

12 favourites of four aficionados

SUSAN SEMENAK
THE GAZETTE

There are hundreds of fabulous Quebec and international cheeses that have legions of loyal fans. For many people, though, choosing cheese can be intimidating. Is it cow's milk or sheep, pasteurized or raw milk, washed rind or ash-covered?

Quebec's cheese industry needs to do a better job demystifying its products, says Jordan LeBel, an associate professor of marketing at Concordia University's John Molson School of Business.

"Consumers are just beginning to understand cheeses. But nobody has put any money into educating them the way wine producers and chocolate makers have."

The best way to get to know cheese better is to strike up a relationship with a cheesemonger. Ask about his or her favourites and how he or she likes to eat them. Tell him or her what other cheeses you like, to help decipher your tastes. Find out what's just come in, what's still ripening and what's at the perfect age for eating now.

We asked four Montreal cheese aficionados for their all-time best cheeses – their desert-island favourites – including at least one from Quebec.

CHEESE Makers aren't ready for the glory

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That, say cheese retailers and food-marketing experts, is the sign of an inferiority complex on the part of Quebec's cheese industry.

"Winning a big cheese award is a little like being on Oprah's book list," said Jordan LeBel, associate professor of marketing at Concordia University's John Molson School of Business.

"An award is a great marketing tool, but you have to be ready to capitalize on it within the first week. People flock to your product, but soon it will have lost its glitter and they will have moved on to the next best thing."

Yannick Achim – owner of Yannick Fromagerie shops in Montreal and St. Jérôme, and a judge on several cheese award panels – said growing numbers of Quebec cheeses have been garnering major awards for years now, including the prestigious American Cheese Society Awards and the Caseus Montanus in Switzerland.

For instance, at the American Cheese Society Awards in Chicago in August, Quebec cheeses took 21 prizes. Among them: La Moutonnière's Cabanon and Le Neige de Brebis, both sheep's-milk cheeses; La Fromagerie 1860 du Village's Tomme des Cantons and Cendré de Lune; and La Maison Alexis de Portneuf's Fourmier and Le Bonaparte.

"Quebec cheeses win a lot of awards. It just doesn't always make headlines," Achim said in an interview.

Even when they do get the recognition they deserve, Achim says too often Quebec cheesemakers aren't ready to capitalize on their success.

"They enter these competitions never expecting to win. So they aren't ready to assume the glory," he said.

Achim says the prizes are a prestigious calling card for all of Quebec's cheese industry. They create increased demand for the winning cheeses, but also new interest in other local cheeses.

"Quebec has possibly become North America's premier cheesemaker. It's a young industry full of ambition, but there are major lessons to be learned.

"We want to win prizes –

DANIE BLAIS,
communications director,
La Fromagerie Hamel, Jean Talon
Market, 220 Jean Talon St. E., plus
four other locations.

www.fromageriehamel.com

1. Piave Vieux

Firm cow's-milk cheese. Comparable to parmigiano, but not as granular. With a sweet, fruity, intense flavour. Straw yellow in colour.

Origin: Belluno, Italy

2. Alfred Le Fermier, Fromagerie La Station

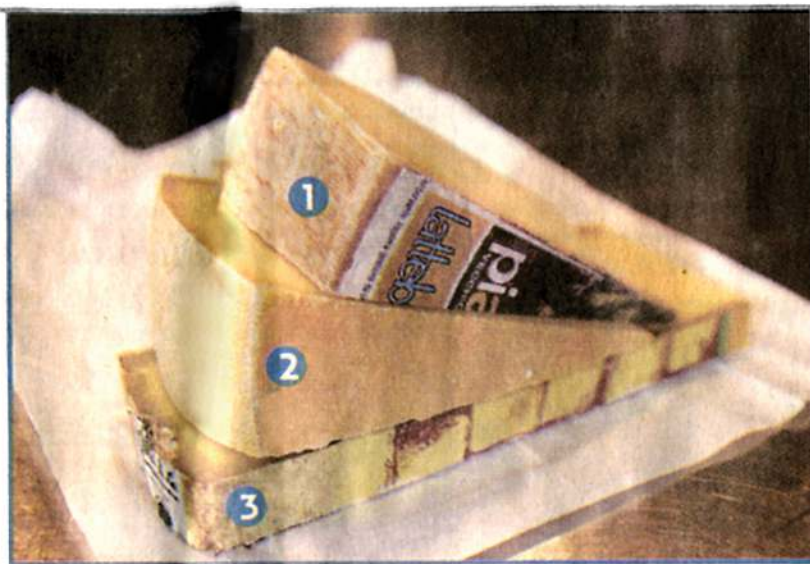
Artisanal, washed rind, raw cow's milk. Multiple award winner. Semi-firm with a dense paste and small pinholes. Ripened on spruce planks. Fragrant, floral aroma with buttery, nutty notes. Sliced thin, it melts in your mouth.

Origin: Compton, in the Eastern Townships. Visit www.fromagerielastation.com

3. Comté, 3-year-old, Marcel Petite

Artisanal raw cow's milk. Graceful, buttery taste with hints of caramel and hazelnut. Ivory-coloured paste. Deep, concentrated flavour. "Like being in a pasture in summer."

