An Easy Guide to enjoying....

The *Perfect* **Cheese** Experience!



Michael Jones













The Cheese Lover

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About the Author.

Michael Jones is *the* Cheese Lover. After spending 14 years running his own cheese shop in Switzerland, he spent 2 years in London, at Paxton & Whitfield (*the oldest cheese shop in the U.K.- suppliers to the late Queen and Prince Charles,*) and then managing Blackwoods Cheese Shop in the world famous Borough Market.

He is now based in The Netherlands and spends his time doing what he loves most, writing and talking about Cheese. He hosts tastings and workshops all over northern Europe for companies, private parties and anyone who just wants him to share his passion for all things dairy.

He also hosts very popular Cheese Shopping "Walk & Talk" events, a unique opportunity for people to visit cheese shops and markets with a professional cheese monger and learn about cheese, what cheese is good (and what is maybe not quite so good), how to buy it (and impress the staff with your knowledge) and to put together his idea of the "*Perfect Cheese Board*", and then to enjoy the cheeses in a local restaurant or brewery with a drink and some cheesy tales!

This booklet is an easy guide to enjoying what he calls "*Real Cheese*", cheese based on traditional values, made from good quality milk from happy animals and by cheese makers with a passion for quality and tradition but also in many cases modern innovation. These cheeses are rarely found in supermarkets but in speciality cheese shops and weekly markets. The quality is vastly superior but the prices are often surprisingly low, and the cheesemongers you will buy from are just like Michael, proud and passionate about cheese and keen to share their passion with you.

This is a very personal view about his favourite types of cheese but also how to best serve them and what to enjoy them with. For example, everyone pairs cheese with wine, but have you tried cheese with different beers? (*Michael is also the founder of Zürich's first Craft Beer Bar, The International*).

And although from the north of England, Michael is half Scottish and half Irish so also loves pairing cheese with Whisky (*and Whiskey*)!

And his perfect Cheese Board? It's....

Something Old
Something New
Something Stinky
Something Blue!



Introduction

Thanks for taking time to read this booklet about my passion, hopefully you will find some connection with what I love, what drives me and excites me. This is an easy guide to help you choose cheese and get the most from them, be it special artisan or everyday cheese.

I like to use my talks and workshops to inspire people to buy less cheese from supermarkets and more cheeses, simple ones as well as special ones, from independent cheese shops and weekly markets. I hope this booklet will have a similar effect!

If I spark your curiosity, please follow me on social media or sign up for my email newsletter on my web site, and hopefully we will have the chance to meet at one of my workshops or Cheese Shopping "Walk & Talk" events!



How I choose cheese.

Every cheese professional will have their own views to help them decide what cheese to buy and/or sell but this is what I look for when first looking at an unknown cheese:

- Does it have a Natural Rind?
- Is it made from Raw Milk?
- Is it made on the Farm?
- Does it follow traditional styles?
- If an innovation, is it honest or a gimmick?

• Why is a natural rind important? Rinds give the cheese character and help it mature, or age, by allowing the cheese to breath and develop. The rind is basically a concentration of the interior paste of the cheese and is usually edible (*see p.9*). Cheese made in blocks and vacuum packed for supermarkets in plastic may get older, but they can't actually mature as they have no natural rind to give the cheese character. In most good cheeses the rind is integral to the whole product and is often the best part of the cheese.

• Why is raw milk cheese better? There are many pasteurised cheeses which are excellent, but if you were to make the same cheese but from raw milk it would usually have more complexity and depth. Pasteurising milk kills any possible dangers in it, but it also kills all the friendly bacteria which make great cheeses stand apart.

• Why should it be made on the farm? Cheese made where the animals live, feed and are milked gives you a cheese with "terroir", you are enjoying a food product which is a snap shot of everything from that farm: soil, grass, animals, milk and local traditions in that village, in that region. Have you heard of "Single Estate" wines? This is the cheese equivalent. It's not a critical thing for me as I have worked with many wonderful cheeses from small dairies that don't even have their own animals (although most of those source their milk from local farms).

• Why should cheese be a traditional style? Well again, it doesn't have to be, but cheese is a traditional process and cheese makers have developed the worlds most famous styles of cheese over centuries, and time has proven that these recipes work.

