Life & Leisure

Life & Leisure Food & Wine

Why fancy cheese is good for you

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Lifestyle Reporter
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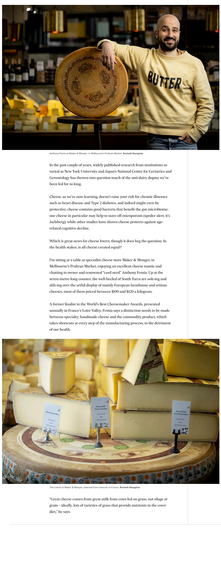
A cheese. I'm so glad you're back. For years, the health police have put you in the naughty corner, all but cancelling you for numerous crimes against humanity. But the tide is turning. Cheese is high in saturated fat, there's a high in lactose, but now is brimming and hard to digest, and lordy – and more recently – cheese is not plant-based, therefore we shouldn't be eating it at all. (Eh dear.)

Except, probably, we should. For as it turns out, cheese – that's real, full-fat cheese, properly made and aged – is surprisingly good for our health in ways scientists are just beginning to understand.



Aubrey Cross from O'Mara & Marcuse, a Melbourne cheese fortress. Rowland Hampton

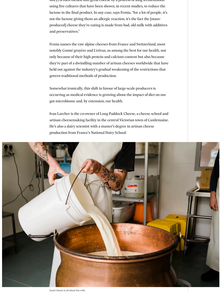
In the past couple of years, widely published research from institutions as varied as New York University and Japan's National Centre for Geriatrics and Gerontology has thrown into question much of the anti-dairy dogma we've been fed for so long.

Cheese, as we've been learning, doesn't raise your risk for chronic illnesses such as heart disease, stroke or diabetes. Rather, depending on the type of cheese, it can be a source of beneficial bacteria that benefit the gut microbiome; one cheese in particular may help to stave off osteoporosis (spoiler alert: it's Jarlsberg); while other studies have shown cheese protects against age-related cognitive decline.

Which is great news for cheese lovers, though it does beg the question. Is the health stakes in all cheese created equal?

I'm sitting at a table at specialist cheese store Maker & Monger in Melbourne's Prahran Market, enjoying an ice cheese cheese sauna and contemplating this very question. Aubrey Cross, who owns the shop at the store's mezzanine long counter, the soft buckle of South Town are sub-log and ultra-log over the artful display of mainly European farmhouse and artisan cheeses, most of them priced between $30 and $250 a kilogram.

A former finalist in the World's Best Cheesemaker Awards, presented annually in France's Loire Valley, Fromis says a distinction needs to be made between excessively, handmade cheese and the commodity product, which takes shortcuts at every step of the manufacturing process, to the detriment of our health.



The Comte at Maker & Monger, Jarlsberg from Australia, and Comte. Rowland Hampton

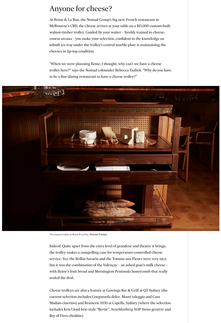
"Great cheese comes from great milk from cows fed on grass, not silage or grains – ideally, lots of varieties of grass that provide nutrients in the cows' diet," he says.

That great milk (ideally raw milk, although that's another, controversial story) is then turned into great cheese by a process that Fromis likens to "a symphony". Cultures are added, then rennet, then the curd is cut, before it's ladled into moulds. In my case, says Fromis, "for a bit of people, it's not the layman giving them an allergic reaction, it's the fact the [mass-produced] cheese they're eating is made from bad, old milk and additives and preservatives."

Fromis names the raw alpine cheeses from France and Switzerland, most notably Comté gruyère and Comte, as among the best for our health, not only because of their high protein and calcium content but also because they're part of a dwindling number of artisan cheese worldwide that have held out against the industry's gradual weakening of the restrictions that govern traditional methods of production.

Somewhat ironically, this shift in favour of large-scale producers is occurring as medical evidence is growing about the impact of diet on our gut microbiome and, by extension, our health.

