**A Guide To English Cheeses**

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France has its Brie and Camembert. Italy has its Parmigiano-Reggiano and *mozzarella di bufala*. But what about England? For cheese connoisseurs, Great Britain might lack variety and reputation, but it makes up it for in quality.

When English cheeses are good, they are very, very good. A top-notch Stilton or farmhouse Cheddar is incomparable. The combinations are classic: Think of a crumbly slice of Stilton, a ripe pear and a glass of vintage port. Or how about a ploughman's lunch made up of a wedge of sharp, golden Cheddar, a crusty roll, some tangy Branston pickle, an apple and a pint of beer.

The market for high-quality English cheeses is an emerging one. The noted English food writer and critic Egon Ronay described the cheeses available in supermarkets in 1986 as "awful; ugly blocks better suited to a building site.... Where were the Great British cheeses?"

In the past decade, those Great British cheeses have seen a resurgence, in large part due to the efforts of Neal's Yard Dairy. This British cheese retailer and wholesaler has promoted small farmhouse producers and contributed to an overall rise in quality of the British cheese available at home and abroad. Now, many excellent English (and Scottish and Welsh) cheeses are available throughout the U.S., either in specialty cheese shops or by mail order.

This guide intends to not only touch on classic favourites, but also suggest some alternatives from the pastures and creameries of England that would not be out of place on any cheese plate.

#### Cheddar

*"If you offered me a desert island with only one kind of food, farmhouse Cheddar would be my unhesitating choice."* --Patrick Rance, *The Great British Cheese Book*

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Unlike with Champagne, there has been no attempt by English cheesemakers to preserve the reputation of the Cheddar name. All kinds of aberrations around the world are labelled "cheddar"--usually an orange shrink-wrapped block of waxy plastic with little taste, unless it is called sharp or mature, in which case there will be an acidic overtone in the flavour.

Real farmhouse Cheddars, like those made by Keen or Montgomery in Somerset, are made with raw cow's milk and aged from six months up to five years. They are a creamy, pale color, with a tinge of tan and gold, cloth-wrapped and cylindrical. During the cheesemaking process, "cheddaring," a milling of the curd that breaks it into fine particles, creates a silky, buttery yet firm texture. The cheese smells sweetly milky and has an incredible depth of savory flavor, with a bite from the aging. Steve Jenkins, in *The Cheese Primer*, describes good farmhouse Cheddar as "toffee, nuts, apples, hay, and hard-boiled eggs," which intensify the older the cheese is.

Steve Jenkins also advises, "Serve Cheddar anytime you feel like adding something wonderful to your life." On a cheese plate, with crackers and a glass of tawny port; or in a sandwich made of crusty peasant bread, with a glass of dark beer or ale; or melted on toast, with a glass of a light red wine; or in macaroni and cheese; or accompanying a slice of apple pie; or shredded in a salad with apples and nuts. The possibilities for how and when and where you can eat Cheddar are (thankfully) endless.

#### Stilton

*People who know nothing about cheeses peel away from...Stilton because the plebian proboscis is not equipped to differentiate between the sordid and the sublime.* --Harvey Day

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Unlike Cheddar, the Stilton name is carefully regulated, meaning that while there are variations in quality between different producers, in general Stilton is indeed sublime. Though there is a town called Stilton, it lent its name to the cheese in the 18th century because that's where the cheese was first sold, not made. It's actually made within a legally defined area encompassing parts of Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. Known as "the King of English Cheeses," Stilton starts out as pasteurized cow's milk. The cheeses are formed into cylinders, which are matured for several months. During this time, they are regularly pricked with long steel skewers to allow the bacteria to penetrate and give Stilton its characteristic greenish-blue veins.

One of the best Stiltons is made by Colston-Basset in Nottinghamshire. Its Stilton is even creamier than most, but still has Stilton's distinctive crumble. Its taste is complex, fruity and minerally, with the classic tang of blue cheese and that underlying hint of funkiness.

The archetypal Stilton pairing is with a glass of port, ruby or tawny, accompanied by a handful of walnuts or a few slices of crisp, ripe pear. It's one of the best ways to end a spectacular dinner. Stilton isn't a great cheese to have as an appetizer, as its strong flavor dominates the rest of the meal. Definitely one of the great British Cheeses, if not the ultimate

#### Rarer Cheeses

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| Double Gloucester |  |
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*Poets have been mysteriously silent on the subject of cheese.* --G.K. Chesterton

It is a common misconception that the cheeses of England are as boring as the people. There are a host of English farmhouse cheeses that prove this wrong, some of which at times are available in the U.S., either by mail order or at a specialty cheese shop. They are good, honest cheeses, approachable and adaptable, so that they shine on a refined cheese plate or in a simple sandwich.

One of the most appealing English cheeses is Ticklemore, an aged goat's cheese made by cheesemaker Robin Congdon in South Devon. The snow-white flesh of the cheese gives off a fresh, grassy aroma. While its texture is dry, it melts in the mouth, with the tangy, lemony flavours of a fresh chevre, as well as complexity and depth from its three-month aging. Murray 's Cheese in New York City, one of the few American retailers of Ticklemore, recommends pairing it with a Loire Valley Chenin Blanc such as Vouvray. No other accompaniment would be necessary, save for maybe a few green grapes or slices of a sharp, crisp apple.

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|  | Red Leicester |
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Also sold by Murray 's is Lincolnshire Poacher, made by cheesemaker Simon Jones from milk from his herd of Holstein cows. This farmhouse cheese has a texture and aroma similar to Cheddar, and is aged for nearly two years, giving it a mellow, nutty quality. The sharp and addictive flavour lingers on the palate, the long finish bringing to mind the best Parmigiano-Reggiano or vintage Cheddar

More traditional English cheeses include Double Gloucester, a rich, buttery cheese made with full-cream milk, with a flaky texture and pale orange colour that has been known in Gloucestershire since the 8th century. Single Gloucester is similar but made with skimmed milk. Cheddar-like Leicester, or Red Leicester, is dyed orange with a natural annatto dye made from the seeds of a tropical tree.

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| Shropshire Blue |  |
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Shropshire Blue is also dyed with annatto, but the blue-green veins in the cheese make a startling contrast. It's like a cross between Cheddar and Stilton and makes a visually stunning addition to a cheese plate.

English cheeses, particularly farmhouse cheeses, are well worth searching out. And if you find yourself in London, be sure to stop by Neal's Yard Dairy on Neal Street in Covent Garden , or Paxton & Whitehead on Jermyn Street . Not only is the strong cheese smell overpowering, but also, for the cheese aficionado, so is the huge range of cheeses from all over the country.