



Breaking it Down: The 12 Families of Cheese

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In last month's column, I raised the subject of intimidation when it comes to walking into a cheese shop and selecting cheese. This is more common than people realize. With the overwhelming amount of choices available, where does one start? I began to break it down for you using classifications and other characteristics to help differentiate the types. This month, I hone in a little further by delving into the 12 families (or categories) of cheese.

Basically, I group all cheeses into one of 12 families based on enough similar characteristics to be grouped together. Many cheeses can fit into one or more families; for instance, Roquefort is both a blue and a sheep milk cheese. The word "family" refers to cheeses grouped by categories that make sense, much the way wines are associated by grape type, blend, or country. This is the easiest method for me, and I hope it works for you.



The 12 Families of Cheese

1. **Fresh.** Often called unripened, these are very young cheeses with a short shelf life of only a few weeks from production. Fresh cheeses generally go through a relatively quick transition from fresh to tart to sour.

Examples would be cottage, ricotta, Farmer cheese, mozzarella and cream cheese. You will also find many goat and sheep cheeses that fit into this family as well.

2. **Swiss.** These are slow-ripening cheeses that are free of added bacteria, such as Brie or washed rind cheeses. Ripening takes place with salt and time, usually several months with minor changes noted. These cheeses are usually eaten within 3 months to a year of aging.

Examples from the Swiss family would be Emmenthaler (the original Swiss cheese), Gruyere, Jarlsberg, Comte, Beaufort and Raclette.

3. **Cheddar.** Known for the cheddar-type cut curd from which it is made, cheddar is originally an English cheese. Today t

largest production happens in the United States and Canada.

Examples are cheddars by name: New York, Vermont, Wisconsin, Canada, England, Oregon, and so on. This also includes Colby, Tillamook, Longhorn and Black Diamond.

4. **English.** This is the large group of cheeses produced in Great Britain with similar characteristics, subtle buttermilk undertone and a crumbly texture. This is a simplified definition, but these are great cheeses nonetheless. You really need to try the small farm production cheeses from England to truly appreciate them.

Examples are Cheshire (which predates cheddar by 400 years), Caerphilly, Wensleydale, Leicester, Double Gloucester, Cotswold and Lancashire.

5. **Dutch.** These are medium-ripening cheeses that have natural rinds but are more often waxed. You will notice some change month-to-month as they ripen.

Examples are Gouda, Edam, Fontina, Mimolette, Monterey Jack, and Beemster cheeses.

6. **Port Salut.** These are also medium-ripening cheeses.

Examples are French Port Salut, Tomme de Savoie, St Marcellin, Morbier, Reblochon (no longer available in the United States), and Delice de Jura.

7. **Tilsit.** A medium-aged cheese usually with a small eye formation (holes), these cheeses are usually ready after a few months and hold up well. Most are on the mild side but they get more pungent with a little aging.

Examples are German Tilsit, Danish Tilsit (most popular being creamed Havarti), Swedish Farmers, Austrian Grinzing, Monterey Jack.

8. **Blue.** These are generally smaller cheeses, two to 15 lbs. After the cheese is set, firm needle holes are made in the cheese where a blue mold is injected.

Examples are Stilton, Gorgonzola, Blue, Blue Castello, Cambozola Black, Shropshire Blue, and of course, Roquefort.

9. **Hard.** These are well-aged cheeses that can require years to mature. They are generally pressed and heavily salted, and many months are required before taste differences occur in the cheese.

Examples are Parmesean, Romano, Asiago, Pepato, Sardo, Grana Padana, and Provolone.

10. **Soft-Ripening.** One of the most popular families, the name comes from the action that takes place. The cheese is sprayed with penicillium camberti, a white mold. Then, as it ripens, it softens from the outside in. When first made, soft-ripening cheeses have a hard core in the center. As they begin to ripen, the core disappears. When gone, the cheese is considered full ripe. This will all happen in just a few weeks. There are three types classified by butterfat content, as mentioned above.

Examples are Brie, Fromage d’Affinois, Moses Sleeper.

11. **Washed Rind.** Unlike soft-ripening cheeses that have a white bloomy mold sprayed on them, washed rind types are washed with a different mold. They are then allowed to ripen in a moist room where the washed rind develops. These orange-hued cheeses are more pungent and favorable, as a general rule. They can over-ripen quickly, so it is best to taste before you buy.

Examples are Chaumes, Epoisses, Livarot, French Munster, Stinking Bishop, Grayson, and Pont Le'Veque.

12. **Goat and Sheep.** I rank these together because most people are looking for the different taste of the two milks blended. Cheeses from this family can be found as fresh cheese, soft-ripening, medium aged and hard cheese.

Examples of fresh would be most goat logs, Montrachet, Crottins, and Valancey Pyramids.

Examples of soft-ripening would be Bucheron goat logs, Clochette Belles, Chevrot, and Chabichou.

Examples of aged are Romano, Tomme Crayeuse, Midnight Moon, Lamb Chopper, Gjetost, Feta, Kasseri and Beemster Goa

Once you understand the 12 families, you can now go into a shop and say, "I'm interested in four or five cheeses, maybe a blue, an aged gouda, a soft goat, something in a Brie, and whatever you might recommend today." That was easy. Bottom line: Enjoy the experience, and if you can, try before you buy. This way you will never take home a cheese you don't like.

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