Origin: Juras, France



GILLES JOURDENAIS,
owner of Fromagerie Atwater,
Atwater Market and Lachine
Market.

www.fromagerieatwater.ca

4. Comté, 18 months, Fort des Rousses

"Stranded on a deserted island? Beatles and a hunk of Comté." Hard, ripened raw-milk cow's milk. Aged in old military caves, without refrigeration. Soft, smooth, melt-in-your-mouth texture. In the Gruyère family.

Origin: Juras, France

5. Victor & Berthold, Fromagerie du Champ à la meule

Artisanal semi-soft, ripened cow's milk. Light, fruity flavour. "Tastes like the farm," with earthy notes and the smell of butter.

Origin: Notre Dame des Lourdes, Que.

6. Ste. Maure Caprifeuille

Aged, pasteurized goat's milk. Almond-coloured, hand-moulded log with a lemony tang when young, and a nutty and piquant character as it ages. Moist, flaky paste. Nice acidity, but not overpowering.

Origin: Loire, France

MAX DUBOIS,
owner of L'Échoppe des Fromages,
12 Aberdeen St., St. Lambert.

www.lechoppedesfromages.com

7. Ossau-Iraty Fermier

Pressed, aged sheep's milk.

First crunchy, then melting in texture. Delicately coloured, like mother of pearl. Subtle caramel and red berry notes.

Origin: Pays Basque, France

8. Caprice des Cantons, Fromagerie La Germaine

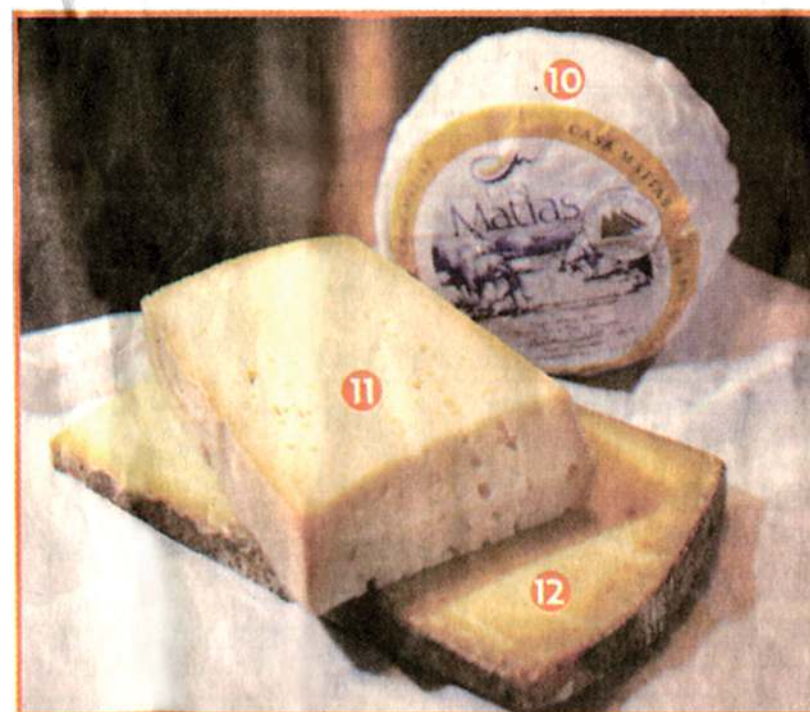
Soft washed-rind cow's milk. "Like a pasture after the rain." Similar to Munster, with a light hazelnut aroma and jammy, lactic flavour.

Origin: St. Edwidge de Clifton, Que.

9. Tomme du Maréchal, Chèvrerie du Buckland

Natural rind, semi-soft raw-milk farmstead goat cheese. Lingering flavours; light hazelnut and chestnut notes. Creamy.

Origin: Buckland, Que.



YANNICK ACHIM,
owner of Yannick Fromagerie, with
three locations including Marché de
l'Ouest and 1218 Bernard St., Out-
remont.

www.yannickfromagerie.ca

10. Serra da Estrela, Casa Matias

Handmade raw sheep's milk in a cloth-bound rind. Portugal's most celebrated cheese, traditionally made by the shepherds' wives in stone cottages in the mountains. Made from sheep's milk that is coagulated with wild cardoon extract. Soft and unctuous, with a full, round flavour, exotic herbal and floral notes and a lingering aftertaste.

Origin: East-central Portugal

11. Comtomme, 6 months, Fromagerie La Station

Semi-soft artisanal cow's-milk farm cheese. Smooth texture, with the aroma of fresh milk and a light, lingering sharpness.

Origin: Compton, in the Eastern Townships.

www.fromagerielastation.com

12. Comté selection, 36 months, La Maison Arnaud

Raw-milk cow's milk. Interesting texture, slightly crumbly but smooth. Complex and aromatic in flavour, with floral, nutty notes.

Origin: Juras, France



ALLEN McINNIS THE GAZETTE

Fromagerie Atwater's Gilles Jourdenais counts on Comté.

that's great for cheesemakers' egos. But ultimately it's detrimental to the industry when the products are not ready to be commercialized."

Achim said too often manufacturers, especially small artisanal cheesemakers, are unable to play in the big leagues

because their distribution networks are ill-developed or they haven't acquired the proper documentation for exporting their products.

"Maybe Quebecers are just too modest. If we're going to be winners, we have to start acting like winners."

PHOTOS: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER THE GAZETTE