

A FOOD PRIMER

A WORLD OF CHEESE

Forget the deli American, try some artisan-crafted, ethnic varieties

PASSAIC COUNTY CHEESE TREATS

■ **Kenafa:** Taste this Middle Eastern dessert, a soft, sweet cheese layered with phyllo dough, baked in pizza pans and sold by the square at Nouri's Bakery, 999 Main Ave., Paterson. 973-279-2388.

■ **Mozzarella:** Stop in to Corrado's Family Affair on Tuesdays or Fridays for this freshly made specialty of the house. Corrado's Family Affair, 1578 Main Ave., Clifton.

■ **Apricot and cheese pirogi:** Call ahead to Home-made Pirogi in Clifton to pick up some of this unusual combination pirogi. 1295 Main Ave., Clifton. 973-340-0340.

■ **Macaroni-and-cheese:** Find the best soul-food style of this classic at Kingdom Foods at 444 Broadway in Paterson, and the best Memphis barbecue style at CC's Barbecue Pit at 527 Belmont Ave. in Haledon. 973-553-1025.

■ **Halavah:** Get this Circassian treat of fried dough pastry stuffed with cheese every Sunday at Grapevine Specialty Foods, a Circassian restaurant and catering business, at 315 Belmont Ave. on the Paterson/Haledon border. 973-956-0900.

■ **Cheesecake:** Try a slice of the original (or 29 other flavors), made fresh at Marc's Cheesecake on Valley Road in Clifton. 973-684-8511.

— Jean Stevens



By JEAN STEVENS
Herald News

Life is Gouda and getting Feta in the cheese world. The finer side of the world's oldest indulgence — historians estimate cheese dates back to 10,000 BC — has been making a comeback after decades of being banished to a boxed pasta dinner and cold-cuts wasteland, when most Americans couldn't tell their Reggianos from their Havartis.

Oaxaca, a mild string cheese of Mexico, similar to mozzarella.

Queso blanco, a mild, creamy or crumbly Mexican cheese similar to farmer's or feta cheese.

Sharp cheddar, a semi-hard tangy, popular cheese made in Wisconsin from cow's milk.

Gorgonzola, a salty, crumbly Italian bleu cheese, aged about three or four months.

Sage Derby, a cousin to English cheddar cheese, traditionally made with sage herb and cow's milk.

Gouda, a mild, semi-hard cheese from Holland made of cow's milk.

Brie, a soft-ripened French cheese made of cow's milk, aged about one week.

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But these and other specialty cheeses, including mozzarella, goat and Hispanic cheeses like Oaxaca and queso blanco, have shown up on restaurant menus from T.G.I. Friday's to Le Cirque, in chain grocery stores and in the hands of celebrity chefs.

Most come from independent farmers or companies, produced in small amounts and sold in wheels and wedges the old-fashioned way. They're far more flavorful than the standard American cheese or the ubiquitous grated parmesan in the green canister (which are not true cheeses at all but processed cheeses, a mix of cheese, salts and other additives, explains authors Steve Ehlers and Jeannette Hurt in "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Cheeses of the World"). Specialty cheeses are sold primarily in gourmet markets — at gourmet prices — such as The Cheese Shop in Ridgewood. Owner Rick Breistein says young people seem quite interested in the "classy" factor of cheese.

"Ten years ago, they'd be having kegs," Breistein said, "and now they're having wine and cheese parties."

The average American ate about one pound more cheese last year than the year before, according to the Agricultural Marketing Research Center. To feed the need, the United States dairy industry produced 9.6 billion pounds of 300 kinds of cheese, including a record 4.1 billion pounds of Italian cheeses like mozzarella (in 2002, mozzarella beat cheddar as America's most-consumed cheese for the first time, most likely because of its popularity as a pizza topping). A fourth came from Wisconsin and slightly less from California.

We love mozzarella, Brie, Parmigiano-Reggiano and blue cheese most, according to a report by the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, and we're buying more Asiago, Gorgonzola, provolone, Munster, and goat cheese.

Thousands of North Jerseyans and others across the country visit the enormous cheese bar of Corrado's Family Affair in Clifton each year, drawn to its selection of about 500 cheeses. Most shop for mozzarella or provolone, said co-owner Paul Corrado, glancing out the window of his second-floor office, nearly level with the hundreds of balls of provolone hanging above the counter.

Photo illustration by ELIZABETH LARA / Herald News

SOME GREAT CHEESES

■ **Oaxaca:** A Mexican melting cheese, similar to string cheese, works best in quesadillas and grilled cheese sandwiches.

■ **Cotija:** Dubbed the parmesan of Mexico, this salty, hard goat cheese does not melt but crumbles well.

■ **Halloumi:** A mild and slightly

tangy cheese made in Cyprus; the best halloumi is made with goat's or sheep's milk. It's rubbery, does not melt but grills well.

■ **Reggiano:** An Argentinean version of reggiano (parmesan) cheese, aged for at least six months.

■ **Panela:** A Mexican fresh, mild cheese that softens but does not

melt; works best in burritos, casseroles and with beans.

■ **Paneer:** A fresh, mild cheese common in Indian and Persian cuisines with a texture similar to ricotta.

■ **Beyaz peynir:** A Turkish sheep's milk cheese similar to feta, popular in breakfasts and used as pastry filling.

— Jean Stevens

ON THE WEB

Log on to
MyHeraldNews.com/taste
for two videos:

■ **How to shop for the best cheese.**

■ **How to make Cherry Gorgonzola Cheese Pate.**