the plate and tastes nicely ripe, but lacks any real complexity. ★★★★★

Waitrose French Mature Ripe Brie 170g, £2.75
Wow, this looks as if you bought it from a cheesemonger in peak condition, but the flavour is a let-down. It's just a bit boring. ★★★★★

Lidl Chêne d'Argent Brie 200g, 85p
The texture is too firm and it doesn't taste of anything at all. Really boring. I'm afraid. ★★★★★

Marks & Spencer Normandy Brie 200g, £2.50
It bulges rather than oozes and makes me think of plastic. Dull, dull, dull. ★★★★★

Feta



Tesco Finest Barrel Aged Feta 150g, £2.00
Salty, crumbly, with a good tang. Just what you'd want from feta. ★★★★★

Aldi Lyttos Greek Feta 200g, 95p
A sour, characterful flavour and good texture. A nice safe option. ★★★★★

Marks & Spencer Diced Feta in Olive Oil 150g, £2.50
It has a good texture and nice deep flavour, but it's overwhelmed by the oil and herbs that it comes in. ★★★★★

Waitrose Greek Feta Cheese 200g, £2.49
The texture is a bit too creamy; it could do with being crumblier. There is a nice sourness, though, and a rounded flavour to the cheese. ★★★★★

Lidl Eridanous Original Greek Feta Cheese 200g, 95p
Very sour and too soft. You want a bit of crumbliness to your feta, and this lacks that. ★★★★★

Sainsbury's Taste the Difference Barrel Aged Feta 200g, £2.60
I'd expect more complexity from the barrel-ageing, and it lacks that salty punch. ★★★★★

* All cheeses were blind tested by Tony Turnbull