• But are new, innovative cheeses also good? Absolutely! Todays artisan cheese makers are taking some traditional styles and tweaking them or even creating totally new styles using different types of milk, ageing at different temperatures and humidity, washing or wrapping the cheeses in different ways etc. But, there are also marketing led innovations that can often give cheese a bad name, these include some cheeses with added flavours.

I understand why people like cheeses with fruit or spices (I even saw a G&T flavoured cheese once), some of them can be tasty. But I would rather be able to taste the actual cheese and have the fruit, spicy chutney, or even a G&T *on the side*. Industrial cheese producers create these products because it's cheaper to flavour a cheap, bland cheese with added ingredients than it is to make a good cheese in the first place.

But some flavoured cheeses do have a place eg cumin cheeses are very popular and have a historical place in the Netherlands, truffle is a great addition to soft cheeses or hard sheep's cheese and cheesemakers often smoke their cheeses. Be aware though that almost all supermarket smoked cheese isn't smoked, it's washed with a smoke flavour brine. Taste the real thing and you *will* notice the difference!



Buying Cheese

Most cheese is purchased from supermarkets and it's unlikely that will change. Supermarket cheese is cheap because it's bought in bulk from large producers. But far better quality cheese is often cheaper at independent shops and markets.

It's not like this everywhere, supermarkets in Switzerland and France have some excellent cheeses but the majority sell "everyday" cheese. You might notice though that some branches of supermarkets will have a better selection of special cheese in more affluent areas. A good pointer is if the supermarket has a staffed cheese counter where they will cut cheese for you.

During my time selling cheese, I found that many people buy what they know, I feel that some are overawed by selections of unusual cheeses, and they might be a little shy to admit that they don't really know that much about special cheeses, those with unusual looks and smells. Don't be shy! There is nothing a cheese monger loves more than an inquisitive customer who needs advice. They will give you tasters and suggest what cheeses will make a perfect selection.

How much cheese should you buy? For everyday home use, don't buy more than you will eat in a week. For a party?A rule of thumb is anything from 100 - 200 gr of cheese per person in total. If there's lots of other food or your guests are not big cheese eaters then aim towards 100gr for a light tasting.

I have had customers who wanted to buy cheese for a special party and asked me to choose 8 or 10 cheeses. That is far too many. If you have 20 guests, you would need 400 gr of each cheese just for each guest to have a nibble. Best stick to 4 or 5 (remember, Something Old (hard), Something New (soft), Something Stinky and Something Blue. If you incorporate a Goat and/or a Sheep cheese amongst them you will have an example of almost every type of cheese. For large groups you could go to 6 cheeses, especially if you know some guests will not enjoy smelly, goat or blue cheeses. But keep it simple and keep it quality!

Take the hard cheeses out of the fridge 3 or 4 hours before serving, soft and blues take out an hour or 2 before, depending on how warm your room is. On the cheese boards you might want to cut some of the hard cheeses into small wedges. Soft and blues, I would cut them in half and leave a cheese knife with them for guests to help themselves. Soft cheeses will spread in a warm room if cut into small pieces.



Cheese Dates

When you buy cheese from a supermarket or whole baby cheeses from specialist shops, they will often have a date on the label, this is usually a "Best Before" date. It doesn't mean it will *bad* after that date, but in the producers opinion, it will be better *before* that date. In general I ignore these dates! The problem with these dates is that the producer does't know how the cheese will be stored or cared for once it leaves his farm or dairy, legally they have to do it so they play it safe by putting a shorter date on it. I've eaten some soft cheeses 2 or 3 weeks past their date, and some hard cheeses a few months past and they were better for it.

Soft cheeses are young and change very quickly so generally have a short window when they will be perfect, usually around 1 week or so they will be at their best. To be at its best, you want a soft cheese that gives when you push it gently with your finger, too firm and it'll be too young or too old. Now smell it, the smell should be gentle, if it's too old it'll give off a slight ammonia whiff. If you're not sure, ask the shop staff if they have different dates and tell them when you plan to eat it and if you prefer your cheese milder or stronger, they will advise which one is best for you. When you cut open a soft cheese, if it's too young the paste inside will be firm and dry, at it's best the paste should have a layer of oozy cream under the rind. Too old and it goes back the other way, the paste become dry again but with a waxy texture.

