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annual
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MILKSHAKES TO GOURMET HAUTE DOGS

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CHEESE,

FOLLOWING THE ARTISAN CHEESE TRAIL

PLEASE!

Story | **ROBIN BARR SUSSMAN**

Over the past 10 years, America has embarked on a revival of artisan cheese making. The tasty phenomenon continues to improve and flourish every year with a cheese trail waiting for you in the East, along the West Coast and in the South. So, pack up the car with an ice chest, picnic basket and your favorite foodies, and hit the road.



NAT AND CODY | TOMALES FARMSTEAD | JORDAN WINERY

CALIFORNIA





FREESTONE ARTISAN CHEESE | WILDFLOWER BAKERY | SONOMA COUNTY TOURISM | RAMINI MOZZARELLA

The Sonoma Marin Cheese Trail winds through redwood canyons, pastures and the oak-covered hills of Marin and Sonoma counties just north of San Francisco. This stunning stretch of Northern California links dozens of artisans who make distinctive cheeses using local milk from grass-fed cows, sheep, goats and water buffalo. Local cheese expert Vivien Straus, of Straus Family Creamery and founder of cheesetrail.org, supplied us with valuable tips on worthy visits. Prepare for an astounding array of cheese varieties in creative flavors.

Ramini Mozzarella Farm

TOMALES, CALIFORNIA

Here's your rare chance to try handcrafted mozzarella made with fresh water buffalo milk. Audrey Ramini's very special ranch near Point Reyes National Seashore hosts tours and tastings every week. On the tour, you'll get to hand brush one of 45 water buffalo, and mozzarella lovers will find the Old World-style Italian mozzarella silky-soft, sweet and clean-flavored. Love fresh oysters? Cap off your day at nearby Tomales Bay Oyster Company. raminimozzarella.com

Freestone Artisan Cheese

FREESTONE, CALIFORNIA

Located in the Sonoma Coast wine appellation between the coastal redwoods, the Pacific Ocean and San Francisco, this little bungalow is brimming with artisan cheeses from Sonoma, Marin and Napa counties (try the amazing Beecher's cheddar with green and black peppercorn). It also sells raw local honey, chocolates and local olive oils, plus hot crepes and coffee. For picnic provisions, stop by Wild Flour, one of the best bakeries in Northern California—a bread lover's fantasy. Nearby: Beautiful Bodega Bay, the local's getaway to the Sonoma Coast. freestoneartisan.com

Toluma Farms & Tomales Farmstead Creamery

TOMALES, CALIFORNIA

Twenty minutes west of Petaluma (nestled in Tomales Bay Estuary) is this Marin county dairy, organic farm and creamery. Its farmstead cheeses, named after the native Indian land (Miwok) where the sheep and goats are raised, include Kenne, a mouth-melting soft-ripened goat cheese, and Atika, a tangy and dense aged sheep-goat mixed cheese. You'll see the popular cheese products in hundreds of restaurants, gourmet shops, resorts like Meadowood and wineries such as Ram's Gate. The farm has guided tours on the first Sunday of each month with a hike up to the pastures, a peek into the creamery and cheese tasting. tolumafarms.com

Marin French Cheese

PETALUMA, CALIFORNIA

Here's a great stop that's open daily in western Marin County with lush green pastures, gardens and picnic tables by the lake for lunch and sampling cheese. One of the longest operating cheese factories in the United States (1865), Marin French Cheese produces classic soft-ripened French-style Brie and Camembert. The opulent cheese also comes in other rich styles including Schloss (yellow and pungent; pairs great with wine and beer) and a swoon-worthy triple crème Brie with truffles that begs for Champagne. Pack up some 4-ounce "petites" for your purse or other selections from the cheese shop. marinfrenchcheese.com

