

MEDITERRANEAN-STYLE CHEESES

Middle East Inspires California's Dairy Delights



The emergence of Greek-style yogurt set the American food world on fire, and opened doors for other Mediterranean dairy products, particularly cheeses. While Feta is as beloved as ever, there is more to Mediterranean cheese than the salty, crumbly Feta that's sprinkled over salads, marinated in herbs and olive oil, and used as a foundation ingredient for baked spanakopita spinach pie.

California dairy processors are adapting cow's milk to replicate the flavors of traditional cheeses from Greece, Lebanon, Syria, Persia (Iran) and elsewhere along the Mediterranean Sea to create new varieties and tie the Old World to New.

MEDITERRANEAN-STYLE CHEESE FACTS

Feta is a Greek invention, said to be one of the oldest cheeses known to humankind. The word Feta comes from the Italian word "fetta," meaning slice, to fit the cheese into barrels for brining. A salty brine is key to Feta cheese production, giving it a tangy snap and savory salinity.

Ackawi is a semi-firm, unripened cow's milk cheese with a mild flavor and a smooth, yet firm texture. As one of the oldest cheeses produced in Lebanon and Syria, Ackawi is salty and white like Feta, yet softer in texture and ideal for enjoyment at the table with bread and fruit.

Halloumi has a firm texture and high melting point, so it can be easily grilled and fried. It's ideal for topping salads, adding creaminess to gyro-style lamb and chicken sandwiches, and as a salty contrast to prosciutto-wrapped melon. Fry it until golden brown and top it with tomato sauce, as one would polenta.

Labneh (also known as labane and labanah) is a "yogurt cheese" made by draining thick, full-fat yogurt overnight in cloth. It's similar to Greek yogurt and traditionally eaten at breakfast. The main difference between the two yogurts is the texture. Labneh is thicker because it is highly concentrated. Labneh is used as a yogurt spread and is commonly paired with pita bread, toast, and veggies. It's also an excellent substitute for cream cheese.



STORAGE & HANDLING

When purchasing cheese, make sure the package is properly and tightly wrapped and sealed, and that the cheese inside looks appealing. Do not purchase any cheese that looks dry or discolored, as the package seal may be broken. Most cheeses will maintain their flavor and quality in a refrigerator for extended periods, but use the following guidelines for storing cheese after opening:

- Fresh cheeses should be treated just like milk and kept refrigerated. Many fresh cheeses can last for a few weeks if properly stored, so note the freshness date on the package before you buy. If you detect mold on a fresh cheese, discard it.
- Soft-ripened cheeses will keep for up to several weeks if properly stored.



FOODSERVICE APPLICATIONS

Back-of-the-House

Chefs and bar managers should consider adding “mezze” plates to menus. Feta, hummus, roasted red peppers, Kalamata olives, almonds and a drizzle of olive oil pack a huge flavor punch as a shared first course and make for a substantial bar offering. Consider replacing de rigueur sandwich cheeses such as Jack and Provolone with more tantalizing Halloumi. Savory pies such as spanakopita are popular in Mediterranean cuisine – chefs can create their own savory fillings with greens, herbs and fresh cheeses like Feta.

Front-of-the-House

Put on a show with flaming saganaki, a Greek appetizer of Feta or Halloumi cheese fried in a pan, flambéed tableside, doused with a squeeze of fresh lemon juice and served with bread. Suggest high-acid white wines to match the spectacle and increase profits. Absent the flames, Mediterranean-style cheeses, offered as appetizers or part of meal-ending cheese plates, add new and intriguing flavors to adventurous, pleasure-seeking diners.



WHAT'S TRENDING

Cheese & Hummus Pairings

Following the popularity of hummus bars in London, U.S. restaurateurs are introducing this chickpea, garlic- and tahini-laced dip to menus in myriad ways. Hummus has opened the doors to non-Middle Eastern restaurants and grocers to introduce Mediterranean-style cheeses to their offerings. The cheeses are accompanying hummus in dishes as a replacement for mayo in sandwiches, a creamy base for an heirloom tomato salad, and an easy yet complex dip for pita chips.

Cheese – A Healthy Choice

Healthy food trends provide foodservice operators with opportunities to attract and keep customers. The popularity of the “Mediterranean” diet has resulted in the opening of a number of new chain restaurants in recent years. Promoting Mediterranean dishes with portions of fish, vegetables, olives, and Mediterranean-style cheeses will boost business.

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