Hard cheeses have a much longer window of when they will be at their best, sometimes 2 or 3 months or more. This is because hard cheeses don't "develop" or change as quickly as soft cheeses do. But, once you cut a wedge of hard cheese two things happen: it starts to dry out and after a few days the cut surface tries to develop a new rind, this can be visible at first as a sheen on the surface, later as some mould growing on it. It's easy to scrape off this sheen or mould and the cheese is still good to eat, but you can't reverse the drying. The bigger the piece of cheese you buy, the longer it will stay at the best moisture level. I would consume small wedges of hard cheeses within a week, bigger wedges can be fine for 2 or even up to 4 weeks.

Blue cheeses are something in-between the two styles above, but as with soft cheese, once it ages too much, you'll get an ammonia smell and taste which is not pleasant.



Cheese Styles

When you think that all cheeses are basically made with 2 ingredients, milk & salt, it's a wonder when you walk into a cheese shop and see dozens, sometimes hundreds, of cheeses with so many different styles and looks. Soft, hard, smelly, mild, strong, blue - all come from different production and maturing methods. Here's a list of the most common styles of cheese, unless stated, all these styles can be made with all types of milk.

Fresh. Anything from Cottage cheese, Feta, Ricotta to Mozzarella (the real one made with Water Buffalo milk). These are very young and are best eaten as soon as possible.

Soft (*mild*) These are "Bloomy" rinded cheeses, the most common being Brie. Brie de Meaux and Brie de Melun are the French originals, but every country makes similar versions, Baron Bigod from the east of England is stunning! Camembert is another soft French cheese, it's made in smaller wheels and has a slightly stronger smell and flavour, think of mushrooms and farmy moist hay.

Soft *(smelly)*. These are also young cheeses but the rinds have been washed during maturation. Washing a cheese with a salty, alcohol or herb brine creates a bacterial reaction with the rind and makes it smelly. The rind is usually orange to pink in colour and can sometimes be quite sticky. Typical styles include Petit Langres, Epoisses and Stinking Bishop. The smell can be very gentle up to hair curlingly smelly!

Soft *(ash rinded)*. These are usually made with goats milk, but there are some made with cow and sheep. The cheese is usually very young, sometimes only 2 or 3 weeks old, and to encourage a drier rind to develop, the cheeses are rolled or dusted in wood ash. Ash is also alkaline so can be used to reduce acidity in cheese.

Semi Hard. When firmer cheeses are matured, the moisture is basically allowed to evaporate, so the cheese becomes harder. Semi hard cheeses are "pressed" during production to force out more moisture and matured typically for 6 - 9 months and include younger Gouda and Alpine cheeses. These cheeses are similar in that they are both "Thermophilic" cheeses, i.e. heat has been used to cook the curds, this results in a sweeter flavour and more rubbery texture. Cooler produced cheeses (such as most traditional British cloth bound cheeses: young Cheddar, Wensleydale, Lancashire etc) have a more acidic flavour and crumblier texture.



Of course the most common style in the Netherlands is Gouda. The cheese gets it's name not because the cheese was made in Gouda but that this Dutch style of cheese was first traded from there. Once the cheese has set and been removed from its mould, a thin layer of liquid wax is painted over the rind. This sets to become a thin hard rind and and stops the cheese from drying out too much, but also to stop any bacterial growth on the rind or through any cracks, into the cheese.

Hard. Gouda, Alpine, Cheddar and Italian cheeses such as Pecorino (made with sheeps milk) and Parmigiano Reggiano are aged further from 18 up to beyond 36 months. The further ageing dries the cheese out making it even harder. Some of these cheeses, especially traditional cloth bound cheddars, can develop a few blue veins. As the paste of the cheese is concentrated so is the flavour, it becomes stronger and little salt crystals (Calcium Lactate) can develop giving a delightful salty crunch.

Blue *(foiled)*. Contrary to popular opinion, Blue cheeses are rarely old, most are 3 - 6 months and foil wrapped ones are the creamiest. The foil acts as a rind and inhibits a thicker natural rind from growing. Typical styles include Gorgonzola and Roquefort (sheeps milk).

Blue *(natural Rind)*. The most famous of this style is Stilton from England. The cheese is made from pasteurised cows milk and aged for about 4 - 5 months.

Blue Cheese is the most scary looking and I always meet people who declare that they don't like it, or rather, they *think* they don't like it. After I explain that it's not an old, strong, stinky cheese, most Blues are young, mild and creamy, but they have a *distinctive* flavour from the blue mould. So far I have an over 80% success record of making people understand what it is, appreciating it and finally enjoying it.