Cowgirl Creamery

POINT REYES STATION, CALIFORNIA

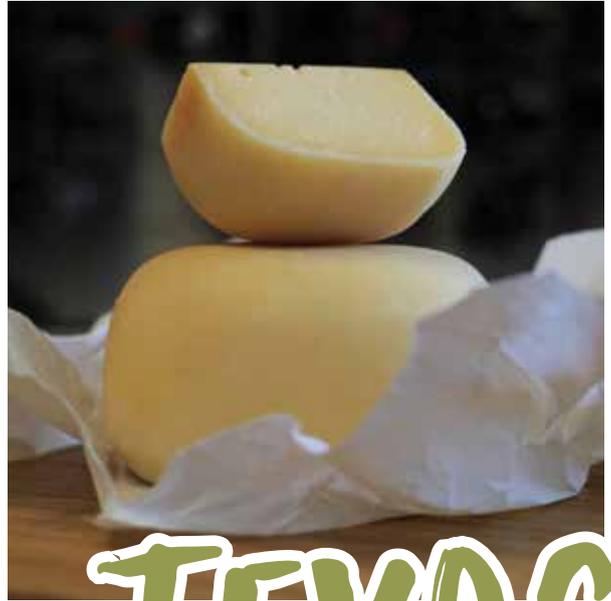
Famous for fresh and aged organic cheese named after California landmarks, this company owned by Sue Conley and Peggy Smith has been a smashing success since 1990. Visit the original Cowgirl Creamery shop and creamery in postage-stamp-size Point Reyes Station, which has a lunch café, cheese classes and tastings. The hundreds of artisan cheeses will make any foodie squeal with delight. You can find the wildly popular cheese across the Bay Area (farmers markets, Ferry Building Cheese Shop, gourmet shops and restaurants) and throughout the U.S. cowgirlcreamery.com

Vella Cheese

SONOMA, CALIFORNIA

When visiting the many wineries in Sonoma near the San Francisco Bay Area, stop in for a classic taste or picnic at Vella Cheese factory housed in a historic circa 1904 stone building on the Sonoma town square. Known for dry Jack cheeses—quite popular in California—the company founded in 1931 also produces cheddars and Italian-style cheeses that are great to cook with. Don't look for a dairy farm or a tour, just lots and lots of delicious cheese. vellacheese.com





KERRISA TREANOR | BLUE HERON FARM

TEXAS



The Lone Star State has seen a surge of boutique cheesemakers enter the market in the past decade. There are as many as 40 such businesses across the state, and several have won awards from the American Cheese Society and other national competitions. We asked local cheese pioneer and expert Lindsey Schechter, owner of Houston Dairymaids cheese shop, to give us pointers on great Texas cheeses and dairy farm visits. Not hitting the trail but craving cheese? Visit Houston Dairymaids (houstondairymaids.com) for free daily cheese tastings. They also hold events and cheese-making classes. Prepare to get addicted on Texas cheese!

Blue Heron Farm

FIELD STORE, WALLER COUNTY, TEXAS

Perhaps the closest dairy farm to Houston, this sustainable goat farm owned by young Houstonians Lisa and Christian Seger hosts 36 goats producing extra-rich milk for luxurious chèvre cheese. Anticipate half a dozen flavors ranging from green goddess to breakfast spread. Blue Heron also makes feta from goat's milk and cajeta, a Mexican-style goat's milk caramel for desserts or to sweeten coffee. Blue Heron holds myriad events (mostly in the spring) where you can tour and taste, plus they schedule pop-up dinners out in the field. Sign up for the newsletter and check the website regularly for updates. blueherontexas.com

Pure Luck Farm and Dairy

DRIPPING SPRINGS, TEXAS

Located near Barton Creek, this family and goat dairy farm is on 5 acres of certified organic land. Pure Luck specializes in handmade artisan goat cheese made with the milk of its 100 Nubian and Alpine goats, and it is a favorite for its "clean, bright, wonderful" characteristics, says Houston Dairymaids' Schechter. Flavors range from Anaheim red chili to a delight called June's Joy (chèvre mixed with honey, black pepper and thyme). Pure Luck also produces some of Texas' best feta and Hopelessly Bleu (goat's milk and creamy blue cheese). The farm hosts special events and is building a new classroom for workshops. Buy its cheeses at Whole Foods Market, Central Market and Houston Dairymaids. purelucktexas.com

Veldhuizen Family Farm

DUBLIN, TEXAS

Seventeen or so years ago, when cheesemaker and owner Stuart Veldhuizen started making cheese, raw milk cheeses were scarce. Now his farm is booming and selling at least 15 varieties of raw cow's milk cheeses to hotels and restaurants in Dallas, Houston and beyond. The cheese is categorized as mild, medium or sharp, with its signature Redneck

cheddar, a semihard cheese, which tastes subtly sweet with the addition of Shiner Bohemian Black. Visit the Veldhuizens' 180-acre dairy farm (near Fort Worth) by appointment, where they blend the milk from 40 cows including Holsteins, Ayrshires and Jerseys. Find the cheese at Houston Dairymaids, Revival Market and many restaurants including Brennan's. veldhuizencheese.com

Eagle Mountain Farmhouse Cheese

LIPAN, TEXAS

Nearby Veldhuizen in the Fort Worth area, stop by this cheese-making operation owned by former lawyer Dave Eagle and check out the new high-tech facility and cheese shop. Gouda, Alpine, Trappist and Tomme style cheeses, plus natural-rind and washed-rind cheeses are made from fresh raw cow's milk from a nearby farm. His Birdville Reserve won first place at the American Cheese Society's annual judging in 2011. Expect Eagle Mountain's cheeses at farmers markets in North Texas, as well as high-end cheese purveyors and restaurants throughout the state. Want to make your own? The team offers cheese workshops in the spring and late fall. eaglemountaincheese.com

