

Wrap party

Buying and storing cheese

By Kathleen Bauer
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The first time I put it in my mouth, I knew I was in love. It was a cheese from France called Comté, imported by Daphne Zepos of the Essex Street Cheese Company in New York. Zepos hand-selects 80-pound wheels of cheese from a single cave in France, then brings it to this country for distribution. The Comté I tasted that day had a creamy texture and strong Gouda-like flavor.

The owner of my new neighborhood cheese shop in Portland, Oregon, sliced me off a piece and wrapped it in pretty cheese paper with a label that described the cheese's origin and included tasting notes. As soon as I brought it home, the family descended upon it; within minutes, it was gone.

So the next time I dropped in to my local supermarket — which has a very nice selection of both imported and locally made artisanal cheeses — I saw the same Comté from Essex Street. Feeling lucky, I tossed it in with the rest of the groceries as a special treat.



It's better to wrap cheese in cheese paper than in plastic.

Opening the plastic wrapper at home, however, I didn't smell the same deep, milky aroma that I'd experienced with the first cheese. Instead, this Comté was much more subdued, with a whiff of plastic from its wrapper. I tasted it. The flavor was disappointingly different, not the same rich, almost caramel taste of the first piece.

The cheese looked perfectly fine, with no mold or other discoloration. But the date on the label showed it had been cut a couple of days earlier. It had been sitting in the lighted case, wrapped in plastic.

Thus began my cheese education.

I asked some experts for their cheese-handling secrets.

Peter Dixon, of Vermont's [Dairy Foods Consulting](#), says

that wrapping cheese in plastic, as most supermarkets do, is criminal. "It's like putting your cheese in a body bag," he says. "It can't live and breathe any more."

Respecting the cheese

Wrap. Cheese-shop wraps feature a thin breathable layer next to the cheese that wicks moisture away (so the cheese doesn't get slimy and moldy) and a waxy outer layer that keeps the moisture from escaping (so the cheese doesn't dry out). Many cheese shops sell their paper to customers; or **you can buy**

Michael Lee agrees. He's the owner of [Twig Farm](#) in Cornwall, Vermont, and one of the bright lights of the artisanal-cheese community in Vermont. He worked first as a buyer at [Formaggio Kitchen](#), a specialty cheese store in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but eventually turned to making cheese because, he says, he had a very clear idea of how it should be sold.

"You see what happens to cheese when you wrap it up," Lee says. "Cheese is always going. There's moisture and gasses that are going to be trapped inside the wrap."

Like any living, breathing thing, cheese needs to have the right balance of humidity and air circulation to keep its bacteria and microorganisms alive and in balance — something good cheesemongers work hard to do.

So, if you're lucky enough to live in a community with a local cheese shop, patronize it. Because cheese is the focus of their business, these shops have a vested interest in making sure the cheese you take home is at its peak and that you're going to be so satisfied you'll want to come back.

cheese paper
online at

Formaticum.

Otherwise, use waxed paper. If you must use plastic wrap, change it every few days.

Store. Keep wrapped cheese (even several different kinds) in an airtight container in the fridge. The container provides a humid environment and keeps other odors out.

Eat. Don't buy in bulk; buy only as much as you're going to use in the next few days.

"At the really good cheese shops," Dixon says, "every morning they'll shave the face of every single cheese, since the faces oxidize and the flavor goes off." That's the kind of attention that supermarkets simply don't have the time or manpower to give to their products.

Another difference? Buying cheese from a cheese shop invites you to slow down and contemplate your purchase. Cheese-shop staff are generally eager to talk to you about the cheeses they carry and answer your questions, and they'll always give you slices to try.

If it's too intimidating to ask for a sample, or you don't know how to pronounce "Chabichou du Poitou," tell them what kind of cheese you like and ask what they have that might be similar. Chances are, the discussion you have will be fun and informative, not to mention tasty.

That said, in reality most people buy their cheeses at supermarkets. If you're among those who do, educate yourself about how your supermarket handles its cheeses — especially if you're going to be paying the same \$8 to \$20 a pound that a cheese shop would charge.

"When you consider the size of our country, moving a perishable product across [the U.S.] can be a challenge," says **Jeff Roberts**, author of *The Atlas of American Artisan Cheese*. People who handle cheese must be knowledgeable about it, he says, in order to maintain the cheese's quality. That means they must know more than just the backstory of a particular cheese; they must also know how to handle and wrap different cheeses.

"It's not something that somebody can come in and do without knowing anything about it except cut and wrap," Roberts says. If cut-and-wrap is all the staff can do, both the product and the customer suffer. "The best stores are taking the time to educate their counter staff," he says.

So if the supermarket is your only option, try to find one with knowledgeable staffers who understand how to handle and store cheeses. Check that the store sells its cheese soon after cutting it, too — although that's not as much of an issue with hard cheeses, like cheddar and Parmesan, as it is with soft cheeses, like chèvre or Brie.

And finally, be assertive. If the cheese you want isn't as fresh as you'd like, ask the cheese manager to cut you a new piece. Because there's cheese, and then there's cheese. And you might as well have the best.

Food writer **Kathleen Bauer** blogs at **GoodStuffNW**.

Also on Culinate: **A cheese primer** by Tami Parr.



Protect your cheese: If you buy cheese that's wrapped in plastic, take it home, remove its plastic, and wrap it in cheese paper.

