



CHEESE MATTERS

Cheese Etiquette

Kris Lloyd

Great cheese will only ever be at its best when served at the correct temperature. There is nothing more frustrating than a cheese that is served straight from the fridge, icy cold. This will never allow the true flavour or texture to be revealed. As a cheese maker it is heart breaking when people serve cheese cold!

We all talk about serving cheese at 'room temperature'; however, clearly in the middle of our summer this is just a ridiculous concept. Therefore consideration needs to be given to the temperature on the day. In addition the size and style of cheese will determine how long a cheese should be left out before serving.

As a general rule I would say if the temperature is over 30 degrees your cheese will only need to be out around an hour before serving. Make sure you leave the cheese in its original wrapper or box and cover it with a clean damp tea towel until you are ready to serve. Cheese will dry out very quickly in hot conditions, it will also sweat and, if ripe, it will ooze everywhere.

On milder days the situation is quite different, allow around two hours before serving. Again where possible keep the cheese in all original packaging, which is designed especially for cheese, allowing it to breathe and absorb any moisture.

If you are serving whole wheels or large wedges of cheese then up to three hours on cooler days is ideal, particularly for dense cheese such as cheddar or semi hard styles. A simple test can be completed by placing your hand or three middle fingers in the centre of the top of the cheese. You should not feel any cold at all.

Fresh cheeses such as ricotta, quark and goat curd need only a very short time out of the fridge. Serving them a little cooler is ideal to enhance the fresh character of this style. Only take out the amount of cheese you think you will use to avoid drying and being repeatedly warmed and chilled.

Presentation of cheese should be given some thought. Choose large boards or plates so as to not crowd the cheeses, this also makes it easier for your guests to cut. I prefer a separate knife for each cheese on the board and serrated

edged knives are a definite no! Thin blades will always give you a cleaner cut. At times I like to incorporate natural materials such as fig and vine leaves on my cheese boards as the base. This can look fresh and cooling on a hot day! Baking paper as a base is another favourite and works well for a crisp, professional and simple finish.

Cheese does not always have to be cut in the traditional wedge. Some smaller wheels present beautifully on a board cut horizontally through the middle, keeping the rind round and in tact. This is also useful when the cheese is quite ripe and runny creating a perfect serving vessel.

I have learnt over the years that good cheese etiquette means not hacking at a cheese and devouring the centre. To be fair, everybody needs to take a share of the rind. Many, however, do not like eating the rind. This is of course optional and in most instances the rind will possess most of the flavour, so I like to encourage people to at least try it. Offering a small plate and a knife and fork for your guests is ideal, so they can cut away the rind and leave it on their plate.

Should your selection include a robust cheese, take care to keep it away from other cheeses that are delicate and may be contaminated by stronger flavours. The order of tasting cheese is always best to begin with mild cheeses and finish with blue or washed rinds.

Consideration should be given to your guests bearing in mind not all people go for the smelly sock cheeses. If you are unaware of their cheese experience, a selection that offers at least one cheese with broad appeal is ideal. This could be Brie, Camembert or Cheddar.

There are so many different styles of cheese to choose from we are very spoilt for choice. Be creative with your selection by considering different shapes, colours and finishes. Always take the time to explain to your guests the cheeses you have on offer. Ideally less is more and choosing quality over quantity will always hold you in good stead.

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