

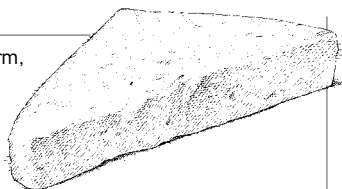
# Shopping for Supermarket Cheeses

An opinionated guide to buying and using widely available “cooking” cheeses. BY SEAN LAWLER

When we taste cheese in the test kitchen, it's usually to determine how it will behave in a particular recipe. Flavor certainly matters, but we are just as concerned with properties such as creaminess, melting ability, and stability at high temperatures. What's the best cheese for the best recipe? Some of our findings may surprise you.

## ASIAGO

**What It Is:** This firm, aged cow's milk cheese is a common substitute for Parmesan.



**Tasting Notes:** Despite its credentials, authentic Asiago d'Allevio doesn't have the strength or complexity of flavor to stand in for Parmigiano-Reggiano. For the price (about \$15 per pound), we'll pass. Domestic Asiago, especially Bel Gioioso brand, is a pleasant surprise: sharp, tangy, higher in moisture—and about half the price of the Allevio.

**Cooking Tips:** The texture of a good domestic Asiago (firm, but yielding to gentle pressure) makes it quite versatile: It is just soft enough to be eaten plain or with antipasto, broken into small chunks for a salad, or sliced thin and melted. It is also firm enough to be grated over pasta.

### TEST KITCHEN WINNER

★ BEL GIOIOSO ASIAGO (\$7.50/pound)

## BLUE CHEESE

**What It Is:** Named for its streaks (called veins) of bluish-green mold, blue cheese may be made from goat's, sheep's, or cow's milk or a combination thereof.

**Tasting Notes:** At one extreme are pricey imports like Roquefort, a tangy, pungent sheep's milk cheese with a soft, almost spreadable texture, and Stilton, a crumbly English cow's milk cheese that is nutty and sharp. At the milder end of the spectrum is the inexpensive Danish Blue, which is sliceably firm and less complex tasting, though still tangy and assertive.

**Cooking Tip:** Most blue cheeses turn greasy and gritty when melted, so they are generally crumbled over salads or blended to make creamy dips and dressings.

### TEST KITCHEN WINNERS

★ **For salads:** ROQUEFORT or STILTON (both about \$18/pound)

★ **For dips and dressings:** DANISH BLUE (\$4.99/pound) or STELLA (\$5.69/pound)

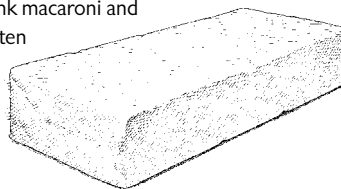
## CHEDDAR

**What It Is:** Depending on how it is aged, this cow's milk cheese ranges from “mild” to tangy “extra-sharp.” This cheese is naturally yellow, but some are colored orange with annatto paste.

**Tasting Notes:** Tasters rejected a number of brands as bland and rubbery and dismissed a few of the more expensive organic cheddars as overly pungent and sour. The test kitchen favorites were balanced, tangy, and clean when tasted plain, smooth and buttery when melted.

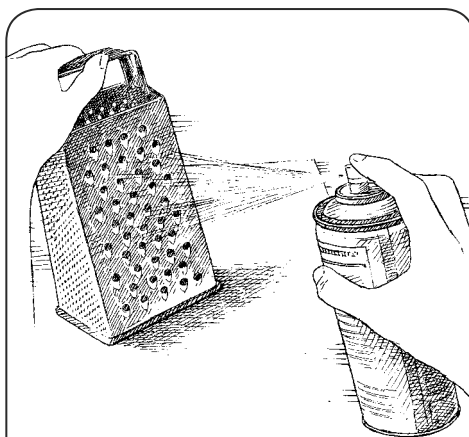
**Cooking Tips:** When melted, cheddar can separate and turn greasy and grainy. This is especially true of extra-sharp varieties, which have less moisture.

When both flavor and a smooth, creamy texture are important (think macaroni and cheese), we often use a mix of sharp cheddar and a smooth melter like Monterey Jack.



### TEST KITCHEN WINNER

★ CABOT SHARP VERMONT CHEDDAR CHEESE (\$4.60/pound)



### TEST KITCHEN TIP: Shredding Neatly

Semisoft cheeses such as cheddar and block mozzarella can become clogged in the holes of a box grater. Coating the large holes on the grater with nonstick cooking spray eliminates this problem.

## Measuring Cheese

To obtain the most accurate measure, cheese should be only lightly packed into a measuring cup.

### Parmesan and other hard grating cheeses

- Fine holes of box grater: 1 ounce = ½ cup
- Microplane: 1 ounce = ¾ cup

### Cheddar, mozzarella, and other softer cheeses

- Large holes of box grater: 1 ounce = ¼ cup

### Blue cheese, feta, and goat cheese

- Crumbled by hand: 1 ounce = ¼ cup

## CHÈVRE (GOAT CHEESE)

**What It Is:** Once strictly a French product, this soft, spreadable unripened goat's milk cheese has become a supermarket staple.

