

Cheese Basics

Cheese is a creamy blend of high-quality protein, milk-fat, minerals such as calcium and phosphorus, and vitamins such as riboflavin (vitamin B₂). Cheese products vary, so you should refer to the product label for information about individual products. Cheese is also very versatile as it partners with many other wholesome foods, including vegetables, fruits, whole-grain breads, cereals, and carbohydrate-rich pasta.

Cheese Varieties

There are many varieties of cheese, from Cheddar to Swiss, each with its own standard of identity specified by the Food and Drug Administration. Cheese varieties are categorized as **natural cheese**, **pasteurized process cheese**, **cheese food**, and **cheese spread**.

Natural cheese is made from a starter bacteria, rennet, and milk and allowed to solidify. It may or may not be aged. Each natural cheese variety is processed, resulting in distinctive flavor and qualities.

Pasteurized process cheese is prepared by grinding, blending, and heating one or more natural cheeses together to allow for uniformity and keeping quality. *American cheese* is an example of a pasteurized process cheese. Pasteurized process cheese products usually have good melting properties.

Cheese food is made by blending one or more cheeses without the use of heat plus the addition of dairy products such as cream, milk, skim milk, or whey. Cheese food has a higher percentage of moisture than natural or pasteurized process cheese.

Cheese spread is similar to pasteurized process cheese food except that an edible stabilizer and moisture are added. This allows for smooth spreading at room temperature.

Cheese lovers interested in reducing their fat and calories can still enjoy a variety of lower-fat cheeses. Cheese varies in fat content depending on the amount of milk-fat used to make the cheese. Look for the words *light*, *reduced fat*, or *part-skimmed*, which indicates these cheeses are lower in fat than their counterparts but are not imitation cheeses.

Storing Cheese

To maintain the original flavor, appearance, and quality, unopened cheese products should be stored in the refrigerator. To minimize moisture loss and odor exchange with other foods after the cheese is opened, keep it tightly wrapped. *Surface* mold should be cut off approximately 1/2-inch from the surface, but use the cheese within one week.

Cheese is labeled with a “best if used by” date. This date is not an indication of safety but tells you how long the product should retain its flavor and quality.

Natural Cheese and Pasteurized

Process Cheese will last in the refrigerator four to eight weeks after opening, if tightly wrapped to prevent surface drying. Hard cheeses like Cheddar, Colby, Gruyere, Parmesan, and Swiss; firm cheeses like Edam, Gouda, and Provolone; and semi-soft cheeses like American, Asiago, Baby Swiss, Monterey Jack, and Muenster fall in this category. As a general rule, the harder the cheese, the longer it will remain fresh. Some Pasteurized Process Cheese Products packaged in squeeze containers and aerosol cans are designed to remain at room temperature unless otherwise labeled.

Soft Cheeses such as Brie, Camembert, Limburger, Blue, Cottage, Cream, and Neufchâtel are more perishable because of their higher water content. They should be stored in a tightly sealed container and used within two weeks. Strong smelling cheeses should be wrapped in plastic film and stored in airtight containers to prevent flavoring other refrigerated products.

Freezing Cheese

Most natural cheeses freeze successfully for six to eight weeks. Hard cheeses freeze better than soft cheeses. Freezing does change the texture, making semi-soft and hard cheeses more crumbly and causing soft cheeses to separate slightly, but the flavor and nutritional value remain stable. Thawed cheese is best used in cooked dishes. Cottage cheese is not recommended for freezing as the curd separates and becomes mushy. For all cheeses use an airtight, moisture-proof container or cling wrap.

Cooking with Cheese

Some cheeses do better when exposed to heat than others. In general though, use low heat or just enough to melt the cheese and blend with other ingredients. High heat or long cooking times cause cheese to become tough and stringy.

Shred, grate, cube, or dice cheese to ensure even melting. When broiling cheese, heat less than five inches from the broiler until the cheese just melts. Add cheese toppings during the last five to ten minutes of the baking time in a 325° to 375°F oven. Covering with crumbs may prevent toughening.

The following recipe adds a twist to a traditional favorite. Measure cheese based on weight. Four ounces of cheese equals one cup of shredded.

Summer Slaw

Yield: 6-8 servings

- 1 pound Cabbage, shredded
- 1 Red Bell Pepper, finely chopped
- 1 cup Fresh Spinach, cut into thin strips
- 1 cup Monterey Jack Cheese, shredded
- 1 cup Cheddar Cheese, shredded
- 1 cup Coleslaw Dressing, bottled

In large bowl, combine all ingredients and mix well. Cover and refrigerate for one hour. *Nutritional Analysis:* 319 calories; 11 g protein; 24 g fat; 17 g carbohydrate.

