

Rules of Engagement

At the cheese counter and beyond, providing a welcoming environment in which to engage and educate customers leads to sales success.

By Priscilla Martel

Pastoral's pairing of the week — a cheese, a bottle of wine or beer and a condiment — gives the staff something to share with customers, says Cristi Menard, pictured.

It starts with the basics," says Cristi Menard of Pastoral Artisan Cheese, Bread and Wine in Chicago, where open cheese cases were chosen to ensure customer engagement.

Menard, the company's senior cheese buyer, stresses the importance of making the cheese-buying experience "interactive and approachable." With an open case and full wheels of cheese on display, customers don't have to guess what a cheese might look like, she says. At Pastoral's three retail stores, cheeses are cut to order, which Menard notes "engages" the customer and allows cheesemongers to monitor product quality. "We are constantly opening and looking at cheese," she says.

Inside the case, cheese tags and signage are important for Pastoral's marketing, according to Menard. "On every product that we offer, we suggest some sort of pairing, such as jams and cheese, or wine and cheese," she says.

Meanwhile, A Southern Season has a large, L-shaped open cheese case. A service case on top of the unit allows cut-to-order cheese to be displayed and sampled, explains Matthew Hart, head cheesemonger at the Chapel Hill, N.C.-based purveyor.

Cheese also finds a home in the store's wine department. Hart finds that such "satellite displays" are effective, and he's looking at the coffee and candy departments for cross-merchandising opportunities.

At Oliver's Markets

in Northern California, Colette Hatch, consultant and coordinator of the cheese department, recommends such "vision stations" in select areas of the store to cross-merchandise cheese as long as the cheese displayed is composed of 85 percent dry matter. For the Super Bowl, Hatch placed a 2-year-old Cabot Clothbound Cheddar in the beer department to be paired with Red Hawk beer. At Oliver's three specialty grocery stores, the number of cut pieces put on display is limited, with Cheez-Savor Film from Lenexa, Kan.-based Robbie Flexibles used to wrap them.

A Southern Season's Hart has had success with true pressed cheddar, Parmesan and cheeses that have been aged at room temperature for his satellite displays. The staff makes sure to switch out the pieces on display throughout the day to maintain their freshness.

No matter where they're located, the display needs to engage the customer. "Always make sure your display tells a story, because a cheese alone does not do that," explains Hatch. At Oliver's, where *Culture Magazine* and *Cheese Connoisseur* are sold, as well as the latest books on cheese, a staff writer helps craft the cheese tags with "beautiful descriptions" of the cheese in a voice that is "as authentic as possible," says Hatch. The tags "create an image in the mind of the customer," she says, and help them select the right cheese.

Stocking Decisions

When he arrived at A Southern Season last year, Hart reorganized the cheese selections based on what sold well and the cost per item. This allows him better bulk purchasing. For the cheese story to be successful, the selection of cheese has to sell through.

Hatch relies on inventory software to track sales and strategize when to make investments in cheeses with long shelf lives, such as 70-pound wheels of Gruyère or Parmigiano Reggiano, of which she never buys fewer than 20 at a time.

Pastoral stocks a 50/50 mix of imported and domestic artisan cheese. Most of the domestic cheeses are sourced from Illinois, Wisconsin and areas close to the store, such as Holland Family