Lucky Layla Farms

GARLAND, TEXAS

Third-generation Texas dairyman Todd Moore has a state-of-the-art dairy farm producing "blue ribbon" queso fresco cheese, drinkable yogurt and handcrafted butter made from Guernsey and Jersey cows. The sweet fresh butter, which Schechter calls "amazing with a deep golden color," comes in flavors like honey sesame and chili lime. Tours are offered at sister farm Lavon Farms in Plano where you can buy delicious dairy products in their shop, or witness championship cattle freely roaming the 1,180 acres of grassland and 3-acre cooling lakes. lavonfarms.com, luckylayla.com



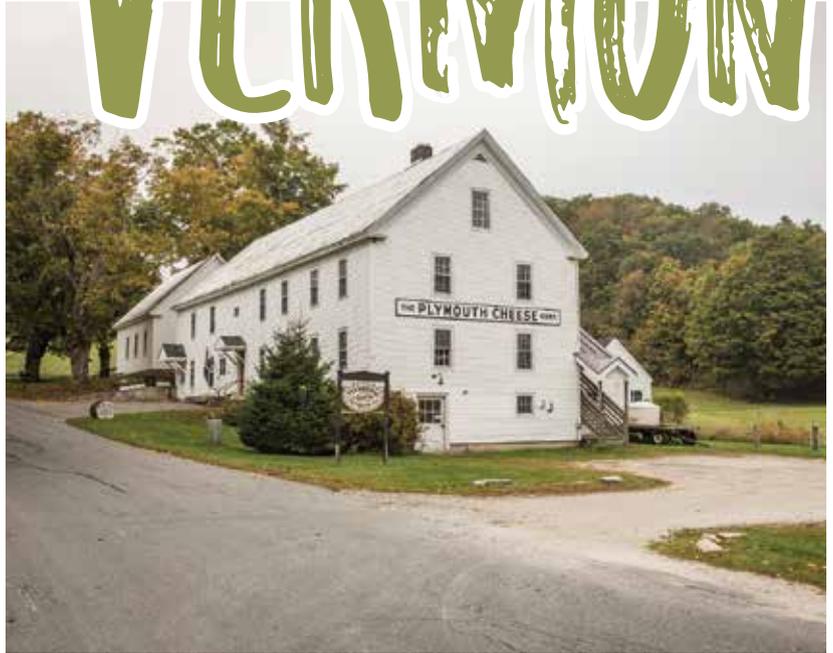
Mozzarella Company

DALLAS, TEXAS

It's the 35th anniversary for Paula Lambert's popular cheese company she founded in 1982 after falling in love with fresh mozzarella in Italy. Her tiny downtown factory still crafts award-winning cheese by hand using fresh cow and goat's milk and high-quality ingredients. The team produces 200,000 pounds of Italian-inspired cheese a year and more than 30 products including a blue cheese, butter, mascarpone tortas and several flavors of mozzarella. The creamy hoja santa—goat cheese wrapped in the hoja santa leaf—is a standout with its lemony-mint flavors. Paula conducts monthly cheese-making classes at her factory in Deep Ellum. Schechter says it's a "great experience and she's wonderful." Come join the fun! mozzco.com



VERMONT



CABOT | PLYMOUTH CHEESE

The Green Mountain State's famous cheese trail encompasses idyllic tree-lined country roads dotted with farmstead cheese producers beginning in scenic Plymouth Notch. Experience much more than Vermont's iconic sharp cheddar with award-winning gorgonzola, feta, chèvre, flavored Gouda and other artisanal varieties. Here are pointers from the Vermont Cheese Council for a weekend of must-visit historical spots producing irresistible cheese.

Shelburne Farms

SHELburnE, VERMONT

This national historic landmark on the shores of Lake Champlain sports a 1,400-acre working farm, walking trails, a children's farmyard, a farm-to-table restaurant and an inn. The Vanderbilt-Webb estate is a nonprofit organization educating for a sustainable future. The on-site dairy features farmstead cheddar cheese from purebred Brown Swiss cows. Visit the estate mid-May to mid-October for the walking trails; cheese making in the historic Farm Barn; sampling the myriad flavors of cheddar, cave-aged Shepsog, alpine sheep's milk cheese and other Vermont products (maple syrup!); and the Farm Cart featuring a local lunch. shelburnefarms.org

Grafton Village Cheese Co.

