

IS MUENSTER A BEAST? IS GOUDA ANY GOOD? THE RIGHT CHEESE CHOICES MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN YOUR DIET.

Cheese Whiz

By LINDA KNITTEL

Say “cheese.” Now snap a mental picture and note what you see. A mountain of smothered nachos? A huge, gooey pizza? A bubbling pot of fondue? For some, cheese is a forbidden indulgence, best enjoyed in excess. But for others, cheese is an ultimate edible. A salty, sensual, serve-it-hot-or-cold accompaniment that enhances the flavor of almost anything — from asparagus and arugula to ziti and zucchini. It’s a vital ingredient in casseroles, vegetable dishes, appetizers, even desserts.

But alas, cheese, yummy cheese, can also be high in calories and saturated fat. This is why many health- and weight-conscious folks have completely eradicated Cheddar, Colby and chèvre from their diets. Yet cheese has a lot to offer, say nutrition experts. And if you avoid all cheeses like you might a piece of stinking Limburger, you’re overlooking a multitude of benefits.

Packed with protein, calcium and vitamins, cheese can help keep blood-sugar levels stable. It also satisfies the palate, creates a feeling of satiety and has even been shown to help prevent tooth decay. Chosen carefully and consumed in moderation, cheese can be a great addition to a healthy diet. (Of course, those with sensitivities to dairy products have clear reasons to avoid it. For more information, see “Lactose-Free Look-Alikes,” page 26.)

Americans love cheese. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the average U.S. citizen stuffs, sprinkles and smothers his or her food with more than 30 pounds of cheese a year. That’s nearly triple the American average of 30 years ago. But let’s be honest: A significant portion of the cheeses consumed today hardly qualify as cheese. Many cheese spreads, squirtable cheeses and “American” slices are heavily processed, packed with artery-clogging hydrogenated vegetable oils, chemicals and preservatives. Couple those processed varieties with other nutrient-deficient foods, such as white-flour breads, pastas and pizza crusts, trans fat-laden crackers, and processed meats, and you’ve got a recipe for obesity and poor health.

In contrast, real cheese — the type whose ingredient list reads simply “milk, enzymes and salt” — can be a health food when eaten in moderation. “Cheese is a great source of protein and fat, so it burns slowly for a long period of time, giving you a lot of staying power,” says Melissa Diane Smith, a nutritionist in Tucson, Ariz., and coauthor of *Syndrome X: The Complete Nutritional Program to Prevent and Reverse Insulin Resistance* (Wiley, 2000). “Cheese stabilizes the appetite and can help you avoid overeating. That’s why at a cocktail party it’s better to nibble on a bit of cheese than on bread or other grain-based appetizers.” Starchy items trigger the rapid release of insulin, she explains, which can in turn fuel a cycle of cravings.

That said, cheese is probably never going to be proclaimed the ultimate weight-loss food. There is *some* evidence that cheese and other dairy foods may help people lose weight, but it’s not terribly reliable or conclusive. A



2003 study led by Michael Zemel, PhD, a nutrition professor at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, showed that people who ate at least three to four servings of dairy daily (1,200 to 1,300 milligrams of calcium) for 24 weeks lost fat and maintained muscle mass. In fact, they lost 70 percent more weight than study participants who ate less than one daily serving (400 to 500 milligrams of calcium). The daily food intake of all participants was reduced by 500 calories.

Yet a more recent, larger study, conducted by a team at the University of Vermont, does not support such findings. Though similar to the Zemel study, it found that high dairy consumption failed to help dieters lose more weight.

Of course, none of this research means you should either swear off Swiss or snarf down Stilton with hopes of losing pounds. Rather, it's best to regard cheese as a flavor- and pleasure-booster for other healthy foods. You can also substitute cheese for junk foods or sugared snacks, taking care not to add to your daily calorie totals.

Generally speaking, an ounce of cheese contains about 100 calories and 7 to 10 grams of fat (see sidebar for specific information). So you might choose to ditch that afternoon bag of pretzels (220 calories) and replace it with 1 ounce of cheddar cheese (110 calories). Rather than eating a hard roll (150 calories) with your green salad, sprinkle on a handful of feta (100 calories per ounce) instead. Not only will you feel satisfied longer, but you'll also be trading empty calories for nutrient-dense ones.