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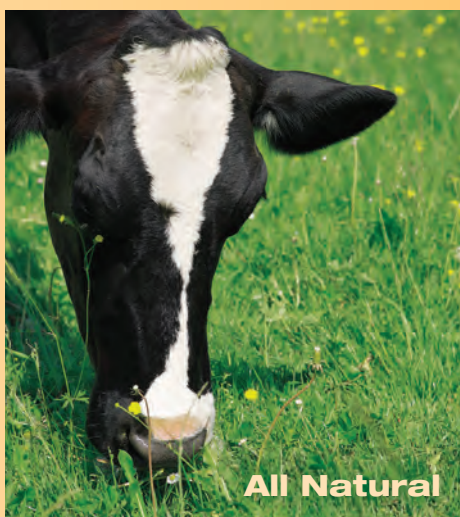
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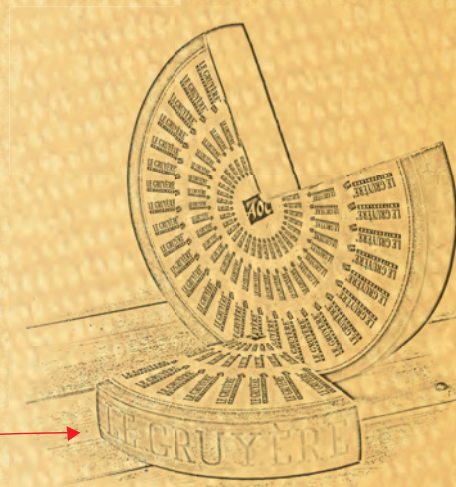


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Case & Counter

At Pastoral, cheese tags and signage not only identify the cheese but also suggest pairings.

Cheese and Pleasant Ridge Reserve. “Within our domestic selection, we pay homage to where we are,” says Menard. It is important to know the flow of inventory, she adds. Menard warns of overstocking esoteric cheese when sometimes all the customers want is “a really good hunk of cheddar.”

Minimizing Shrink

Having a few ways to use excess cheese or seasonal specials ensures a cheese counter's success. Pastoral's French Market location, which attracts a commuter crowd, does well with a small grab-and-go refrigerator stocked with small portions of cheese, occasional miscuts, mini baguettes and cans of beer, says Menard.

At its Cotati location, Oliver's offers a “small plate” of three to five cheeses that works well for the area's budget-conscious university students.

Goose the Market in Indianapolis uses a dynamic sandwich program as a “creative outlet” for the cheese it stocks, says Christopher Eley, who co-owns the upscale butcher shop with his wife Mollie. Not only do the sandwiches sell cheese and the store's charcuterie, but also they customers see the cheese in action. Around five unique sandwiches, three of which change daily, are available. For example, there's the Hathaway, made with pork tongue pastrami, fresh chèvre, pickled beets, arugula, and the Zingraf, made with jerk chicken, feta cheese, Swiss chard and guava jelly. Naming the sandwiches for a customer or local



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Case & Counter

figure makes them memorable and adds to the laid-back aura of the market, explains Eley.

Match Makers

Regardless of the type or placement of a cheese display, sampling is an essential tool for educating the customer. For Goose the Market, sampling creates a “low-pressure” sales atmosphere, in line with the unpretentious attitude Eley wants for his 2,000-square-foot specialty butcher shop, grocery and wine bar. “I want people to taste things,” he says. “We know if they taste it, they will want it.” When cutting a customer’s order, Eley and staff will offer a sample. Or they’ll surprise other customers at the counter with a sample of house-made salami. It’s low-key suggestive selling, he says. “The customers [are acting] like best friends hanging out talking about salami” when they receive the unexpected sample.

Pastoral’s Menard says that “the seasonality message” of cheese can be conveyed with sampling. Staff at Pastoral may use sampling to explain how the same variety of cheese tastes different in October and April, she says. What works especially well at Pastoral, says Menard, is the pairing of the week: a cheese, bottle of wine or beer, and a condiment. The weekly special, which is promoted on the company’s blog and in-store signage, gives the counter staff a story and a specific sample to share with their customers. One recent pairing highlighted the close relationship the stores have to regional cheesemakers. Pleasant Ridge Reserve from Wisconsin’s Uplands Cheese Co. was paired with an Anchor Brewing Co. brown ale. For events like Thanksgiving, which Menard calls “cooking holidays,” staffers might develop a recipe card appropriate to the season, such as blue cheese mashed potatoes.



