

Tasting Plate: An All-New Elite Eight

BY DAVID GIBBONS

“**W**hat’s new?” is just about the best question you can ask at the cheese counter. Any good cheesemonger is guaranteed to come up with plenty of delicious answers.

To arrive at a suitably exciting “all-new” plate, nearly 50 candidates from all over the fine-cheese landscape were whittled down to 20 finalists—and eventually to this elite eight. (Some of these cheeses have been around in Europe for several years but only recently became available in the United States.)

When putting together a tasting, it’s important to strive for variety, breadth and depth. Generally speaking, you want to start with milder, lighter cheeses and move gradually to stronger, heavier ones. Also, try to alternate textures, tastes and milk types: sweet and sour (acidic); dense and aerated; cow, sheep and goat. (For more guidelines, see “Tasting Plates: Little Effort, Big Reward,” in the May 31, 2015, issue.)

1 OMORRO AMANTEIGADO

The latter term means “buttery,” and this cow-milk cheese, from the Omorro creamery on the island of Faial in Portugal’s Azores, certainly lives up to that billing. It’s mild, soft, open-textured and just-melting, with the tastes of fresh farmstead milk and sweet cream jumping out. It’s also remarkably refreshing—rare in such a rich cheese.

2 FUZZY

Michael Lee has been making notably subtle and balanced cheeses at Twig Farm in West Cornwall, Vt., since 2005, and this is his latest creation, a mixed-milk tomme, with a rough, mottled all-natural rind and soft yet crumbly paste. Its flavors are moderately earthy, highlighting sweet caramel and the pleasant tang of goat’s milk alongside the creaminess of the Ayrshire cow component.

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3 FUNKMEISTER

Somewhat belying its name, this lovely goat-milk number from Haystack Mountain Cheese in Longmont, Colo., is demure, subtle, sophisticated, relatively mild and balanced between its salty and sweet goaty elements without sacrificing one iota of umami. Cheesemaker Jackie Chang, who immigrated from Taiwan via South Korea in the early 1980s, has become one of America's most dynamic and talented artisans.

4 BRÉBIS PARDOU GRAND CRU

Affineur Christian Pardou, the fifth generation at his family's firm in Laruns, in France's Ossau Valley, sources from local high-mountain shepherd producers and ages in a former railway tunnel. Aged 18 to 22 months, Ihsan Gurdal's selections for Formaggio Kitchen are remarkably smooth and moist, providing all the balanced bittersweet, nutty and sheepy (lanolin) flavors you'd expect from such a pedigree. Relatively modest on the attack, they build to a salty, pleasantly acidic and savory finish.

5 DALMATINAC

Made by the Paška Sirana creamery on the island of Pag, just off the Dalmatian coast of Croatia, from sheep and cow milk, Dalmatinac has a hard, Parmesan-like consistency. It's more rustic and "masculine" than its sister cheese, Paški Sir, which paved the way for Croatian cheese in the U.S. Dalmatinac offers a complex profile, with meaty, floral and herbal hints.

6 K-RÉ DU PAYS D'EN HAUT

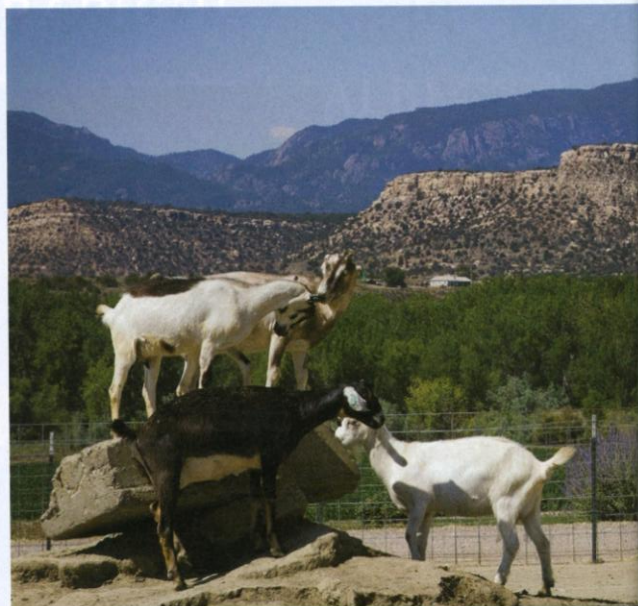
Made by Michel Bérout of Fromagerie Fleurette in Canton Vaud, Switzerland, this outstanding cheese delivers a resounding blast of flavor, with loads of mouthwatering sourness and funk, and a persistent aftertaste. K-Ré is the local pronunciation of *carré* ("square"), which is its shape; the Pays d'En Haut is the Vaud's high country, where the cows' milk originates. Dense, sticky and mouthcoating, yet quite open-textured, it is every bit the equal of the finest Alsatian Munsters or farmhouse Maroilles.

7 PERSILLÉ DE RAMBOUILLET

Ferme de la Tremblaye, located by the Rambouillet Forest, not far from Paris, produces one of the better pasteurized (i.e., legal in the U.S.) Camemberts, and now adds this lovely goat-milk blue to its repertoire. Featuring an attractive white, dense, smooth paste with pockets of greenish blue, it starts with a moldy, salty bite that backs off gracefully, yielding to a nice balance of creamy sweetness and hints of chalkiness, caramel and hay. Thank goodness the nation of Roquefort, Camembert and Brie is not immune to such delectable innovation.

8 FIOR D'ARANCIO

Upon superficial examination, this cheese, from Latteria e Caseificio Moro, about 30 miles northeast of Venice, might seem a tad overelaborated—literally and figuratively. But when you taste it, does it ever work! Made from cow milk, it's studded with candied orange peels and macerated in the DOCG dessert wine of the same name, which means "orange blossom." Sharp, moldy flavors are quickly alleviated by rheumy, yeasty and bittersweet tones. It plays a ticklish trick on your palate before settling into a satisfying sweetish aftertaste that practically screams dessert, and demands the last word in this lively lineup. *David Gibbons is co-author of Mastering Cheese.*



Haystack Mountain's goat milk comes from a farm run by inmates of Colorado's Skyline Correctional Center.

HOW TO GET IT

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| 1 Omorro Amanteigado
ForeverCheese.com, \$23/pound | 5 Paška Sirana Dalmatinac
ForeverCheese.com, \$24/pound |
| 2 Twig Farm Fuzzy
FormaggioKitchen.com, \$31/pound | 6 K-Ré du Pays d'En Haut
FormaggioKitchen.com, \$35/pound |
| 3 Haystack Mountain Funkmeister
HaystackGoatCheese.com, \$35/pound | 7 Persillé de Rambouillet
MurraysCheese.com, \$33/pound |
| 4 Brébis Pardou Grand Cru
FormaggioKitchen.com, \$35/pound | 8 Fior d'Arancio
ForeverCheese.com, \$31/pound |



Paška Sirana makes Croatia's most internationally acclaimed cheeses.