Vegan Cheese. Is it cheese? In my opinion, yes. Membrillo, or Quince Paste is often called "Quince Cheese" and in Yorkshire we call Lemon Curd "Lemon Cheese", so cheese does not *have* to contain milk. However, at the moment most cheese shops won't stock it, for two reasons. First, the shelf life is usually very low, secondly, because most are made with nut bases or nut butter, shops would have to have separate storage, display and cutting areas and equipment to avoid allergy problems. There's also the issue of ingredients, whereas most Dairy cheeses have two, many Vegan cheeses have many more including stabilisers and emulsifiers etc,

I've only tasted a couple so far which are very good, but it is improving all the time and there is a massive market for it, so watch this space!

Travelling with Cheese.

Most cheeses don't need refrigerating for short periods. Remember that most hard cheeses are matured at between 10 and 12 degrees for up to 2 years, so 1 or even 2 days travelling at 20 degrees or so will not hurt it. Soft cheeses should be kept cooler though, keep them out of direct sunlight and away from heat sources (air-con in your car will be cool enough). If you're flying, play safe and put your cheeses in your hold luggage. Some cheese shops will vacuum pack them for you, I'd rather put the paper wrapped pieces of cheese in a plastic zip-lock freezer bag and then inside my hold suitcase.



Storing Cheese

If you buy cheese that has been vacuum packed, take it out of the packing when you get home and give the cut surfaces a gentle scrape to remove any sweaty "sheen" and re-wrap in grease proof paper (there are many good videos online to teach you how best to wrap cheese) or store them unwrapped in a cheese box. These are plastic boxes with a loose fitting lid to prevent sweating.

The fridge is actually the worse place to store hard cheeses as it dries the cheese out (but it's the best place for soft and blue cheeses). However, if you don't have a cool place, around 12 - 15 degrees c to store wrapped hard cheeses, put them in the salad drawer of your fridge. It's a little warmer and less dry there.

Lactose in Cheese

I have had many customers who have friends who don't eat cheese because they are "Lactose Intolerant". There are some cheeses in supermarkets now proudly claim to Lactose Free. Well here's a secret for you, any cheese over six months old has ZERO lactose, and cheeses at four to five months old have almost zero, certainly not enough to disturb anyone with an intolerance.

Also, many lactose sufferers find that sheep and goats milk cheeses are much less troublesome for them, a food scientist once told me it's because protein molecules in sheep and goats milk are smaller therefore making it easier to digest.

To Rind or not to Rind?

The most common question I have been asked when behind the cheese counter is "Can I eat the rind?". The simple answer is - if your teeth can bite through it and it tastes good, then yes! But if you don't like it, you might be able to cook with it (see below)

As I've said earlier, the rind is usually just a concentration of the paste. It is harder, drier and stronger in taste. Sometimes that taste is pleasant, sometimes it's not. But 90% of the time it's perfectly edible. Here's a breakdown of which rinds are good to eat.

Fresh, soft, washed and ashed rinds are *all* good to eat (and soft cheeses such as Brie and Camembert styles, the rind is the best part).



Semi hard and hard cheeses. First of all, many typical Dutch cheeses have a very thin food grade wax rind. It can be easily peeled off to leave the natural harder rind which is perfectly edible. It is harder than the interior paste and it is stronger in taste.

There are cheeses with a thicker waxed rind, typically from the UK. These cheeses are not made in this shape so do not have a natural rind under the wax. The cheeses are usually made in larger blocks then once firm enough they are milled or crumbled and compressed into smaller cheese rounds before waxing.

Alpine cheeses don't have a waxed outer rind, but that leaves the rind to become thicker and harder. Generally they are not so tasty or easy to bit through. If you are going to cook with it, I would suggest scrubbing the outer surface with a wire brush to clean off any bacterial growth or wax that has been used to polish the surface.

Cloth bound cheeses (such as traditional Cheddar etc) - the cloth outer rind will usually have been removed by the shop leaving a hard inner rind. As in Dutch waxed cheeses, this rind is thicker and tastier, sometimes quite farmy. Again, it's perfectly edible, but taste it!

