

Cheese holds an exalted place in France, forming a culinary holy trinity along with bread and wine. For the uninitiated, here's a guide to this utterly French - and delectable custom of the cheese course.

Served after the main course, the cheese course is a nice segue to dessert or, in lieu of a sweet, a sumptuous finale to enjoy with the last sips of wine. Though it might be tempting, you probably should not try every cheese on the cart. Depending on your appetite and whether dessert will follow, four to six different cheeses will suffice.

Cheese is one of the only things in life that can be judged by its cover and learning to read the rinds is the first step in choosing the best cheeses. In general, the rougher a rind looks, the more interesting the cheese. If the rind is too pristine, the cheese is factory made and is probably boring. Also seek out a variety of flavors from mild to pungent. Choose cheeses with varying textures and rinds and you'll likely vary the intensity of flavors.

Start with a mild goat cheese, or *chèvre*, which is made in a variety of shapes, from bells to buttons to pyramids, like the Pouligny-Saint-Pierre, which is nicknamed the Eiffel Tower. Un-aged *chèvres* have a white exterior with a moist, somewhat crumbly interior. As they age, the rind darkens to a mottled beige, the center becomes firmer and the flavor is more pronounced. *Chèvres* also come covered in fresh herbs, which infuse the cheeses with extra flavor.

Next, for a more pronounced, sharper flavor, choose a firmer cheese made from cow's milk, typically with a hard rind and a light yellow interior. A good choice would be the mild, straw colored *Tomme de Savoie*.

Then you definitely want to have a washed-rind cheese, something that's smelly and strong, with a soft texture. Typically square-shaped with a reddish rind when aged. A very powerful *Maroilles* or a somewhat milder *Pont l'Évêque* will probably be on the cart. Or opt for a more familiar unwashed-rind *Camembert* or *Brie*, recognizable by a milky-white exterior and a creamy, ivory interior.

Finally, round out the plate with the most pungent of cheeses: *bleu*. With a crumbly texture and characteristic bluish-green veins, blue cheese stands out in a crowd. *Roquefort* is particularly strong; if you prefer less bang in your bite, choose a gentler *Saint Agur* or *Bleu d'Auvergne*.

As you select each cheese, the waiter will slice a small wedge and serve it on a plate. And as for the rind, feel free to eat it or use a fork and knife to trim it away - it's completely a matter of personal taste. Finish up the wine that's left over from the main course, or ask the sommelier to recommend an appropriate half bottle. You'll soon understand why the cheese course is such a beloved institution.

David Brindley of *Bon Appétit*
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