Ivan Lechner is the co-owner of Long Paddock Cheese, a cheese school and artisan cheesemaking facility in the central Victorian town of Castlemaine. He's also a dairy scientist with a master's degree in artisan cheese production from France's National Dairy School.



Ivan Lechner of Long Paddock Cheese

"Artisan cheeses might have 25 or 30 strains of [beneficial] microbes," he says. "This is between three to 10 times more diversity of microbes than mass-produced cheese.

"The big factories want fast processing and long shelf life, so they significantly shorten the fermentation process [when making cheese]."

Notwithstanding the academic qualifications, it's clear Lechner considers cheesemaking as an art as much as a science.

"Milk is a vector of emotion," he says. "It's a concentrated pleasure that reflects everything that happens on the farm. And when consumers get to know the farm and the farmer, that human connection is also good for their mental health, not just their physical health."

More than 20 years ago, raw milk cheese advocate and Cheese Slices host Will Studd was labelled a "food terrorist" by a paranoid member of the Australian dairy industry after importing 80 kilograms of Roquefort, a shipment food safety authorities then ordered him to destroy on the basis it leaks even the presence of raw milk.

Ivan Lechner at Maker & Monger. Rowland Hampton

Today, given what we now understand about the unique probiotic properties of this benchmark blue cheese rich in "good" bacteria, Studd feels his radical stance has been vindicated at last.

"But we still have a long way to go," he says. In his new series, Cheese Searching for a Flavour (airing next year), Studd takes a provocative look at why traditional, artisan cheesemaking matters and why, more than ever, it's under threat of extinction.

"In Australia, two-thirds of family dairy farms have disappeared since 1982, with profound implications for both animal health and welfare and human health," he says.

Aside from Roquefort, Studd names Parmigiano-Reggiano ("made from both low-fat milk and full-cream, with low lactose and high levels of umami from the amino acid tyrosine") and Comté gruyère ("nutrient-dense with high levels of vitamins and essential amino acids") as his top picks for the healthiest cheeses.

The last word in defence of quality cheese goes to Alison Lunsford, secretary of the Australian Specialist Cheesemakers Association and the co-owner of Long Paddock Cheese.

"Artisan cheese, naturally rinded and properly aged, is at one level a simple food [with real microbes], yet its biochemistry is immensely complex, making it the king of fermented foods," she says.

"So it's very satisfying to see how science is now taking our knowledge beyond the sensory aspects of good cheese, allowing us to better understand its health benefits in areas as diverse as cardiovascular health, diabetes, the human gut microbiota and cognitive health."

For anyone eyeing off that second helping of oozing triple-cream, however, there's just one caveat. "All in moderation, of course."

Anyone for cheese?

At Rolos & La Boe, the Nomad Group's big new French restaurant in Melbourne's CBD, the cheese arrives at your table on a $12,000 custom-built walnut-timber trolley. Guided by your waiter – freshly trained in cheese-course arcana – you make your selection, confident in the knowledge an ubiash ice tray under the trolley's central marble plate is maintaining the cheeses in tip-top condition.

"Where we were planning Rolos, I thought, why can't we have a cheese trolley here?" says the Nomad cofounder Rebecca Varkuli. "Why do you have to be a fine-dining restaurant to have a cheese trolley?"

The cheese trolley at Rolos & La Boe. Rolos Trolley

Indeed. Quite apart from the extra level of grandeur and theatre it brings, the trolley makes a compelling case for temperature-controlled cheese service. Yes, the Rollas Sonoma and the Tommy ans Flours were very nice, but it was the combination of the Valencay – an ashed goat's-milk cheese with Bries from's fruit bread and Mornington Peninsula honeycomb that really sealed the deal.

Cheese trolleys are also a feature at Gossings Bar & Grill at QT Sydney (the current selection includes Gorgonzola dolce, Mauri talegio and Cow Hollow cheese) and Brasserie 1930 at Capella, Sydney (where the selection includes Kris Lloyd brie-style "Bertie", Arnolds bleu, SOP Swiss gruyère and Bay of Fires cheddar).

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