Very hard cheeses, such as Parmigiano Reggiano have a very hard rind which is almost impossible to get your teeth through, but don't throw it away, it has a great use in the kitchen!

Blue cheeses. Foil wrapped blues have virtually no natural rind once the foil has been removed and is perfectly edible, usually just a little drier than the internal paste. Natural rinded blues like Stilton have a thick, dry rind and is edible but can be rather bitter.

With all the above rinds though, try eating the rind on it's own, but also a little with a thin slither including the milder internal paste, it's my favourite way of enjoying the whole cheese, I call it a "Cheese Cocktail"!

Herb wrapped cheeses. Not so common but some cheeses are wrapped in whole leaves (such as nettles and wild garlic) or chopped herbs or fruits such as grapes. If there is any obvious mould growing on them I would try to clean them before tasting, or just throw them away. But if a herb rind is clean and it tastes nice, then eat it with the cheese.



Cooking with rinds

So what do you do with those (edible) rinds that you don't like? Cook with them! Rinds are packed with flavour so you need less of them to give dishes a cheesy tang.

In Italy, the rinds of Parmigiano Reggiano are often kept in the fridge to flavour soups, just pop a few inches of rind into your minestrone for 10 minutes. Afterwards, rinse and dry and use again the next day. (before the first time I would gently scrub the outside of the rind though). I've also heard that some people cut the rinds up into 1cm cubes and cook them for 20 or 30 minutes in a soup, they become soft enough to eat whole.

If you have slightly less tough rinds of cheese they can be finely grated and used on pasta or in cheese sauces, remember, the flavour is stronger so you don't need so much.

If the rind from a washed cheese is too smelly for you, it can be roughly chopped and added to sauces, or used to make the ultimate cheese burger. Finely chop the rind and mix it into the minced beef when you make your own burgers. It gives a great cheesy taste within the burger and also seasons the meat (so use less salt). Blue cheese rinds can also be used in this way!

Pairing cheese

Most people pair cheese with wine, it's often seen as the right thing to do, but I'm a big fan of enjoying cheese with beer as there are many more flavour possibilities than with wine. Different hop varieties, added fruit, dry, bitter, sweet, sour, light, strong, the variations are limitless. Here are my suggestions as to what to serve with each style of cheese, but don't be afraid to experiment!





Mild soft cheeses	Light, dry white and rosé and sparkling wines. Light Wit or Blanche beers.
Smelly soft cheeses	Sparkling & rosé Wine. Gentle sour, Saison or light fruit beers
Mild goat & sheep cheese	Rosé, white (Albariño, Reisling & Tokaji) and sparkling wine. Blonde, wheat, pale ale beers.
Strong Goat cheese	Reisling, Gewürtstramine, full bodied red wine, Double IPA & Barley Wine.
Hard Sheeps cheese	Dry white and light red wines. Dry Cider, Wheat beer, Pale Ale
Alpine Cow cheese	Fruity white and rounded red wines. Med Cider, light Belgian beers
Hard Cow cheese	Dry white, full bodied red wines. Cider, Pale ale, IPA, mild dark beers.
Mild Blue cheese	Fruity and semi sweet white wines. Strong Belgian beers, Barley wine and Imperial stout
Strong Blue cheese	Desert wine and sweet Port and Sherry. Barley wine and Imperial stout.

Cutting & Serving Cheese.

Yes, there is a perfect way to cut different cheeses! Every cheese is made up of different textures and taste. When portioning, try to serve a piece of each texture on every piece: Outer rind, inner rind and middle paste.

Any knife will cut cheese, but some will do it better than others, the knives here are from Boska and are the perfect set for home use (you can order these on my web shop)

Soft Cheeses. These generally have 3 textures: The edible rind, the soft under rind, and the firmer internal paste. Use knife A, the small blade surface is to stop the paste from sticking too much.

Soft Goats Cheeses. Most of these are similar to above so I would use knife A, some might be firmer and may need knife B.



Blue Cheeses. The texture and taste of the outer and inner rinds are stronger than the softer middle paste so try to serve part of each.

Gouda style cheese. Look carefully and you will notice that the centre of these cheeses often looks paler. This is because it has more moisture as it's further from the rind. This moist centre will be milder and more creamy. Use knife C.

Hard cheese wedge, such as Cheddar or Manchego. Again, knife C will be perfect to cut this type of cheese into thin triangular wedges.