◀ **Olivers Market's Colette Hatch recommends “vision stations” in select areas of the store to cross-merchandise cheese.**

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Local Favorites

Local pairing recommendations are a regular part of the cheese experience at Oliver's, which carries more than 300 products from Sonoma County, according to Hatch. "You can dress up Taleggio with truffle honey or dress the smear-ripened Italian cheese down with the Jimtown condiments," she says. Hatch has also seen success pairing local cheese with onion jam from Friends in Cheeses Jam Co. in Santa Cruz, Calif. Oliver's publishes a daily flier for each of its stores, as well as a weekly flier. Taking advantage of Oliver's impressive beer inventory, a recent weekly flyer promoted four beers with four cheeses. One such pairing was Bellwether Farm's Pepato with Lagunitas Pils. The grocer's Cotati store, which has the largest selection of wines and craft beers, has a tasting bar that's open every Thursday, Friday and Saturday evening.

In-store pairing events entice customers to try new products. At Goose the Market, free pairings of tea and cheese accomplish just that. The store also offers a knife-sharpening service, beer and cheese, as well as a bacon-of-the-month club and free wine tastings in Enoteca, its wine repository, all of which help Eley achieve his goal to bring people into his shop "two or three times a week."

At Goose the Market, the staff shares samples of specialty cheese and charcuterie with an unpretentious attitude.

Engaged Staff Make the Sale

Tastings, fliers and passive sampling all work to an extent, but what really drives sales is an educated cheesemonger, explains Hatch. And if well-trained staffers are the front line for good case management and sales, they're also the source for recipe ideas.

Pastoral's blog features staff recipes written in the

lively voice of each employee. Among the more popular recent blog posts is one describing the repurposing of cheese left over from a cheese tray. Called the Everlasting Burger, the recipe calls for topping a beef burger with Bucheron and Serrano ham bacon. Its chef customers supply Pastoral with a steady flow of recipe ideas, which are shared with customers via the blog. A post on quark defined the cheese and included recipe ideas based on ways that Chicago area chefs are featuring the cheese on their menus, as well as a zippy video of a chef at Found Restaurant making a Winter Vegetable and Quark Flatbread.

Marketing the Seasons

Not only do company blogs, Twitter and Facebook pages herald new products and in-store events, but social media also help bring customers into stores.

At press time, A Southern Season was preparing a spring promotion centered on the plentiful goat dairies in the Tar Heel State. The promotion will be featured on the store blog as well as the company's Facebook page.

Fondue for Two, available in February at A Southern Season, used a seasonal holiday to bring in customers while cross-merchandising products in its store. Four kits combined a recipe card with all of the cheese and spirits needed to make fondue. In addition to the Classic Kit was the Cheap Date, a beer-based fondue kit with relatively inexpensive cheese, spices and Welch ale. Another combined goat and sheep cheeses with Tawny Port, for those allergic to cow's milk. The kits were promoted on A Southern Season's Facebook page. In-store, the kits were displayed with a ceramic fondue pot also available for purchase in the store.

Pastoral's blog features recipes tied to popular holidays and trends such as Meatless Monday. A recipe for a vegetable oven bake liberally dusted with Sartori SarVecchio Parmesan appeared on the blog as a vegetarian dinner, giving its customers another reason to come into the store to purchase this special cheese.

Pastoral's blog is used to keep things fresh, with posts about when the first batches of goat cheese from Prairie Goat Farm arrive or about buffalo mozzarella at the start of tomato season. The posts are a "shout out" to customers to come in and try what's new, says Menard. New releases and special allocations of cheeses, such as a large-format Pleasant Ridge Reserve, are motivators to the cheesemongers as well. "We are really fortunate to be in a segment of the food industry where there is a lot of excitement around it," notes Menard. Pastoral's staff and customers are also interested in learning, which makes meeting the challenges of selling a delicious perishable product all the more rewarding. **TGR**

