

A
DOZEN
WAYS

CHEESE ON TOP

Twelve ways to leverage cheese in unexpected flavor combinations

BY AMELIA LEVIN

CAPERS ADD
BRINY NOTES TO
HERBED CREAM
CHEESE

With such a vast range of quality producers, flavors, textures and capabilities, cheese offers an incredible opportunity to star in dishes or round them out, put the “comfort” in comfort food, and lend that “something special” to any dish. Artisan cheeses also tell a story: one of terroir and craftsmanship—which is what consumers these days crave as they seek the stories behind their food. Here’s a look at a dozen trending cheese categories that present opportunity for recipe and menu development today. Each exhibits next-level attention to flavor building, where chefs are leveraging cheese to make their menus stand out.

Cream cheese dotted with capers and formed into a quenelle adds to the specialness of this Gravlax at Five Leaves in Los Angeles, with house-cured Arctic char, pickled beets and marble rye.

1 SPREAD IT ON

Spreadable cheeses like pimento and cream cheese have always had their place on Southern menus and in Jewish delis, but chefs are finding new uses for these versatile, craveable favorites, either by making their own versions or pairing them with unexpected ingredients.

- ▶ Pimento Cheese Sandwich on white bread with tomato slices—*Vinaigrette Sub Shop, Miami*
- ▶ Gravlax with house-cured arctic char, pickled beets and caper cream cheese—*Five Leaves, Los Angeles*
- ▶ Fried Green Tomatoes with house pimento, Cotija, green tomato relish—*Stir, Raleigh, N.C.*

2 FAN THE FLAMES

When picturing flaming cheese, there’s that image of traditional Greek saganaki arriving tableside in flames with the accompanying “Opa!” While the pan-fried cheese appetizer remains a hit, chefs are exploring other cheeses that can withstand high heat, perfect for grilling or frying.

- ▶ Crispy Halloumi with roasted beet dressing, apple, onion and herbs—*Shaya, New Orleans*
- ▶ Sfela Cheese Saganaki with red walnut and sesame—*Oleana, Cambridge, Mass.*

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FINISH WITH CHEESE

Cheese is finding its way into more desserts today, thanks in part to a growing consumer interest in desserts that combine savory with sweet in compelling ways. Chefs and pastry chefs are responding, applying creative strategies that balance cheeses with sweeter components.

- ▶ Traditional Middle Eastern Kunafa Dessert with syrup-soaked, thin noodles layered with fresh mozzarella cheese—*Asali Desserts & Cafe, Cary, N.C.*
- ▶ Dessert Burrata with orange and fennel mostarda and toasted bread—*Café Spiaggia, Chicago*
- ▶ Cheesecake: Goat cheese, mezcal, pineapple, malted milk—*Bacchus, Milwaukee*

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ALPINE ADAPTABILITY

Alpine cheeses like Gruyère, Emmentaler, Comté and raclette are well known for their ability to add an ooey-gooeyness to just about anything. Chefs are taking full advantage of this easy-melting characteristic to add that extra level of creaminess to standard comfort fare like mac and cheese and sandwiches, as well as burgers, pizzas and flatbreads. On the horizon? Alpine cheeses making their way here include: Beaufort, vacherin Fribourgeois, Appenzeller and Sbrinz.

- ▶ Shaved Fingerling Potato and Bacon Pizza with local raclette, fromage blanc, roasted garlic, caramelized onion and arugula—*Hearth & Vine Café at Black Star Farms, Suttons Bay, Mich.*
- ▶ Shirlee Burger with Emmentaler, aioli and onion jam on a brioche bun—*Bistro Shirlee, Seattle*
- ▶ Gruyère and Spicy Honey Bacon and Egg Sandwich on sourdough—*Field Brewing, Westfield, Ind.*

A soft cheese touch adds dimension to desserts, like the Dessert Burrata with orange and fennel mostarda and toast at Café Spiaggia in Chicago.

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"Rujak Burrata" starring California burrata cheese at Bone Kettle, Pasadena

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At Stir in Raleigh, N.C., the Fried Green Tomatoes meld Southern with Latin American by featuring a garnish of pimento and Cotija.

5 STARTING THE DAY

Cheese has long been a staple on breakfast and brunch menus, but chefs are experimenting with more creative uses during those dayparts. There's certainly room for new menu opportunities here as brunch crowds tend to favor authentic global dishes, bold flavors and eclectic mash-ups.

- ▶ Shrimp Enmoladas with black mole, Monterey Jack, crema, cilantro, queso fresco, pickled red onions and two eggs, any style—*North Park Breakfast Co., San Diego*
- ▶ Turkish Breakfast: Marinated goat cheese, cucumber salad, olives, soujouk, hard-boiled egg, whipped yogurt, simit (circular bread), seasonal preserves, muhammara—*Cira, Chicago*
- ▶ Baked Ricotta Tart with kale, tahini yogurt, soft-boiled egg and arugula—*Coast and Valley, Brooklyn, N.Y.*

6 LATIN EXPLORATION

Queso fresco and queso Chihuahua are staples in Mexican-American cuisine, but today, chefs are exploring other types of Latin cheeses like Oaxaca cheese, a white, semi-hard variety with a mild flavor and good meltability. There is also requesón, a fresh, ricotta-like cheese made in Portugal, Brazil and Mexico. At La Merenda in Milwaukee, the Queso Fundido is made with Menonita cheese, a style of cheese that originated in the Mennonite communities of northern Mexico with a cheesemaking process similar to that of cheddar. Chefs are also finding more uses for Cotija cheese beyond elotes and tacos.

