



Fiscalini's San Joaquin Gold

The Great Cheeses of California

The Golden State is home to some of America's finest artisanal cheeses.

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California cheeses have been made for about as long as California wines. So why aren't they as well-known as the wines? Perhaps because until the gastronomic awakening of the 1980s and 1990s, Americans relied on Europe for excellent cheese. Names such as Gruyere, Epoisses, Parmigiano-Reggiano, Roquefort, Stilton, and Taleggio are as common as Bordeaux, Burgundy, Chianti, and Barolo. But Humboldt Fog is not as recognizable as Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon.

The American originals, cheeses often made on small farms, sometimes on larger dairy farms, and even in the back of a retail store, have been hard to find beyond regional specialty shops. The cheesemakers may be inspired by the memory of a taste of Reblochon or Pecorino, or they may be recreating their homeland's native cheese. Many are made by descendants of early Italian or other immigrants; some are made by more recent transplants. But then California has always been known as a place to try out new ideas or transform old ones.

With more than 50 cheesemakers producing 250 varieties and styles of cheeses, how does one choose the top handful? After talking with experts, scouring lists of awards, and tasting almost 20 samples, here are six of California's finest artisanal (handmade, small-batch) or farmstead cheeses (made from milk from the animals on the farm where the cheese is made).

Cheese master Max McCalman has been eating cheese, tasting wine, and making notes about both every day for 12 years. McCalman, author, teacher, and maître fromager for *ArtisanalCheese.com*, has matched each cheese with one of the best California wines chosen by QRW (Spring 2006 issue). His pairings are listed in the sidebar.

The cheeses are listed in the order in which they might be eaten at a tasting — moving from mild to stronger flavors.

BELLWETHER FARMS — SAN ANDREAS

Naming the farm after the sheepherding term "bellwether," or lead ram who wears a bell to identify the location of the flock,

Cindy and the late Ed Callahan bought their land in 1986. When they added more sheep to control the pasture grasses in 1990, it led them into making cheese. Their son Liam, who learned the trade from Italian cheesemakers, originally modeled his first aged cheeses after the ewe's milk cheese Pecorino Toscano. "As we got more experienced, we started exploring flavors that we liked in our milk, trying to bring that out in the cheeses," said Liam, whose wife Diana works with him.

San Andreas is a raw farmstead sheep's milk cheese named after the famous earthquake fault line that runs near the 35-acre Bellwether Farm. It is a semi-hard, mild straw-colored cheese with a buttery, fruity flavor, and a slightly earthy, sweet aroma. Aged a minimum of 60 days, the three-and-a-half pound wheels are made from the 200 East Friesian sheep. Most recently, San Andreas won second place in the farmstead category of the 2005 American Cheese Society awards.

The Callahans also produce prize-winning ricotta, and other sheep and Jersey cow's milk cheeses, crème fraîche, and fromage blanc.

MATOS CHEESE FACTORY — ST. JORGE

Cheddar cheese is as common as rice at a wedding. But not this cheddar.

When fifth generation cheesemaker Joe Matos and his wife Mary came to Santa Rosa from their Portuguese home on the island of Sao Jorges in the Azores, he brought his dad's recipe with him. He adapted it to the uncertified organic milk of his 35 Holstein and Jersey cows when he began making this one cheese in his factory in 1979. Now their daughter Sylvia Turner, who learned the business while helping her father when he worked nights at the brickyard, is the cheesemaker of these eight to 22 pound wheels, aged between 60 and 90 days.

The St. Jorge is a slightly tangy, fruity, quite balanced cheddar, with a texture that looks a bit like a Havarti. "It's a really perfect cheese ... just really delicious," said Kate Arding, former cheesemonger at the Cowgirl Creamery and

Neal's Yard Dairy in London, and now an independent dairy consultant. "If I had to pick out one California cheese to take on a picnic, that would be it."

