



Say Cheese!

SWEET, SALTY AND SAVORY DREAMS ARE MADE OF THESE...

BY JEFFREY SPEAR

Whether you call it gooey, chewy, buttery, stretchy, melty, creamy or even funky, there's something about cheese that's undeniably crave-worthy. The bottom line is that cheese, no matter how or where you find it, is tasty, enjoyable and fun. From mild to sharp, salty to sweet, domestic to imported, it's estimated there are more than 1,000 different varieties either produced or available here in America. Whether you elect to consume them at home or in restaurants, there are countless ways to enjoy these culinary delights.

If you're ready to have an unforgettable cheese experience, the best place to start is the all-American burger. In Jacksonville, some of the best and cheesiest varieties are served at **Epik** (Jacksonville and St. Johns). No need to settle for everyday American cheese. Try their Red Dragon Burger made with Red Dragon Cheddar, Epikurean Burger made

with Maytag cave-ripened Bleu cheese, or the Fruit & Cheese Burger topped with Old Quebec three-year aged super sharp Cheddar (each \$14). Of course, you can build your own, selecting between several varieties of cheddar, bleu, pepper Jack, emmental Swiss, goat, brie, parmesan and pecorino.

Another option, considered a staple of Southern cuisine, is mac-n-cheese. Although widely available across town, **Spiff's Gastropub** (Riverside and Bayard) serves some of the best. If you like yours straight up, their String Cheese Incident mac n cheese (\$15), made with cheddar, Swiss, provolone, mozzarella, smoked gouda, and goat cheese can't be beat. You'll also find exceptional variations that feature BBO pork, tri-tip steak, grilled chicken and shrimp.

At the more epicurean end of the spectrum, the lobster mac n cheese (\$20 small) at

Orsay (Avondale) is not to be missed. Made with cavatappi, lobster, gruyere and Parmigiano, this dish is cheesy, crunchy, creamy and incredibly indulgent. Before you dig in, consider starting your meal with a selection of fine cheeses offered here such as Brillat-Savarin, Mekkerstee Oud, Treur Villa Bleu and Humbolt Fog, to name a few, accompanied by a crisp white or full-bodied red wine.

If pairing wine and cheese sounds good, you may also want to try the Cured + Aged cheese and charcuterie board (\$22 serves four) at **Town Hall** (San Marco). Choose from a selection of meats along with cheeses such as Manchego, marinated feta and Chef Tom Grey's house-made pimento cheese.

It goes without saying that one of the most alluring and decadent applications for cheese is in sauces. While dishes such as Welsh rarebit, potatoes au gratin and mous-

saka are wonderful examples, you don't want to miss the highly entertaining and deliciously prepared Signature Cacio E Pepe (\$24) at one of the two **Bella Vista Italian Restaurants** (Fruit Cove and Jacksonville Beach). Prepared tableside, hot and creamy fettucine is tossed in a wheel of pecorino romano, then spooned onto a plate just for you.

There's also fondue, a traditional Swiss dish made popular in the late 1960s, designed to be shared by everyone at the table. A true Jax classic, **The Melting Pot** (Deerwood) serves a variety of cheese fondues, as well as several chocolate fondues for dessert.

Influenced by French, Italian and British culinary traditions, cheese is a wonderful thing to enjoy at the end of the meal, paired with a fine cognac, brandy or port. If your preferences lean towards something sweeter, there's always cheesecake. Arguably, some of the best cheesecakes in Jacksonville are served at **bb's** (Southbank) and **Biscottis** (Avondale). While their most popular is key lime, they offer an enticing variety (availability changes throughout the year) including cappuccino chocolate truffle, limoncello, praline, New York or lemon blueberry.

Should you prefer a cheesy adventure from the comfort of your own home, or you're eager to present new and exciting varieties while entertaining, the best (and only) true cheese shop in Jacksonville is **Grater**



*Town Hall's
cheese board*

Goods (Murray Hill). Featuring an impressive selection of artisanal American and imported cheeses, you'll find varieties not readily available in mainstream grocery stores. You'll also find a wide variety of specialty foods including conservas (tinned fish), caviar, and everything else you could want for an elegant, cheese-centric, dinner party. Alternatively, there's a broad selection of cheeses at **Whole Foods** (Mandarin and Jacksonville Beach), intriguing Latino varieties at **Rowe's**



*Bella Vista's
Cacio e Pepe*

(multiple locations), a range of Middle Eastern cheeses at **Hala's Mideast Eatery and Market**, and Eastern European styles at **Romashka Euro Store** (Jacksonville, St. Johns)

Each of these options offers plenty of choice and exciting culinary experiences. When you consider the seemingly endless number of variables, whether listed on menus or discovered in the retailer's cheese case, there's a lot to explore. So many cheeses. So little time. ✨