

From Pyramids To Logs, Odd-Shaped Cheese Gaining Popularity Among Makers, Retailers

Non-Traditional Shapes Can Present Ripening, Other Challenges

Madison—More artisan cheese makers are experimenting with shapes other than standard-issue retail cuts, inviting new challenges and opportunities with each non-traditional mold.

In evaluating an unusually-shaped cheese for flavor and functionality, one may ask if the shape was chosen purely for aesthetics, or does it enhance the cheese, according to Neville McNaughton, founder of CheezSorce consulting company.

“Is it the result of a convenient process such as Gaperon, a Hershey Kiss-shaped cheese,” he said. “Is it the result of a draining process?”

“We have never had a comment that referred to the cheese as ‘gimmicky’. If we did, our response would be that the shape is necessary in order to age the cheese properly.”

—Maxx Sherman, Marin French Cheese

“A cheese that has a hole in it – in the case of a smear-ripened cheese – might help penetration of the smear, but is very difficult to form and press,” McNaughton said.

A cheese maker needs to consider the impact each cheese is making but in the end, it’s “the organoleptic experience that carries the weight,” he said. “Cheese is food; it needs to be gastronomy.”

That said, distinctive shapes rarely improve the quality of a cheese, according to McNaughton.

“The traditional shapes generally work best,” McNaughton said.

“One of the biggest issues is often the Camembert and Brie styles, the bigger they get, the more likely you get too much aging at the surface and not enough in the middle, so that’s a real problem,” McNaughton said.

Distinctive shapes will, however, help sales of commodity cheese styles like Cheddar or Colby, according to McNaughton.

Most of those consumers are not that discerning, so the shape may add value, he said.

Marin French Cheese Company of Petaluma, CA, makes a Rouge et Noir Schlosskranz, or “Castle Wreath,” that earned Best of Show in the 2005 California State Fair Commercial Cheese Competition.

Rouge et Noir Schlosskranz is made in a round with a cut-out center in order to help it age more efficiently, according to Maxx Sherman, president of Marin French Cheese.

The cut-out center provides additional surface area for oxygen to interact with the mold in the cheese, he said.

“The cheese wrap we use is porous and breathes to enable the oxygen and mold interaction,” Sherman continued.

Schlosskranz is made by inoculating the milk with a Brie culture, then washing the molded curd with water for two weeks. The surface area then develops a secondary fermentation.

“We have never had a comment that referred to the cheese as ‘gimmicky,’” Sherman said. “If we did, our response would be that the shape is necessary in order to age the cheese properly.”

Marin French sells the bulk of its Rouge et Noir Schlosskranz to retailers in Washington and Oregon, who cut and re-wrap it into wedges.

The company also sells Schlosskranz to restaurants and caterers in the San Francisco and Los Angeles areas.

“The one challenge that we have is making sure the cheese does not lose its shape after cutting out the center,” Sherman said.

“Occasionally, the cheese comes up from the aging cellar a little more oval than round,” he continued.

Square Cheese made by Twig Farm of West Cornwall, VT, is made using raw goat’s milk heated to 32 degrees Celsius, inoculated with culture, renneted, set, and stirred for 20 minutes with gentle heat, explained Twig Farm cheese maker Michael Lee.

“If they were referring to our cheese (as gimmicky), I would probably try to explain that a square is a pretty common shape. If it were a cheese shaped like a Ford Mustang, I would probably agree.”

—Michael Lee, Twig Farm

The whey is drained and the knit curd cut into slabs which are placed in cheese cloths – the corners of which are drawn together and tied. The cloths are removed the next day when the cheeses go into the brine.

After salting, the cheese is aged for about 90 days, flipped every two or three days during affinage.

“We never thought a square was that unusual a shape,” Lee said. “There are numerous cheeses with a similar shape – Sola from Piedmont and Mahon spring immediately to mind.”

