

## Tips on Buying Cheese

1. When buying cheese, it's best to find a reliable source, such as a specialty market, cheese shop, or gourmet foods store that specializes in cheeses. Often, your local farmer's market and a cheesemaker's Web site are excellent resources, as you will often speak directly to the cheesemakers, who will ensure that the products are in the best possible condition. When using a retail store, you will want to make sure that the staff is knowledgeable and that turnover is swift. Those consumers that are the most fortunate will live in larger cities and have cut-to-order or cut-and-wrap retailers.
2. Check the labels, especially on fresh cheeses, to make sure that the product is well within its expiration date. For larger cheeses that are cut down to smaller amounts, the store label should also include an expiration date near the weight and price amounts. If a cheese is reduced in price for quick sale, it's generally not a bargain, and your experience will be a less than happy one.
3. Check the condition of the cheese, especially for aroma, appearance, and flavor. Less desirable characteristics include ammonia, sour milk, barnyardy or unclean aromas. Further, the cheeses should be characteristic of their style, with an interior that is free of cracks, discoloration, and mold (unless it is a blue cheese). Note that natural rind cheeses, may have a rustic appearance, which is one of their attributes. When possible, taste the cheese before you buy. This is much easier in a cut-and-wrap environment. If you are unable to taste the cheese but want to give it a try, buy the smallest amount possible.
4. Because of the wide variety of dietary concerns and restrictions, check labels for the type of milk (cow, goat, sheep) from which the cheese was made, whether it is a pasteurized or raw milk, and whether it uses animal, vegetal, or microbial rennet. If the label doesn't say, ask. A good cheesemonger will be able to tell you and will be happy to steer you in the right direction, especially if religious, dietary, or animal rights concerns govern your diet. At present, product ingredient labeling is inconsistent, but most good cheesemakers will supply the most important information on their labels.
5. In general, buy only as much cheese as you will be able to consume within a few days. If the cheese is wrapped in plastic at purchase, re-wrap the cheese as soon as possible in waxed or parchment paper, as air and moisture are integral to keeping the cheese in the best possible condition. If you get a cheese that is over the hill, return it to the store and ask for a replacement or a refund; most retailers are willing to keep their customers happy.