

5 Delicious Ways to Have Your Cheese and Enjoy It Too

Cheese is one of the most delicious, versatile foods enjoyed around the world. More and more cheese varieties are produced in the U.S. and available at reasonable prices. Montana cheesemakers are also beginning to produce local varieties from both cows' and goats' milk. Here are a few tips to help you enjoy any cheese experience - from Asiago or Baby Swiss to a vintage Cheddar or yogurt cheese.

1. Choose cheese wisely.

A variety of natural cheeses are now available in the dairy, deli, and specialty sections of many grocery stores. Check "sell by" date and look for packaging that is tightly sealed and clean. Lower-fat cheeses may work well for cooking and part-skim mozzarella is always perfect for pizza. Savor the rich, full flavors of regular cheese in moderation.

2. Store cheese properly.

Keep cheese in the coldest part of the fridge, not in the door. Grated cheese can be frozen for up to 4 months; most other cheese does not retain its proper texture after freezing. Use soft cheese (cream, cottage, ricotta, etc.) within 2 weeks. Hard cheese may keep 4 to 8 weeks when tightly wrapped; if mold grows, cut ½ inch off the moldy side and use within 1 week.

3. Cut cheese carefully.

Cheese will cut most easily when it is first removed from the refrigerator. Use a clean, sharp knife and only cut as much as you plan to use at one time. Repeated warming and cooling degrades the texture of the cheese. Cutting for a cheese plate can be done earlier, so long as the cheese is tightly covered and returned to the fridge until 30 minutes before serving.

4. Serve cheese sensibly.

Hard cheeses taste best at room temperature. Take from fridge (whole or sliced) and let sit, covered, for 30 minutes. Treat fresh cheeses like milk and serve cold. Precutting cheese into sensible 1 to 1½ oz. servings, about the size of 4 stacked dice, 2 dominos, or a cheese stick. Cheese, wheat crackers, and fruit make a tasty snack for a day hike or family outing.

5. Pair cheese properly.

Many folks are familiar with the idea of pairing cheese and wine, but different cheeses also go better with different foods. To see what tastes best with almost any cheese you can imagine, go to www.eatwisconsincheese.com/pairings/default.aspx. This online tool from the Wisconsin Cheese Board pairs cheese with food, wine, beer, and spirits.