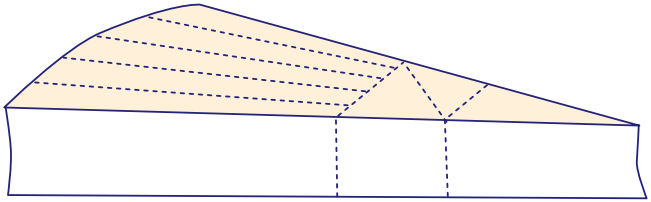
Very hard cheese. Use the sharp point of knife C to break the cheese such as Parmigiana and Sbrinz into little nuggets.

Thanks for reading this little guide to enjoying the perfect cheese experience. I hope that it has inspired you to explore different cheeses and to, sometimes at least, visit independent cheese shops and markets.

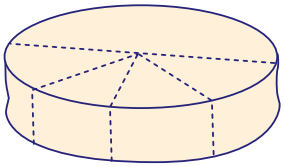
Sign up for my newsletter or follow me on Social Media to get regular tips about enjoying cheese, or book a place on one of my very popular Cheese Shopping walks or workshops. Now go and enjoy some cheese!

Michael Jones
Arnhem, August 2023

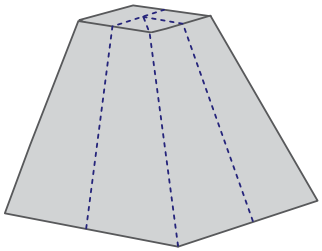
Cutting & Serving Cheese.



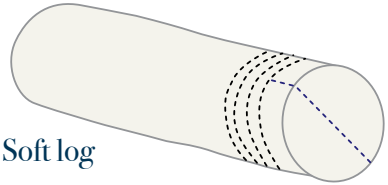
Wedge of large soft cheese



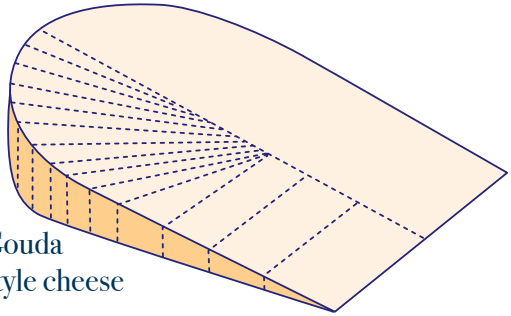
Small soft cheese



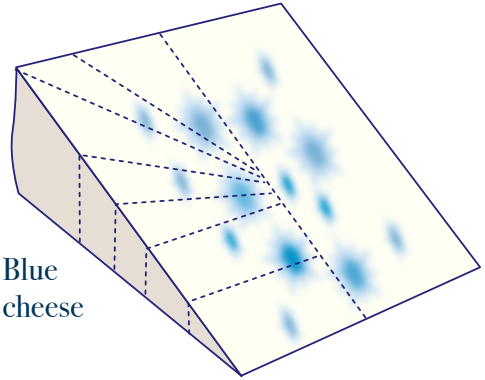
Soft pyramid



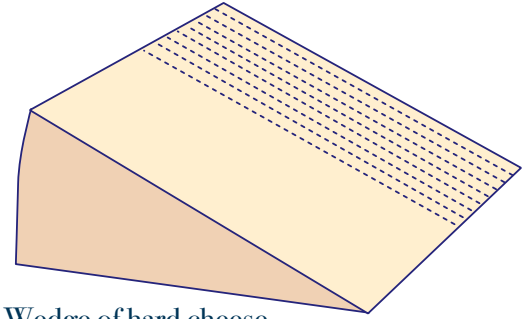
Soft log



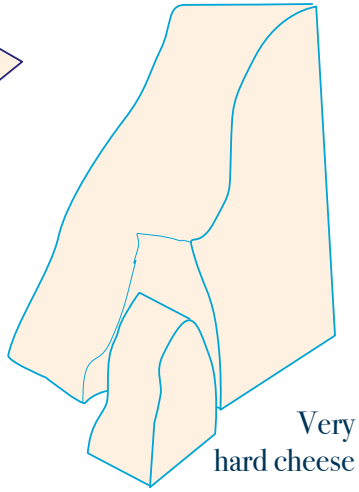
Gouda
style cheese



Blue
cheese



Wedge of hard cheese



Very
hard cheese



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