**Tasting Notes:** American goat cheeses are pleasantly tangy and clean tasting, with a creamy, faintly grainy texture. Imported French chèvres have a more assertive, gamy flavor and a chalkier texture.



**Cooking Tips:** Fresh goat cheese is excellent crumbled over salads or incorporated into spreads and dressings. It dissolves into a pasty mess when melted completely but is quite good when just warmed (sprinkled over hot pasta or grilled asparagus, for example) or formed into crusted rounds and baked.

### TEST KITCHEN WINNER

★ VERMONT BUTTER AND CHEESE COMPANY CHÈVRE (\$16/pound)

## FETA

**What It Is:** Traditionally, this crumbly Greek cheese pickled in brine was made from sheep's milk, but most domestic versions come from pasteurized cow's milk.



**Tasting Notes:** Domestic cow's milk feta is uncomplicated: tangy, salty, moist, and creamy. Less important than brand name, we discovered, was packaging. Blocks of feta packed dry in Styrofoam trays and shrink-wrapped were found to be chalky and much less flavorful than cheese sold in tubs or vacuum-sealed along with a small quantity of brine.

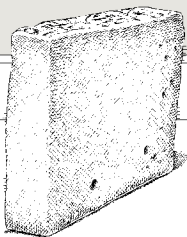
**Cooking Tips:** Feta is not a smooth melter, but when crumbled and combined with a milder cheese, like ricotta, it will contribute some of its tangy flavor to fillings for ravioli, quiche, and other savory pies.

### TEST KITCHEN WINNER

★ ATHENOS (\$5.99/pound) or any brine-packed feta

## FONTINA

**What It Is:** At any supermarket, you'll find squishy wedges of "fontina" covered with red wax and hailing from Denmark or Sweden. Italian and American cheesemakers also produce generic fontinas.



**Tasting Notes:** Real Fontina Val d'Aosta, made from high-quality raw cow's milk, has a barnyard aroma and a grassy, nutty flavor that can be overpowering in a frittata or spinach lasagna. At the opposite end of the spectrum, inexpensive Danish and Swedish fontinas, made from partially skimmed milk, are too bland for most recipes. For cooking, we prefer an American-made fontina or the generic Italian variety (look for a waxy, brownish rind), both of which are very creamy with a mildly tangy, nutty flavor.

### TEST KITCHEN WINNERS

- ★ **For eating raw:** FONTINA D'AOSTA (about \$16/pound)
- ★ **For cooking:** BEL GIOIOSO FONTINA (\$7.50/pound) or generic Italian fontina (about \$9/pound)

## MONTEREY JACK

**What It Is:** One of only a handful of cheeses to originate in America, Jack cheese starts with pasteurized cow's milk and is ripened for only about a week.



**Tasting Notes:** Jack is a creamy cheese with a pronounced acidic tang that mellows considerably when the cheese is melted. Our winning supermarket cheese narrowly bested two artisanal Jacks from California, which tasters found slightly grainy.

**Cooking Tip:** Because of its mild flavor and good melting properties, Monterey Jack is often combined in recipes with a sharper cheese like cheddar.

### TEST KITCHEN WINNER

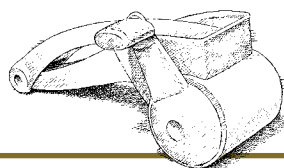
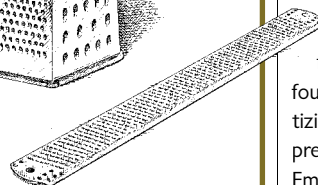
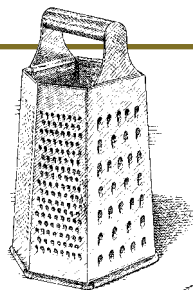
- ★ CABOT MONTEREY JACK (\$2.39/8-ounce block)

### TESTING EQUIPMENT: Cheese Graters

**BOX GRATER:** Our first choice for quickly shredding or grating cheese is a box grater. It sits securely on the countertop and offers a variety of options: large holes for shredding soft cheeses like cheddar, smaller holes for grating harder cheeses like Parmesan, and a raised abrasive surface for grating ginger or zesting citrus. Of eight models tested, our favorite was the CUISIPRO 6-Sided Stainless Steel Grater (\$24.95).

**RASP GRATER:** A MICROPLANE (\$12.95) is an excellent supplement to a box grater. Besides breaking down hard cheese into feathery shreds, it handles shallots, garlic, ginger, nutmeg, horseradish, citrus zest, and chocolate.