WHEELS OF FORTUNE

A 1-ounce serving of cheese (about the size of four medium-sized dice) has 200 to 300 milligrams of calcium. That provides a good start toward the 1,000 milligrams of calcium that most adults need daily. Cheese is also a great source of the B vitamins, and a complete protein. But for most of us, cheese's real value lies in its satisfying, enlivening flavor and texture.

Cheese has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity recently, thanks in part to the Slow Food movement's trumpeting of artisanal cheeses' delicious merits, and in part, many cheese vendors suspect, because the stuff is very low in carbohydrates. "Low-carb diets have been very good for business," says Jason Cruzan, a wine and cheese salesman at The Cheese Shop in Carmel, Calif. "People come in and say, 'I can't eat much on this diet, but I can eat cheese.' Then we tell them that we have more than 300 varieties, and they are thrilled."

Small specialty shops are not the only ones sporting impressive arrays of cheese. In fact, major natural-food chains such

as Whole Foods carry nearly as many varieties. Even conventional supermarkets now offer an impressive selection.

Cheese is big business: In 2003, American cheese-makers produced an estimated 3.9 million metric tons — not far behind the prolific producers in the European Union, who churned out roughly 5.5 million metric tons. Today, the U.S. cheese industry is poised to explode, much like the U.S. wine industry did not long ago. Small, artisanal cheese-makers can be found nationwide, and they are quickly accruing a loyal following. "We carry some domestic cheeses that rival the best cheeses from Europe," Cruzan says. "American cheese-makers are just now beginning to be recognized worldwide."

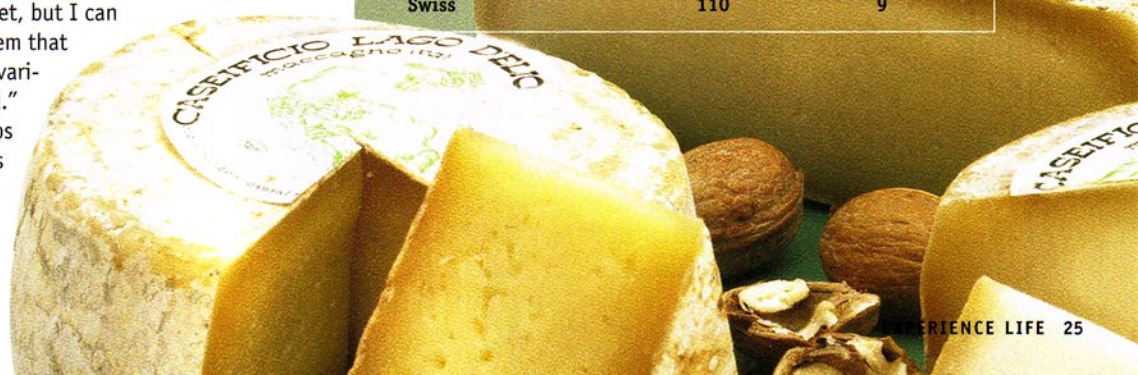
THE RIND AND THE RAW

When it comes to choosing cheese, you can judge a lot by the cover. Cheese doesn't always have a rind, however — this is something that comes with age. Fresh curd cheeses such as mozzarella, ricotta or cream cheese, for example, are served before a rind forms. Soft rinds are found on slightly aged cheeses such as Brie. Washed-rind cheeses, such as Muenster and Gorgonzola, have been brushed with a liquid — brine, spirits, cider — as they age. Only considerably aged cheeses such as Parmesan and Asiago form a hard crust or rind. →

By Slice and Spoonful

STINKY OR SWEET, round or square, cheeses also range a fair bit in calories and fat. The following stats are from *The Doctor's Pocket Calorie, Fat & Carbohydrate Counter* (Family Health Publications, 2004). But keep in mind that serving size is the biggest determinant in your fat and calorie intake.

Variety (1 ounce)	Calories	Fat (grams)
American	110	9
Brick	100	8
Brie	95	8
Cheddar	110	9
Colby	110	9
Cottage cheese (2%)	25	.5
Edam	100	8
Feta	100	8
Goat's milk (chèvre)	70	6
Gorgonzola	110	9
Havarti	120	11
Mascarpone	130	13
Muenster	110	9
Mozzarella (part skim)	70	5
Neufchatel	70	6
Parmesan	110	7
Provolone	100	8
Ricotta (part skim)	40	2.5
Romano	110	8
Stilton	118	10
Swiss	110	9



Just like wine, how a cheese is made and aged determines its distinct flavor. The type of milk used has a lot to do with it, too. Although cheese can be made from many kinds of milk — mozzarella traditionally comes from buffalo milk — the most common sources are cows, goats and sheep. Triple-cream cheeses like mascarpone and Saint André are ultra-rich, because extra cream is added to the curd during production, while low-fat cheeses are, of course, made from low-fat milk.

