

Cheesecraft: A Guide to the Ultimate Board

Christopher “bowties” Miller

In my 5 years of experience in cheese board creation, I have come across a number of tips and tricks to laying out a practical and presentable platter. I present here a culmination of that tacit knowledge.

I. The Board

Selecting an appropriate base is essential to the final cheese board – it guides the overall scale and aesthetic. Material-wise, one traditionally uses a wooden tray, perhaps with rounded corners. A 4”x12”x1/8” cedar plank may suffice for 4-6 guests, while a 12”x16”x2” bamboo tray with dedicated cracker moat around the edges is the standard for a 10-20 person get-together¹. In any case, a sleek monochromatic Bauhaus aesthetic should be maintained – and, at worst, a cutting board or square white plate may be used.

II. Cheese and Accompaniments

Three distinct cheeses is a good starting number – something hard, something soft/spreadable, and something in the middle. A delightful selection may be had at any price range and is often dictated by place of purchase. For Target and Star Market, most are in the \$10/lb range while at Brothers Market and dedicated cheese shops, one may enter the \$25/lb range. Luckily, the minimum quantities are substantially smaller than a pound.

The cheapest, most agreeable choice is a ½” block of off-brand² **Cheddar**, **Colby Jack**, or **Swiss**. To taste, one has the options of embedded smoke flavor, bacon, jalapenos, olives, nuts, or port wine which may reduce the agreeable quality.

One generally includes 1-2 slightly less common cheeses including **Gouda** (smoked), **Dubliner**, **Havarti** (with or without dill), **Gruyère**, **Brie**/**Camembert** (in aesthetic wheel form), **Wensleydale**, and **Manchego**/Sheep. Some tastes are acquired such as that for **Chèvre**/Goat or **Blue Cheeses** so alternatives should be offered. The most divisive class is the stinky cheese – sharing the Proustian response-inducing byproducts of *brevibacterium linens*.

¹ An enthusiast would be mindful that wooden boards require hand washing to prevent warping and occasional “seasoning.”

² Some cheese mongers may recommend specific farms or ages as cheddar is large class once dominated by how orange one could make it by adding annatto.

While **Raclette** is the cheapest, something like **Petit Pont l'Eveque** AOC is most tolerable for fridge storage.

A number of imported cheeses fall under PDO/AOC/AOP indicating regulation down a specific family of cows in a specific town where a cheese originated. The most common such cheese is **Parmigiano Reggiano** whose trade consortium dictates strict serving methods. One must align a knife parallel to a side plane then insert from the top about ¼” behind the plane to about ½” depth. At this point, one must rotate the knife about its central axis to extract a shaving.

On the flip side of imported, local (10-50mi) cheeses may be found with Big E or American Cheese Society Awards including **Tobasi** and **Arpeggio**.

There are a number of options for crackers however Ritz break too easily; Club crackers are excessively buttered; Triscuits are too thick; specialty crackers are overpriced; Water Crackers/hard tac are wide/boring; and graham crackers are not socially acceptable – so I use **Wheat Thins**.

Pickles and **olives** are often provided with pre-inserted **toothpicks** as well as **nuts** and **raisins**. Small quantities of Dijon **mustard** and suspicious jellied substances may also go over well as well as a medium tub of **hummus**. This is not a charcuterie guide, though you may wish have some **salami** or **pepperoni**, passing on the overpriced prosciutto.

III. Preparation

About an hour before serving (or refrigerating) comes the crucial step of composition. Using any sort of knife, begin by removing rinds as you see fit – definitely if made of wax or using a stinky cheese, but keep on a soft cheese like Brie. Proceed to cut into each cheese through the largest face – parallel to and about ¼” in from one side. Continue to slice about half of your block then cut the remaining strips into equally sized ≤ 1” rectangles for cracker compatibility. Stack like fallen dominoes possibly rotated or in a curved shape on your board. Repeat for each cheese and meat as desired. For soft spreadable cheeses cut off a <45° wedge and leave a small knife. Now place crackers near outer edges using same domino technique. Add small quantities of accompaniments to fill in gaps. Note that, in aiming for balance, you will only fit around half of each package of cheese on the board.

In theory, cheese is best consumed after an hour out of the fridge. Your guests may leave behind some cheese which, when finally inspected, has a sad change of temperature and consistency. If waste-averse, you may consume it to contrast the delicious pound of unused cheese you have waiting for you.