

SECTION ONE

CHEESE TASTING AND APPRECIATION

In this section you will find a discussion of the terms used to describe cheese flavor and texture, and information on how to taste cheese.

Having a well-developed sensory vocabulary goes a long way in helping to describe the nuances of cheese flavor to customers. In addition, telling the “story of the cheese” and using clear, enticing descriptions can enhance the tasting experience. California cow’s milk cheeses offer a range of flavors, textures and styles. Using sensory words to describe the cheeses will help when communicating about them and in determining personal preferences.

Cheesemakers closely monitor the ripening of the cheese.

THE FLAVOR DYNAMICS OF CHEESE

When we eat, we use all of our senses: hearing, sight, touch, smell and taste. These senses translate into our responses to what we eat: appearance, aroma, texture and flavor. The language we use to describe the flavor dynamics of cheese refers to these sensory experiences.

Appearance

When first looking at the cheeses, note the nuances in color, ranging from pale white to ivory, to buttery, golden or blue-streaked. Notice the moisture in the cheeses, causing them to range from soft and spoonable to firm or crumbly.

Words that describe appearance are: soft, runny, hard, crumbly, dry, moist, smooth, rough, crusty, moldy, white, yellow, ivory, orange.

Cheese can be aged from a few months to several years.

Aroma

The aroma of cheese is created by many factors including the cow's feed and the butterfat content of the milk, as well as type of starter culture and enzymes that the cheese recipe contains. The length of time the cheese has been ripened or aged helps to intensify its aroma, as does the amount of salting it receives.

“Before putting a piece of cheese into your mouth, sniff it as you would a glass of wine. Take the first bite, breathing a little air into your mouth so the aroma fills the whole nasal passage.”

Before putting a piece of cheese into your mouth, sniff it as you would a glass of wine. Take the first bite, breathing a little air into your mouth so the aroma fills the whole nasal passage. Notice any scent that distinguishes the cheese. Aroma and taste will combine to give you the flavor of the cheese.

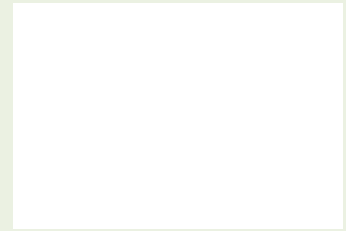
Words that describe aroma are: mild, delicate, milky, fresh, creamy, salty, sweet, strong, pungent, earthy, moldy.

TEXTURE

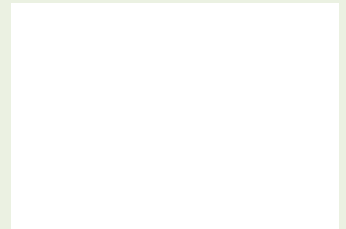
Cheese ranges from very soft to very hard, with semi-soft, firm, and hard somewhere in between the two extremes. The higher the moisture and milk fat of a cheese, the smoother the mouthfeel. In addition to smooth (Monterey Jack, high-moisture Mozzarella, Queso Panela), cheese texture can also be creamy (Mascarpone, Fromage Blanc, Crescenza, Teleme), crumbly (Feta, Cotija), very hard (Dry Jack, Aged Gouda), or stringy (low-moisture Mozzarella, Oaxaca). Texture is also an indication of ripeness with many soft-ripened bloomy rind cheeses; the riper the cheese, the softer or creamier it will be.

Rub a tiny piece of the cheese between your fingers to feel the difference between soft, semi-hard and hard texture. Notice the moisture or dryness of each sample. Don't chew and swallow quickly, but move the cheese around in your mouth to expose it to all your taste buds. Notice that some will coat your mouth and others leave a clean palate.

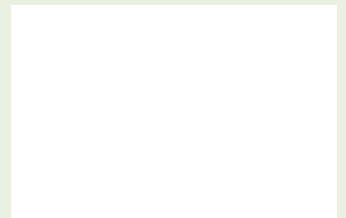
Words that describe texture are: soft, firm, hard, moist, runny, crumbly, granular, creamy, buttery, rubbery, waxy, oily, chalky, spreadable.



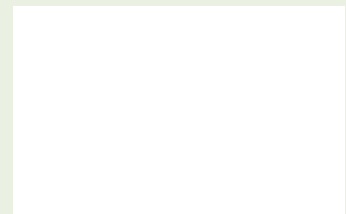
Smooth - Monterey Jack



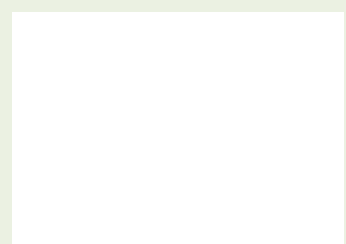
Very Hard - Dry Jack



Crumbly - Feta



Stringy - Oaxaca



Creamy - Crescenza

Taste

Food has both flavor and taste. You may find that a cheese tastes quite different in your mouth from the way it smelled when you held it to your nose. Flavor is the quality that is usually a blend between taste and smell sensations. Taste refers to the sense perception we receive via the taste buds: sweet, sour, bitter and salty. Food scientists now accept a fifth taste, umami, the savory taste often associated with L-glutamates naturally occurring in foods such as mushrooms, meat and seafood, and in milk and cheese. Drying or fermenting foods seems to concentrate their “umami” flavors. Notice umami when comparing a young cheese to its aged counterpart.

Slowly working the cheese around your mouth, notice which tastes are apparent first, then which tastes develop later and which, if any, linger. Words that describe taste are: sweet, mild, milky, buttery, delicate, salty, sharp, acidic, tart, tangy, lemony, bitter, nutty, piquant, smoky, yeasty.

CHEESE TASTING GUIDELINES

Each time a new cheese is tasted, make notes about its appearance, aroma, texture and flavor profile. Whether tasting one or several cheeses, use the following guidelines:

Temperature

Taste all cheese at room temperature except for fresh cheeses, which should be cold.

Mild to Sharp, Soft to Firm

Tasting cheese from mild to sharp will prevent the palate from being overwhelmed, enabling you to appreciate the more delicate nuances in mild cheeses. Tasting softer cheeses before the harder types reveals the development of flavor through aging.

Thin to Thick

Take a thin shaving of each cheese and let it melt on your tongue. Then try a large piece that requires chewing. Note the ways the same cheese can taste different.

Cheesemaker Stories

Learn about the cheesemaker who made the cheese, where the plant or farm is located, and even the breed of cow. The story of the cheese and its producer gives colorful background to the style of cheese being made.

Pairing Ideas

After determining the flavor profile of each cheese, consider pairing complementary or contrasting ingredients with the cheese. Contrast a salty cheese with the sweet flavor of dates, reduced balsamic vinegar, or dried or ripe fruit. Complement a milder cheese by serving nut breads, sundried tomatoes or salty nuts.

Fine cheeses artfully presented enhance the dining experience.