GRAFTON, VERMONT

If you are a cheese mouse for classic Vermont cheddar, this stunning historically preserved New England town with babbling brooks and covered bridges is a must-stop on the cheese trail. Established in 1892 as the Grafton Cooperative Cheese Company, the cheese facility and visitors center was restored in the 1960s by the Windham Foundation. While the exterior maintains its retro farm charm, the cheese-making facility is very high-tech. Watch cheesemakers crank out the cheddar in the viewing area and help yourself to plenty of samples. The cheese is also sold in select Whole Foods Markets. graftonvillagecheese.com

Crowley Cheese

MT. HOLLY, VERMONT

Award-winning Crowley Cheese has been made in the Green Mountains from the same recipe since 1824. The cheese is made from hand from fresh whole milk without preservatives, and the cow's milk produces a distinctively smooth, creamy taste—think cheddar without the bite. The historic factory built by Winfield Crowley in 1882 is the oldest continuously operated cheese factory in America. Go watch the cheese being made by hand, learn a little about cheese making, taste free samples and shop for tasty gifts in the gift shop. The cheese is sold in specialty stores throughout the country. crowleycheese.com

Billings Farm & Museum

WOODSTOCK, VERMONT

This Billings-Rockefeller home and historic dairy farm is regarded as one of the finest outdoor history museums in the country. Combining a fully operational Jersey dairy farm with educational exhibits, interactive programs and events, the landmark provides education and enjoyment for all age groups. Meet the award-winning Jersey cows, sheep and draft horses or explore the restored 1890 Farm House while sampling Billings Farm cheddar. Butter cheddar, sweet cheddar and sharp Woodstock reserve are on offer. billingsfarm.org

Plymouth Artisan Cheese

PLYMOUTH NOTCH, VERMONT

Built in 1890, the second oldest cheese factory in the U.S is located on the Calvin Coolidge State Historic Site and served as the summer White House and private home of President Calvin Coolidge. The signature cheese is reminiscent of what European settlers brought with them to the New World—a slightly granular curd cheese similar to colby and farmhouse cheddar. Cheese lovers are invited to visit the factory, now owned by cheesemaker Jesse Werner, to view cheese being created with raw cow's milk and sample flavors including smoked, hot pepper and Hunter. The Plymouth gift box was chosen as one of Oprah's "Favorite Things" in the 2015 list. plymouthartisancheese.com

Cabot Cheese

CABOT, VERMONT

Founded in 1919, Cabot is a cooperative owned by over 1,000 farm families throughout New England and New York. It produces a wide variety of cheddar, smoked Gouda, blue cheese, Swiss, yogurt, cream and butter. You can find the huge selection of dairy products in every grocery store in Vermont, but a trip to Cabot's Visitor Center is a special experience. Tour the facility, learn about the history, watch the cheese-making process and enjoy myriad samples from the biggest cheese producer in the state. In Texas, the products are sold at Kroger supermarkets and Spec's. cabotcheese.coop ♣

WINE & CHEESE PAIRING

Cheese, just like wine, develops different flavors and affinities based on terroir, the species of animal and what flavorings are added during production. As delicious as cheese is, it is difficult to pair with some of your favorite reds and some white wines. Chef Todd Knoll of Jordan Winery (jordanwinery.com) offers mouthwatering tips on pairing wines with cheese.

RED WINES

- Several types of hard and semihard cheeses can pair, and even flatter, both old and young vintages of cabernet sauvignon. The key is to start with a wine lower in alcohol and tannins, such as Jordan, Corison or Bordeaux.
- Three categories of cheese to avoid with cabernet sauvignon or other highly tannic red wine: creamy soft-ripened cheeses like Brie; hard cheeses such as Parmigiano-Reggiano due to a clash with the salty and sweet characteristics of the cheese; and pungent blue cheeses because they make the red wine taste metallic and bitter.
- Big rich cabernets drink best with intense cheddar cheese and aged Gruyère, while young cabernets with light tannins pair with aged cheeses like pecorino-style sheep's cheese and soft-ripened cheeses with earthy and herbal notes.

WHITE WINES

- Creamy rich cheeses like Mt Tam, an elegant triple-cream by Cowgirl Creamery, tend to pair well with a more buttery, oaky chardonnay due to the complementing flavors and textures.
- Mild blue cheeses that have a hint of sweetness complement Champagne and lean, crisp whites, such as Sancerre or a young Jordan French-style chardonnay, which is elegant with higher acidity and no buttery flavors.
- Tangy fresh goat cheeses (chèvre) pair wonderfully with crisp and citrusy sauvignon blancs and Sancerre—classic pairings made famous in the Loire Valley.