

Season's Cheeses

TORONTO CHEESE MONGERS OFFER THE INSIDE SCOOP ON WHAT TO SERVE THIS SEASON

BY KATHY GUIDI

Holiday season is cheese season. Cheese mongers report selling 30 to 40 percent of their annual cheese volume in December. The reason? Few foods offer the variety, convenience and universal appeal of cheese. The selections that follow are the ones Toronto's cheese mongers will be savouring with their friends and family. You are sure to get some ideas for your holiday cheese boards from their picks.

Ektor Stroutzas from **ALEX FARMS** says the cheese selection depends on whose home Christmas will be at. "At my sister's you can count on **Brie**, snow white like a white Christmas. My mother always has **Epoisse** and **Stilton**. At my house this year, **Reblochon** and **Munster** will star (quaffed with a good deal of tawny port)."

Jane Rodmell from **ALL THE BEST FINE FOODS** is like me, and has real trouble picking just one cheese. Her favourite is the top-of-the-line **Colston Basset Stilton**, while Canadian artisan styles rank high, like sheep milk cheese from **Back Forty**, **Thunder Oak Aged Gouda** and **Ciel de Charlevoix** (impeccable raw cow milk blue).

Delving into the unknown, Afrim Pristine at **CHEESE BOUTIQUE** is featuring **Le Bertschwiller** from Alsace. This phenomenal organic, raw cow milk cheese is ripened buried in damp grey Brittany sea salt. The delicate thin rind enrobes a soft, butter yellow paste and hosts a myriad of flavours that evolve, delight and linger with every morsel.

Tradition reigns supreme with the venerable **Vacherin Mont d'Or**, the unctuous cheese wrapped in spruce bark and best eaten with a spoon, from the Jura region bordering France and Switzerland. Mont d'Or is the choice of Marc Rozender at **THIN BLUE LINE**, Robert Burns from **LA FROMAGERIE**, Brian Langley of **LONGO'S**—and, myself. Available only from November to February, Marc says it has become a ritual in his family to gather around the table and dip into this oozing mass of luscious curd. Robert adds that Mont d'Or is quite often lightly baked on wintry days. Note: Several cheese mongers say Mont d'Or is in limited supply this year, so get yours early!

"The holidays conjure up images of home, great food, and storytelling." So, when asked to recommend a cheese for the holiday season, Nancy Pepler of **NANCY'S CHEESE AT HARBORD BAKERY** chose **Avonlea Cloth Bound Cheddar Reserve** from PEI without hesitation. Jane Rodmell has it on her list, too. The earthy "potato" terroir of PEI comes through this cheddar made in the traditional English method.



A nice English Stilton:
the quintessential Christmas cheese

"Definitely **Bleu Juliette**, the lovely goat Camembert with blue ash and penicilium rind," said Hugh Alter of **ABOUT CHEESE**. David Woods from Salt Spring Island has perfected it. Hugh prefers it right at best-before date or just after.

Delice de Bourgoyne, the luscious French triple crème that melts in your mouth, is the choice of Steve Maggiris from **CHEESE EMPORIUM**.

"I'm in love with **Lamb Chopper**," says Michael Simpson from **LESLIEVILLE CHEESE**. It's an aged sheep milk cheese from California—smooth with an extremely complex character and nutty finish.

"I'll be serving guests **Bauman's Smoke** from **MONTFORTE**," said Joe Ambrus from *Goat Inc.* in Clarkson. I loved it the instant I tried it. The dry creaminess, combined with a fireside smokiness, makes the cheese irresistible, especially paired with an Ontario Pinot Noir.

Bonnechere from **Back Forty** is the pick of the cheese mongers from **WHOLE FOODS MARKET** in Oakville. The distinctive rind of this raw sheep milk is charred over an open flame before aging, imparting a deliciously toasty, caramel-like essence to the cheese while giving contrast to the tangy, fruity body.

I know I'll be indulging in several of the recommendations above, as well as standing in line with fellow Torontonians at **INTERNATIONAL CHEESE** for their famous **Hot Ricotta**. The warm milky goodness of this comfort cheese

is a favourite in our home... just pass out the spoons and homemade gingerbread to slather it on. **CB**



KATHY GUIDI is dean of the Cheese Education Guild and president of Artisan Cheese Marketing, a unique cheese public relations, education and marketing company. See www.artisancheesemarketing.com for details.

CRUSH WINE BAR-TORONTO

crush
is the place
for wine

Reservations: 416.977.1234
455 King Street West
www.crushwinebar.com

