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Flavors of the Landscape

Building the perfect cheese board

Tasting cheese on the farm is a different experience from tasting it in a restaurant or at your kitchen counter. The scent of the animals and the view of open fields add immeasurably to the experience.

There is a similar thrill that comes from walking into a great cheese shop and inhaling the milky, toasty, caramelized aroma and holding cheese after cheese: pale yellow, rich gold, deep orange or white with jagged streaks of blue. Throw in the glistening olives, jars of thick fig jam, and fresh, crusty bread and it's easy to bring home too much cheese.

If the intent is to build a cheese board that features a range of cow, sheep and goat cheese with an assortment of textures, flavors and aroma, the following cheeses are a good place to start. They are arranged in order with the young, soft ripened cheese before the stronger, aged or blue cheese, to make it easier to savor the subtleties. These are all farmstead cheeses, made on the farm from milk produced on the farm.

Given that cheese is one of the few products you can taste before buying, feel free to unwrap and sample. There are more than 150 types of cheese made in Vermont, so there are plenty from which to choose.



1. "Herbal Chevre" Blue Ledge Farm, Salisbury. Goat's milk. Gregory Bernhardt and Hannah Sessions have been making goat cheese since 2002, and currently produce five types of cheese, each unique in color, texture and flavor. This soft chevre has clean, herbal notes with floral highlights, making it a great place to start.

2. "La Fleurie" Willow Hill Farm, Milton. Cow's milk. For more than 11 years, cheesemaker Willow Smart along with her husband and herdsman David Phinney have developed nine types of cheeses that reflect the best of the rich, creamy milk produced by their flock of 150 sheep and 10 Brown Swiss and Dutch Belted cows. La Fleurie is a soft, bloomy rind cow cheese, lightly pasteurized and cave aged, at its peak at six weeks.

3. "Sarabande" Dancing Cow Farm, Bridport. Cow's milk. The care lavished on the animals is evident in the cheese produced by Steve and Karen Getz. The extraordinary sunflower yellow paste is the result of natural beta carotenes from the open fields. Sarabande is a washed rind pyramid, raw milk cheese, aged for a minimum of 60 days. Buttery soft, slightly salty and unctuous, it's best to enjoy when it first appears, as it quickly sells out.

5. "Vermont Shepherd Tomme" Vermont Shepherd, Putney. Sheep's milk. A prizewinner at the American Cheese Society annual competition every year since 1993, herdsman and cheesemaker David Major is legendary, building the first underground cave in Vermont for aging cheese. Vermont Shepherd is a semi-hard aged cheese, featuring a tawny exterior and fully developed flavor with characteristic nutty and caramelized notes.

4. "Square Cheese" Twig Farm, West Cornwall. Goat's milk. Cheesemaker Michael Lee trained as a cheesemonger for a half dozen years in order to learn the art before launching into his own venture. Simply named because of the shape of the wheel, this raw milk goat cheese is intensely flavored, highly fragrant, semi-hard with an amazing rind.

6. "Tarentaise" Thistle Hill Farm, North Pomfret. Cow's milk. Handmade in small batches from certified organic milk of grass-fed Jersey cows, Tarentaise has the flavor of an Alpine style cheese. John and Janine Putnam traveled to Switzerland to learn how to make this complex, full-flavored cheese, and imported copper vats, an essential element in creating Tarentaise. The result is an extraordinary smooth-textured, aged cheese with subtle hints of toasted nuts and caramel.

7. "Bayley Hazen Blue" Jasper Hill Farm, Greensboro. Cow's milk. Cheesemaking is a family affair at Jasper Hill Farm, with Andy Kehler as the herdsman and brother Mateo the cheesemaker. Bayley Hazen Blue is a natural rind raw milk cheese that is exceptionally creamy and smooth, with a buttery taste reminiscent of chocolate. Each wheel is carefully aged in underground caves from four to six months.