- ▶ Fried Green Tomatoes with house pimento and Cotija cheeses, served with green-tomato relish—*Stir, Raleigh, N.C.*
- ▶ All the Peas with panela cheese, mint and marinated mushrooms—*Audrey at the Hammer, Los Angeles*
- ▶ Quesadilla al Pastor with pan-seared Oaxaca cheese and caramelized, marinated pork garnished with cilantro, onion, roasted salsa roja or verde, fresh avocado cream and a pineapple slice—*Vaquero Taquero, Austin, Texas*
- ▶ Tots & Queso with poblano, cilantro and Cotija—*The Ribbon Room, Nashville, Tenn.*

COTIJA ADDS A SALTY FINISH

7 GETTING ON BOARD

Charcuterie plates offer endless opportunities for showcasing artisan and housemade ingredients, including cheeses. Chefs are catering to younger customers with these shareable plates, meant for table snacks or as a stepped-up bar-food option. Cheese naturally finds a place on these boards, paired with accoutrements meant to balance that tang, fat and salt with a little sweetness and acid in the form of mustards, honeys, savory jams, pickled vegetables, artisan breads and more.

- ▶ Bobota Greek Cornbread with feta, mizithra (fresh Greek cheese) and honey—*The Purple Pig, Chicago*
- ▶ Artisan Cheeses with preserved blood orange, beet-pickled egg, candied pecans and focaccia crostini—*Palette, San Francisco*

8 HOLDING A SOFT SPOT

Chefs are upping the game with whipped ricotta, moving it into more savory, creative pairings. There is also room for exploration of other fresh cheeses, such as farmer's cheese and quark. A European fresh cheese that's slightly denser and smoother, quark can be used in cheesecake or stuffed into dumplings, pierogi, blintzes, crêpes and pastas for a little extra tang. Of course, fresh mozzarella and burrata still hold the spotlight, and chefs are responding by playing with new uses, pairings and presentations.

- ▶ Housemade Lemon Ricotta with Swank Farm tomatoes, toasted pine nuts, red-wine vinegar—*Burlock Coast, Fort Lauderdale, Fla.*
- ▶ Brioche Toast with wood-roasted berries, whipped ricotta and roasted rice-wine vinegar—*Sunday in Brooklyn, Brooklyn, N.Y.*
- ▶ Polish-inspired pierogi stuffed with potato and farmer's cheese—*Maddon's Post, Chicago*

Sunday in Brooklyn ups its toast game with whipped ricotta, topped with wood-roasted berries and roasted rice-wine vinegar.

WHIPPED RICOTTA IS A CREAMY BASE FOR BERRIES

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TOUR OF THE MIDDLE EAST

As Middle Eastern foods and flavors continue to grow in popularity, cheeses like labneh and halloumi are making a noticeable debut on U.S. menus. Labneh, the ancient, yogurt-based, strained cheese, can be used in a variety of ways, from granola with honey and figs to savory applications atop flatbread or vegetables. Halloumi, made with goat's and sheep's milk, is great for grilling, making it ideal for a number of modern menu dishes.

- ▶ Halloumi Cheese with tomato and quince jam, preserved lemon yogurt, pine nuts—*Beatnik, Chicago*
- ▶ Meze Platter with labneh—*Sassool Mediterranean Cafe, Raleigh and Cary, N.C.*

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THE VEGAN OPTION

It's hard to ignore the ongoing interest in plant-based everything, and this has made its way to the dairy discussion as well. The expanding line of vegan products on the market is giving chefs a chance to explore vegan menu development for the growing number of consumers who seek out—at least occasionally—plant-based options.

- ▶ Vegan Melt with beet relish, spinach, vegan cheese, seasonal jam on toasty seeded sourdough bread—*Kairoa, San Diego*
- ▶ Northwest Nachos: Housemade tortilla chips smothered in poblano cashew queso, grilled black bean-corn salsa, and cilantro crema, topped with tomato, charred jalapeño and cilantro—*No Bones Beach Club, Chicago*
- ▶ Belgian Waffle Sliders with barley-sausage patties, maple aioli, vegan American cheese, and a choice of a fried egg or tofu—*City, O' City, Denver*

Labneh is among the plentiful Mediterranean treats on the Meze Platter at Sassool in Raleigh and Cary, N.C.

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DEEP-FRIED COMFORT

It's hard to top the combination of frying and cheese, but when explored with unexpected and exciting sauces and pairings, the comfort food of choice offers a blank canvas for added creativity and cross-utilization of ingredients. Chefs have been playing with fried cheese curds for a few years now, and are expanding their horizons into other delectable, crispy morsels.

- ▶ Fried Mushrooms and Cheese Curds with buttermilk-tarragon dipping sauce—*Daisies, Chicago*
- ▶ Fried Burrata: Breaded and fried creamy burrata, marinara, micro arugula and basil oil—*The Richmond, Staten Island, N.Y.*
- ▶ Truffled Fried Burrata with mushroom duxelles, arugula, herbs—*Handcraft Kitchen & Cocktails, New York*

Comfort meets creativity in the Fried Mushrooms & Cheese Curds with buttermilk-tarragon dipping sauce at Daisies in Chicago.

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WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

As cooking with fire continues to rage these days, chefs are keying into anything with smoke for bolder flavors. That extends to the cheese world as well. Swapping provolone, Chihuahua and even burrata and ricotta for smoked versions brings more depth to dishes. Chefs are also house-smoking more cheeses, wrapping them tightly and setting them amidst the embers of a wood-fired grill, or using a traditional or stovetop smoker.

- ▶ Smoked Burrata Pasta with Sun Gold tomatoes, fresh basil and De Carlo olive oil—*Italianette at Fulton Galley, Chicago*
- ▶ Salumi with tomato, smoked ricotta, casalingo, pepperoni, oregano and olives—*Giulia, Minneapolis*

SOFT AND CRUNCHY FRIED CHEESE CURDS

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