“It works well for us because we make two batches of cheese on Mondays, our goat Tomme and the Square, and by only using cloths with the squares, we have less form cleaning to do,” Twig Farm’s Lee continued.

Twig Farm sells its Square Cheese to a number of cut-to-order cheese shops in the Northeast and through its primary distributor, Provisions International Ltd. It also sells through the Cellars at Jasper Hill in Greensboro, the Middlebury Farmers’ Market and the farm’s local grocery cooperative.

At about three pounds, Twig Farm Square Cheese is most often cut and wrapped to order by the retailer.

So far, shape has never been an issue for the company or its customers. “If they were referring to our cheese



Cricket Creek Farm’s Tobasi is made in 8 inch x 8 inch molds to form a square cheese. The ridged rind gives the cheese dimension and additional character.

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Tobasi is the flagship specialty cheese of Cricket Creek Farm, Williamstown, MA. The seasonal, semi-soft raw milk cheese is loosely based on an Italian Taggeggio, a square cheese.

Tobasi is made in traditional eight-inch by eight-inch square Tallegio molds imported from Italy.

“The challenge for us was developing the desired flavor and texture,” said owner Jude Sabot.

“Tobasi rind, which is ridged rather than smooth, gives a lot of dimension and character of the cheese,” she said. “It’s also what makes Tobasi distinctive.”

Typically, Cricket Creek begins selling its Tobasi at about three-plus months to select restaurants, cheese shops, farmers’ markets and on-site, as well as through several distributors.

The farm sells whole cheeses to retailers, who then cut and wrap the cheese. Response has been terrific, Sabot said.

Retailers See More ‘Hybrid’ Shapes;

Question Mainstream Trends

Lately, there are far more people making cheese in different shapes – particularly log-shaped or some type of “cylinder hybrid” of round and square, said Cesar Olivares, fromager at Chicago’s Pastoral Artisan Cheese, Bread & Wine.

“These log-shaped cheeses tend to be relatively easy to work with,” Olivares said. “I have seen a few cheeses that are donut-shaped with a hole in the middle, and many people working with pyramid and metronome shapes.”

“There will always be people working with these types of molds, but I find it important to point out that these shapes will never take off as a mainstream trend because the biggest issues faced with these is the ability for the cheese to ripen properly,” Olivares continued.

Eliminating Waste, Proper Aging At Retail Level ‘Can Be Tricky’

For the most part, customers don’t

seem to be concerned with the shapes of cheeses at our stores, Olivares pointed out.

“We don’t carry too many of these cheeses, as sometimes it can be more of a gimmick. Distinctive shape does not always equate with distinctive, delicious flavor or signify any level of quality.”

—Cesar Olivares,
Pastoral Artisan Cheese,
Bread & Wine

“At times, we have odd-shaped cheeses that were once huge rounds or squares that had to be cut into more manageable pieces and at this point if the cheese is not cut properly, people may become concerned with the rind-to-paste ratio of their purchase,” Olivares said.

However, from a seller’s point of view, non-traditional shapes may affect a retailer’s ability to cut and wrap orders.

Depending on the overall size of the wheel, ensuring that there is no waste involved can be a bit tricky, Olivares said.

If the cheese is a non-traditional shape but is small enough to sell as a single format cheese, then we will always sell it as such, he said.

“What can be tricky about larger, non-traditional cheeses is consistent ripening of the product,” Olivares said.

“We don’t carry too many of these cheeses, as sometimes it can be more of a gimmick. Distinctive shape does not always equate with distinctive, delicious flavor or signify any level of quality,” he said.

“For this, we base all of our selection on taste and consistency,” Olivares continued.

Overall quality and flavor of a cheese, regardless of shape, is of paramount importance, according to retailers and cheese experts.

I don’t see a very good relationship between distinctive shapes and flavor, McNaughton said.

“Flavor and quality of the cheese is very separate from the shape,” he said. “If it’s supposed to be gimmicky, it needs to go with a good cheese,” McNaughton continued. ▮