There's a heated debate around whether milk used in cheese should be pasteurized or raw. Proponents of raw-milk cheese argue that it is far superior in flavor — and healthier, because pasteurization (heating milk to about 145 degrees for 30 minutes) kills good bacteria right along with bad, creating an environment where contaminants can thrive. But the Food and Drug Administration disagrees: By law, raw-milk cheeses can be sold in the United States only if they have been aged 60 days or more — effectively banning the production or import of fresh raw-milk varieties.

Whether you opt for raw-milk or pasteurized, aged or fresh varieties, organic cheeses — produced without synthetic hormones or antibiotics, and made with milk from cows that have been partially grass-fed — are always a good choice. Although low-fat versions of cottage cheese and mozzarella are often surprisingly flavorful, many kinds of cheese are better tasting in their full-fat form. "Eating a little bit of a cheese that you love, that's full of flavor, is so much more satisfying than eating a lot of something tasteless," Cruzan says. So savor and enjoy.

BE CHOOSY ABOUT CHEESE

Particularly if you are weight conscious or looking to reduce your intake of saturated fat, it may be helpful to think of cheese as a condiment or an accompaniment to other foods rather than as a main dish.

For example, instead of making a bland cheese (like Colby or Provolone) the thick centerpiece of your sandwich, try combining tomato and cucumber with a thin layer of Asiago or herbed goat cheese. Rather than tossing a heaping handful of cheese onto your pizza or chef salad, consider crumbling on just a bit of feta or Stilton. Go for quality and synergy, not quantity. Strive to educate your palate to enjoy a broader array of cheeses and to appreciate their various qualities: the crunchy toffee-like bits in aged Gruyère; the luxurious aroma of herbed sheep feta packed in olive oil.

Try pairing different types of cheese with different sorts of fruits and vegetables, seeking out interesting flavor, color and texture combinations that delight your senses and please your tummy. "It is always best to eat cheese with alkaline foods such as fruits and vegetables because they balance out the acidity of cheese," asserts Smith. Options abound for enjoying cheese in new and different ways; here are just a few to get you going:

- Cottage cheese with sliced berries in the morning
- Feta, chèvre, Manchego or Gorgonzola on organic field greens
- Fresh-shredded aged Parmesan, Gruyère or Asiago on vegetable soups
- Fresh mozzarella with sliced tomato, basil, olive oil and balsamic vinegar
- Chèvre on celery sticks or cucumber rounds
- Aged Cheddar on Granny Smith apples

When eaten in moderation, cheese can be a healthy, satisfying source of blood-sugar-stabilizing protein and fat. And when your blood sugar is steady, you're less likely to overeat. "Whenever someone starts working here at The Cheese Shop they spend the first few weeks tasting cheese all day long," Cruzan says. "Amazingly, they always seem to lose weight." ●

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Lactose-Free LOOK-ALIKES

ACCORDING to the American Academy of Family Physicians, up to 15 percent of people of northern European descent, up to 80 percent of blacks and Latinos, and up to 100 percent of American Indians and Asians can't properly digest the sugar lactose in dairy products.

What's more, you might also be allergic to one or both of dairy's proteins: whey and casein. Such intolerances often give rise to digestive problems that range from uncomfortable to debilitating, as well as congestion, sinus problems, sore throats and ear infections.

"Dairy is the No. 1 food allergy," says nutritionist and author Melissa Diane Smith. "If you suspect a sensitivity, try avoiding all dairy for a week or two to see whether the symptoms go away. If the problems do vanish, steer clear of these foods for at least several months. Sensitivities in some people can decline with nonexposure."

In the meantime, a number of nondairy cheeses, made from soy, rice, oats and nuts, are available. Various gums, cornstarch and tapioca are used to provide a solid cheeselike texture. Be aware, though, that while most nondairy cheeses do not contain lactose, many still do contain casein.

Most alternative cheeses have little to no cholesterol, as well as fewer calories, less protein and less fat than dairy cheese. Yet they are often high in sodium. What's more, they don't really taste like cheese. Their saving grace: Faux cheeses add texture and interest to dishes such as burgers, burritos and pizza. Better than nothing? Your call.