References

~A Cheese Lover's Guide to Lower Fat Cheeses, Dairy Council of Wisconsin, Inc., 1991.

~A Guide to Choosing & Using Wisconsin Cheese, Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board, 1994.

Cheese Varieties, Characteristics, and Uses

<i>Variety</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Uses</i>
Brie	Soft; thin white edible crust, creamy interior; slightly firm and mild when young, creamy and pungent when aged	Bake in puff pastry • Bake with butter, garlic, almonds • Serve with fruit for dessert • Split and fill with walnut filling
Feta	Soft; flaky white interior; salty "pickled" flavor	On salads and spinach omelets • Add to lasagna and vegetable casseroles • Accompany citrus fruits
Limburger	Soft; smooth waxy body; creamy-white interior, brownish exterior; strong flavor, highly aromatic	Appetizers and sandwiches on strong flavored breads with onions, radishes, pretzels and beer
Ricotta	Soft; moist, grainy; white; mild, slightly sweet flavor	Filling for cannoli, blintzes, crepes, lasagna and manicotti • Mix with apricots and toasted almonds
Port du Salut	Semi-soft; smooth, buttery; creamy yellow; mild to robust	Appetizers and dessert with fruit • Melt on open face sandwiches
Muenster	Semi-soft; waxy open texture; creamy white with orange exterior; mild to yellow	Cold or hot sandwiches • Cube on fruit kabobs • Slice on pizza
Brick	Semi-soft; waxy open texture; creamy white; mild to mellow, pungent when aged	Slice on pumpernickel with mustard • Cube • Grilled sandwiches
Baby Swiss	Semi-soft; smooth creamy interior with well distributed eyes; mild, sweet nutty flavor	Hot or cold sandwiches • Savory pies • Casseroles, pizza and omelets
Monterey Jack	Semi-soft; smooth open texture; creamy white; mild to mellow	Snacks • Bread and deep fry • Hot and cold sandwiches • Mexican favorites
Blue	Semi-soft; blue-green mold marbled or streaked interior; sometimes crumbly; sharp, spicy flavor	Dips • Dressings • Crumble over fruit or vegetable salads • Stuffed chicken breast or beef fillet • Dessert
Mozzarella	Semi-soft; smooth plastic body; creamy white; mild, delicate flavor	Pizza • Sandwiches • Bread and deep fry • Salads • Casseroles • Omelets and frittatas

<i>Variety</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Uses</i>
Gouda & Edam	Semi-soft to firm; creamy with small holes; light yellow; mild, nutlike	Snacks with fruit • Grilled Sandwiches • Casseroles • Picnic snack
Cheddar	Firm; smooth body; color ranges from almost white to orange; varied shapes and styles; mild to sharp	Tacos • Chili • Salads • Soup • Omelets • Casseroles • Snacks • Sandwiches • Dessert with fruit or atop hot apple pie
Colby	Firm; open texture; light yellow to orange color; mild to mellow flavor	Cube for fruit or vegetable salads • Melt on breakfast breads • Bread and deep fry • Fruit and cheese kabobs
Colby/Jack	Firm; smooth body; marbled white and orange; mild to mellow	Snacks • Cold or hot sandwiches • Salads • Casseroles • Pizza • Dessert
Swiss	Firm; smooth with large shiny eyes; pale yellow; mellow, nutlike flavor	Sauces • Fondue • Quiche • Omelets • Cold or hot sandwiches • French onion soup topper
Provolone	Firm; smooth plastic body; creamy white; mild to piquant or smoky in flavor	Lasagna • Vegetable salads • Cheese bread • Soup topper • Appetizer • Casseroles
Parmesan/Romano	Hard; granular; light yellow; sharp piquant	Pasta • Soup • Salads • Casseroles • Muffins • Breads • Vegetables
Pasteurized Process	Blended with the aid of heat; semi-soft; smooth uniform body; white to orange; mild to mellow with or without added flavors	Spread on sandwiches and burgers • Melt for nacho sauce and soups • Vegetable stuffer
Cold Pack	Processed without the aid of heat; soft, creamy; white to orange; mild to sharp, with or without added flavors	Soup • Sauces • Sandwiches • Salads • Cold or hot sandwiches

(Table adapted from Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board)

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