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## More choosy eaters choose cheese

By Bill Daley  
Chicago Tribune

People turn to ages-old basics when life gets complicated. That's why cheese, particularly American-made cheese, is surging in popularity during these hard economic times, said Clark Wolf, the New York City-based author of *American Cheese*.

Cheesemakers are popping up around the country. New cheese books are being published seemingly every week. The first consumer cheese magazine, a quarterly called *Culture*, debuted a year ago. And you can increasingly find and buy all sorts of cheese at farmers markets, in ambitious cheese stores, and even at your local supermarket.

"We re-entered the macaroni-and-cheese economy in a good way," Wolf said. "There's nothing kitschy about this stuff. It's heartfelt and real. They're using ancient wisdom and new ways, and that's just good."

Consumer demand is fueling the boom in the American artisan cheese production, said Jeanne Carpenter, founder of the Madison-based Wisconsin Cheese Originals, which spreads the word about new cheeses and their makers.

"Many cheesemakers are developing innovative American originals, which are rivaling the great European cheeses in flavor, quality and popularity," Carpenter said.

Yet this burgeoning supply of cheese varieties can prove daunting to the average consumer.

Here are some ways to grapple with the choices.

"View it as an adventure," Carpenter said. "Visit a cut-to-order cheese shop so you can taste any cheese before you buy it. If you're not sure where to begin, tell the cheesemonger some of your favorite foods. This will give him or her a direction for your palate, and you can start with flavor profiles you know you'll like."

Be willing to go outside your comfort zone if your cheesemonger recommends something different, she added. "You may discover a new favorite."

While artisan, locally made cheeses are the rage, Elaine Khosrova, editor of *Culture* magazine, said don't give a cold shoulder to cheese made by big companies. "Just because they're big doesn't mean they aren't high quality," she said.

Conversely, a small operation doesn't guarantee the cheese will be delicious.

When you do bring the cheese home, take steps to make it accessible to guests.

Allison Hooper, co-founder of Vermont Butter & Cheese Creamery in Websterville, Vt., said some cheese boards can look scary with big hunks of cheese.

"Get a cheese started," said Hooper. "It's OK to cut up some of the cheese so it's a little more inviting."

And don't put out too much cheese.

"Even for a party of 15 people, two signature cheeses are plenty," Khosrova said. "Go for something special."