FISCALINI FARMSTEAD CHEESE — 30 MONTH BANDAGE WRAPPED CHEDDAR

When the 260 wheels of 60-pound cheddar fall the four inches onto the shelf below them, it sounds "like a book dropping on the floor," said John Fiscalini, a soft-spoken, prosperous third-generation farmer. They are turned mechanically every day for two months in an innovative walk-in aging room invented by Fiscalini and his talented cheesemaker Mariano Gonzalez, who first made cheese on his family's farm in Paraguay and later at Vermont's Shelburne Farms. Fiscalini's cheesemaking continues a tradition that began with his Swiss ancestors over three centuries ago and was started in America in 1914 by his great-grandfather.

"We are trying to make the real authentic [English] cheddar," said Fiscalini. Handmade with whole, raw cow's milk, the 30-month cheese, though not certified organic, is made without any coloring, preservatives or other artificial ingredients. The oldest of his cheddars is encased in a hard rind that has a barnyard-like aroma. The crumbly, waxy, buttery interior reveals a rustic, true sharp cheddar flavor that is also lemony, piquant, and balanced. It won second place in the mature cheddars category of the 2005 American Cheese Society competition.

Also recommended: 18 Month Bandage Wrapped Cheddar, San Joaquin Gold.

COWGIRL CREAMERY — RED HAWK

Sue Conley and Peggy Smith aren't old enough to have been part of California's first gold rush, but they certainly discovered something as good as gold. They produce the triple-cream, washed rind Red Hawk cheese that won Best of Show at the 2003 American Cheese Society competition.

There's a good reason this cheese is an award winner — the incomparable creamy, balanced, earthy taste. Aged six

weeks, this cheese can vary a lot. The aroma of the edible reddish-orange, stinky rind "is a lot stronger than the flavor," according to Arding.

While running their deli in Point Reyes Station, they dabbled in cheesemaking with the rich, natural milk from the nearby Straus Family Dairy, the first organic farm in California, and then created Cowgirl Creamery. One day they had an unexpected problem with a batch of Mt. Tam. It had a "kind of red mold on it," explained Arding, that got worse when they washed it with salt water. The solution encouraged the mold, a strain of microflora that had gotten on the cheese, and turned it into their bestselling Red Hawk.

They also make triple-cream Mt. Tam, clabbered cottage cheese, fromage blanc, crème fraîche, and other seasonal cheeses.

CYPRESS GROVE CHEVRE™ — HUMBOLDT FOG

Mary Keehn purchased her first goat more than 30 years ago when she was searching for milk that was easily digested by her young daughter. When she decided to start making cheese, she named her company "Cypress Grove Chevre" — after the cypress trees that were grown as a windbreak behind her old creamery.

Humboldt Fog looks like a little cake with a crisscrossed, gray-white exterior that is velvety to the touch, sometimes called a bloomy rind. There is a sash of organic gray vegetable ash that runs through the middle of every round and held in place by creamy, slightly tangy, yet mild cheese made from pasteurized cultured goat milk. Aged three to six weeks, the 14-ounce and five-pound disks are completely edible.

Keehn created her signature cheese in 1995 as a traditional French-style chevre that has won three first-place ACS awards since 1998, and named it after foggy Humboldt County where she lives.

She is importing and marketing European cheeses, and also makes fresh chevre, cheddar, and fromage blanc on her new farm that she discovered had been a dairy also called Cypress Grove.

Also recommended: Fog Lights, a ripened goat's milk cheese.

POINT REYES FARMSTEAD CHEESE COMPANY — ORIGINAL BLUE™

Who better to make the first California classic blue cheese than cheesemaker extraordinaire Monte McIntyre, formerly of Iowa's Maytag Blue fame? Hiring McIntyre, who has over 15 years of blue cheese making experience, may have been the best business decision yet by the Giacomini family.

The cheese's rich flavor is attributed to "the green pastured hills overlooking Tomales Bay," on which the 300 black and white Holstein cows graze, "the coastal fog, and the salty Pacific breezes," and a minimum of six months of aging. The almost seven-pound wheels, sold in wedges, are a creamy white with a pale dappled blue on the outside. On the inside, the buttery texture is streaked with the traditional Roquefort-like mold that lends a more pungent aroma. It has a creamy, tangy, salty taste.

