





CHAIRMAN OF THE CHEESEBOARD

If milk is cheese's leap towards immortality, then the cheeseboard is the launching platform

WORDS: CHRIS ALLSOP

IT'S DIFFICULT TO deliver a subpar cheese course. Only a mind raised by wolves has the inability to throw together Stilton, cheddar, brie, some crackers and a scattering of grapes, to successfully round-off a good dinner party.

As this illustrates, a little bit of cheese knowledge goes a long way. Therefore, it's important to understand that, as far as domestic cheese goes, the UK is enjoying something of a renaissance. Over 900 varieties are now produced on our shores, with many claiming major awards at international competitions. It's an exciting time to be British and lactose-tolerant.

In order to help me to eschew the tired cheeseboard formulas of yesteryear and to capitalise on of this new era in UK cheese, I asked cheesemonger Matthew Feroze to assist me in creating the cheeseboard par excellence. The appropriated French is suitable here, as Feroze is the modern day Henry V of English cheese; he made headlines last year after bearding the French in their own cheese cave by taking first prize in France's national cheesemonger trials: the Concours National De Fromagers.

Feroze believes that a cheese course should be a statement—a talking point—but nothing too intimidating. “The ‘core essential’ is sharing cheese with your guests,” he explains. “You can make this more of an event and celebrate the cheese through presentation and explanation, but basically, if you’re eating cheese, that’s the main thing.”

According to Feroze, the traditional choice between serving on slate or wood is entirely a matter of personal preference; notonthehighstreet.com stocks two sizes of a handmade burr elm board while the Just Slate Company should be able to meet your slate requirements. As for cheese knives, go for French brand Laguiole: these elegant instruments add a panache conspicuously lacking from the dinky chisel sets often found on sale in department stores.

While presentation is important, Feroze emphasises that it's the quality of the cheeses that should be the

star attraction. So how many cheeses should one cheeseboard support?

“It's subjective, but I prefer three or four,” says Feroze. “People tend to get the most out of a tasting if there are fewer cheeses; it helps to focus on what makes each of them special.”

For a cheeseboard themed around domestic artisan cheeses, Feroze put together Stichelton, an unpasteurised Stilton; organic Hafod cheddar; Dorstone, a soft goat's cheese; and camembert-style Tunworth. To accompany the cheddar and the Tunworth, Feroze opts for simplicity and recommends apple slices, while honey plays off nicely against the lemony notes of the Dorstone. He adds that the Stichelton is fine as it stands, and that “putting out some good unsalted butter to cut the Stichelton with will help those who find the blue too strong”.

Finally, Feroze recommends crackers that are high in texture but low in flavour such as water biscuits and charcoal biscuits. “Bread is too filling if this is arriving at the end of a meal,” he says.

But don't be afraid to experiment; try pairing the cheese with unusual alcohols such as gin or whiskey. For Feroze, there is only one hard and fast rule for the cheeseboard: “The key thing is to not let the other bits steal focus from the cheese.” city

❖ Matthew Feroze's memoir: “*The Cheese and I: An Englishman's Voyage Through the Land of Fromage*” is available from bookstores

CHEESEBOARD SELECTIONS BY MATTHEW FEROZE

International Award Winners:

Manchego DO Gran Reserva (Spain)
Winnimere (USA)
Agour Ossau Iraty (France)
Colston Bassett Stilton (UK)

Serious French (traditional, characterful, and pricey):

Beaufort d'Alpage
Salers Tradition
Roquefort
Peral