**ROTARY GRATER:** Too slow and awkward for kitchen use, the rotary grater is a nice (and optional) purchase for the table, in part because it won't rake your knuckles. Of eight models tested, our favorite was the PEDRINI (\$14.95).

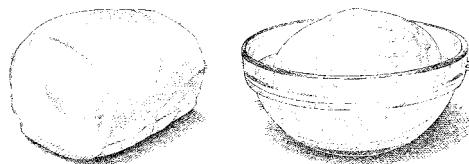


### TEST KITCHEN TIP: Slicing Made Easy

Fresh mozzarella should be sliced evenly for salads or pizza, but the very soft texture of this cheese makes it tricky. Instead of a knife, use an egg slicer to cut through a ball of fresh mozzarella cleanly.



## MOZZARELLA



**What It Is:** Sold in firm, white blocks or already shredded in plastic bags, the stuff in the supermarket dairy case is officially "low-moisture" mozzarella, or, as the experts call it, "pizza cheese." It is a far cry from fresh Italian *mozzarella di bufala*, which is made from water buffalo milk, hand pulled, and extremely perishable. American cheesemakers also produce fresh mozzarella, almost always from cow's milk.

**Tasting Notes:** Tasters expected to dislike the preshredded pizza cheeses, which are coated with cellulose powder to prevent clumping, but these anti-caking agents actually aid smooth melting.

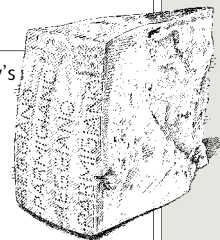
**Cooking Tips:** In its raw state, American mozzarella is dense and rubbery, so fresh mozzarella is the only sensible choice for eating plain. Some cookbooks say the high moisture content of fresh mozzarella will ruin a crisp pizza crust, but our tasters disagreed. Use it sparingly on a thin-crust pizza and add it near the end of cooking so it doesn't dry out.

### TEST KITCHEN WINNERS

- ★ **Best block cheese:** DRAGONE WHOLE MILK MOZZARELLA (\$3.79/pound)
- ★ **Best shredded cheese:** KRAFT SHREDDED PART-SKIM MOZZARELLA (\$2.50/8-ounce bag)
- ★ **Best fresh cheese:** Locally made fresh mozzarella (about \$8/pound)

## PARMESAN

**What It Is:** A *grana*, or hard, grainy cow's cheese. The original and undisputed best in class is Parmigiano-Reggiano, made from unpasteurized milk in a specific region of Italy and aged for about two years. It is widely available in supermarkets, as are many imitators produced domestically and elsewhere around the world.



**Tasting Notes:** Freshly cut Parmigiano-Reggiano had a smooth texture and light crystalline crunch that was somewhat lacking in the precut, plastic-wrapped wedge of Parmigiano-Reggiano purchased at a supermarket. Both, however, had the winning flavor profile that this cheese is known for: spicy, nutty, and creamy. Tasters found domestic Parmesans, aged for only about 10 months, to be much more dense and salty, with a less complex flavor. The mass-produced powders tasted metallic and fishy—in short, entirely inedible. The grated "Parmigiano" sold in bags was dry and flavorless.

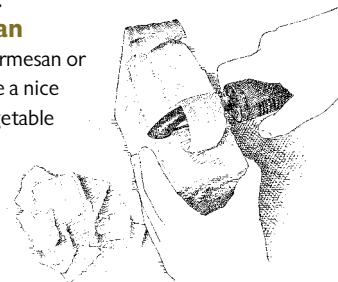
**Cooking Tip:** Once all of the cheese has been grated, the burnished, golden rind can be frozen and then used to flavor soups or stews.

### TEST KITCHEN WINNERS

- ★ **Best choice:** PARMIGIANO-REGGIANO (about \$14/pound)
- ★ **Budget choice:** DIGIORNO PARMESAN (\$7.99/pound)

### TEST KITCHEN TIP: Shaving Parmesan

Paper-thin curls of Parmesan or other hard cheese are a nice garnish for salads, vegetable side dishes, and pastas. Just run a peeler over a block of cheese. Use a light touch for thin shavings.



## SWISS

**What It Is:** Supermarket cheeses labeled "Swiss," usually found sliced in packages or in blocks at the deli counter, are domestic imitations of Swiss Emmentaler, the pressed cow's milk cheese famous the world over for its large holes, or "eyes."

**Tasting Notes:** Tasters loved the complex, nutty flavor of real Emmentaler for a cheese plate but found that when melted it took on a much less appetizing, gamy flavor. For a toasted cheese sandwich, we prefer Jarlsberg, a widely available Norwegian brand of Emmenthal-style cheese with a mild, creamy flavor.

### TEST KITCHEN WINNERS

- ★ **For eating raw:** EMMENTHALER (\$10.49/pound)
- ★ **For melting:** JARLSBERG (\$7.99/pound)