The Original Blue™ is a versatile cheese that "can be quite strong," according to Arding. "But then that strength is balanced out by the texture which is very, very smooth."

What accounts for this stellar blue cheese is partly the Grade A raw milk that Jill Giacomini Basch calls the "pristine raw ingredient." It also may be the process — the homogenized cream is added back into the remaining unpasteurized skim milk in the cheese vat before adding the rest of the ingredients. Then again it may be McIntyre.

Why has California become such a center of artisanal cheesemaking? Some credit the cheesemakers; others think it's the climate, grasses, and proximity to the ocean. Most certainly it has to do with the milk and the mastery of the cheesemaker's art coupled with the passion of the producers. It's no coincidence that they have gathered in and around a fine wine region as well.

And with cheesemakers like these, it won't be long before California cheeses are as world famous as California wines. ♪

CHEESE	APPROXIMATE COST PER POUND	STORAGE	WINES — BEST OF CA, SPRING 2006	ACCOMPANIMENTS
<p>San Andreas Bellwether Farms www.bellwethercheese.com</p>	\$16-24, plus shipping	Wrap in paper or plastic and store inside sealed container or resealable bag	<p>2003 Rosenblum Cellars Syrah "Abba Vineyard" (Lodi) Also Pinot Noir or oak barrel-aged Chardonnay</p>	Quince paste, dried fruit compote, fig or apricot bread, honey
<p>St. Jorge Matos Cheese Factory Tel: 707.584.5283</p>	\$7, includes UPS shipping anywhere in U.S.	Keep in paper it arrives in; then cover with tin foil	2003 MacMurray Ranch Pinot Noir (Russian River Valley)	Fresh fruit: Fuji or Granny Smith apples, grapes, or on a meat platter with a good salami
<p>30 Month Bandage Wrapped Cheddar, Premium Reserve Fiscalini Farmstead Cheese www.fiscalinicheese.com</p>	\$18-26, plus shipping	Wrap in waxed paper, store in cheese and meat bin	<p>2003 Bernardus "Rosella Vineyard," Monterey County, Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir or 2002 Clos Pegase Chardonnay "Mitsuko's Vineyard" (Carneros/Napa Valley) Also Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon</p>	Crisp pears, apples, fresh figs, dark amber honey, marinated or preserved cherries, pecans, walnuts, almonds (either raw or roasted)
<p>Humboldt Fog Cypress Grove Chevre www.cypressgrovechevre.com</p>	\$17-20, plus shipping	Keep cold (33-35°), wrapped in waxed paper	<p>2004 Chateau Souverain Sauvignon Blanc (Alexander Valley) or 2002 Clos Pegase Chardonnay "Mitsuko's Vineyard" (Carneros/Napa Valley)</p>	Honeycomb, fresh pears
<p>Red Hawk Cowgirl Creamery www.cowgirlcreamery.com</p>	\$11-15 for 10-12 oz., plus shipping	Wrap tightly in tin foil or plastic wrap; store in Tupperware container or vegetable bin to keep moist	<p>2002 Shafer Syrah "Relentless" (Napa Valley) Also Sauvignon Blanc</p>	Fresh or dried fruit; McQuade's Glasgow Spiced Apple Chutney
<p>Original Blue™ Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company www.pointreyescheese.com</p>	\$14.99, plus shipping	Keep original foil, wrap in clean wax paper, put in Ziploc bag in refrigerator dairy compartment	<p>2003 Ridge Zinfandel "Paso Robles" Also Port</p>	Almondina (Italian style almond raisin wafers), honey, Point Reyes Preserves

NOTE: Serve at room temperature; take out about an hour before tasting. Some cheeses also are available from Whole Foods Market, local specialty stores and reliable mail-order purveyors such as New York's Murray's Cheese Shop (www.murrayscheese.com), Ideal Cheese Shop (www.idealcheese.com), and Zingerman's Mail Order (www.zingermans.com).