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This holiday season, it's all about getting your cheese on. Bon appétit.

There's no such thing as a bad time for cheese, but celebrations and gatherings are prime time for cheese. The quality of cheeses made in America and imported from Europe and Australia has improved exponentially in recent years. New distribution channels enable Americans to eat cheeses from the smallest, great dairy farms in Europe.

But for those who prefer their food to have as small a carbon footprint as possible, the quality of American-made cheese has never been higher. Europeans—even the French—are embracing American cheese and for good reason; our cheeses now have the depth of flavor, nuance and clearly articulated overtones that distinguish the finest cheeses in the world. Notwithstanding all this, shopping for great cheese is still often a haystack-needle proposition. Most Whole Foods nationwide carry a superb inventory of cheese as does Dean & DeLuca, Cowgirl Creamery's retail outlets and several smaller boutiques. *Culture* magazine, the quarterly bible of cheese lovers, has a [search function](#) to help you find a quality retailer near you. Here are ***The Root's*** picks for the best cheese to be had this Christmas season:

Pleasant Ridge Reserve

Smooth and balanced, this cheese made in Dodgeville, Wis., by the [Uplands Cheese Company](#), is an improvement on most Gruyères on the market. It has a distinct, nutty flavor in the middle and hints of fresh meadow air in its follow-through. It melts wonderfully (this is also prime time for fondue), and it accompanies almost any red wine, and the intrinsic sweetness of Pleasant Ridge's flavor is a nice balance to a dry white wine.

Kunik

Luxuriously creamy yet delicate, Kunik is the perfect cheese for any gathering that includes champagne. It's made at the [Nettle Meadow Farm](#) in Warrensburg, N.Y., from a combination of goat milk with a bit of Jersey cow cream ladled in to make it even richer. It's great on its own or in combination with fig jam. In addition to sparkling wine, it pairs wonderfully with sweet white wines and fruitier reds.

Midnight Moon

Sweet and direct, aged goudas are the perfect crowd pleasers. Midnight Moon is a goat milk gouda with notable overtones of ripe fruit and fresh herbs. It's made in Europe to the specifications of the [Cypress Grove Creamery](#), and it set the standard for flavor and quality

among many firm goat milk cheese (which are smoother in the finish than their softer counterparts). It pairs very nicely with most reds, dry whites and many holiday ales.

Comte

Nutty, fruity and delicately balanced, Comte is one of the best distributed of the great European alpine cheeses. It melts into fondue beautifully, but it melts on the tongue even better. The gentle flavors are distinctive without being overpowering; that makes it an ideal companion to even the most complex red wines and nearly all white wines. Comte also pairs well with India Pale Ales and strong Barleywine ales.

Montgomery's Cheddar

There's more to cheddar than just sharpness. Montgomery's Cheddar is made in the old-school English manner—clothbound, 50-pound drums—and offers a big grassy flavor and malty complexity before providing a sharp finish. Made in Somerset, England, (near the village where Cheddar was invented), it will redefine your concept of cheddar. Montgomery's Cheddar pairs with almost any Porter, Stout or Ale as well as Rieslings and stronger red wines.

Doddington

Some of the best new cheeses combine flavors from other familiar cheeses. Doddington has the sharpness of cheddar and the sweet butterscotchy finish of aged gouda. It's made in Northumbria, England, and is part of the new wave of European cheesemaking. Doddington pairs easily with a broad range of beers, heavier red wines as well as Rieslings and other, sweeter white wines.

Humboldt Fog

The most imaginative American-made cheese, this cake-sized wheel of goat milk cheese has a bloomy rind like brie. A creamy perimeter surrounds a flaky middle, which is decorated with a layer of ash (from burnt grapevines) in the middle. It is extraordinary to look at and a marvel to taste. The flavor is light and citrusy with gentle hints of thyme. Humboldt Fog is made in northern California and goes great with any sparkling beverage and dry white wines.

Vermont Shepherd

Cheese is the best way to experience fat, salt and sweetness in the same bite. The Vermont Shepherd delivers these sensations in a most sophisticated manner. The flavor starts out buttery, followed by hints of grass, honey and rosemary enter and then finishes like fine sea salt. Made in Putney, Vt., this cheese set the standard for American cheese making 10 years ago. It pairs well with sweeter white wines and lighter reds.

Red Hawk

Luxuriously creamy and deeply aromatic (or stinky if you prefer), Red Hawk is made by the Cowgirl Creamery in Point Reyes Station, Calif. The brownish rind is from a daily brine bath that gives the cheeses their sweet, funky aroma. Past that is a dense, alluring texture. Red Hawk goes well with sweet white wines, strong ales and a few red wines like Sangiovese and Nebbiolo.

Purple Haze

If you think that fresh goat milk cheese is only for cooking, think again. Purple Haze (how's that

for a Jimi tribute?) is a fresh goat milk cheese seasoned with wild fennel pollen and lavender. This delightful combination resonates at the front of the palette, and there's a gentle hint of lemon at the finish. The cheese police will not knock on your door if you put it on a beet salad, but it will pair well with a baguette and a glass of white wine, too.

Vacherin Mont D'Or

A seasonal favorite, the Vacherin Mont D'Or is very, very creamy and full of opaque, mushroomy flavor and woody overtones. It's made in France and Switzerland at the end of the harvest and typically is only available from Thanksgiving until Valentine's Day. It comes in small wheels, which are optimally turned into dips for crusty, hearty bread. It pairs wonderfully with Rhone Valley red wines and Chenin Blancs.

Rogue River Blue

The best blue cheese made in America and one of the best in the world, Rogue River Blue from Central Point, Ore., is wrapped in grape leaves that are macerated in pear brandy. The flavor starts out with berries, then opens into a pine flavor and finishes with overtones of wild mushrooms. Rogue River Blue won this year's American Cheese Society judging, and it pairs nicely with sweeter white wines and stronger beers.

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