

By Ronda Payne

# Say Cheese!

Grocery retailers have heard it time and again since store shelves stood bare in the beginning stages of COVID: consumers are far more aware of Canadian food security than ever before. There's an increased demand for locally produced goods and while that doesn't always mean the 100-mile diet, it does mean a desire to support domestic food production.

Cheese is very popular in Canada. Domestic per capita consumption sat in 21st place at 31.6 pounds (14.3 kg) when compared to other countries. And while Canadian imports of what some argue to be a cow's greatest gift continue to grow – \$503.71 million in 2021 compared to \$320.07 million in 2016 – the production and consumption of domestic cheeses has also kept pace. There were 14.4 kilograms of ooey, gooey goodness available to every Canadian with a total of 540 metric tonnes produced domestically in 2021.

Highest consumption continues to be in firm cheeses like cheddars, goudas and Emmenthal with the semi-softs: mozzarella, provolone and edam coming in second. Softs, hard, blues and other cheeses collectively make up about 23.75 of the production in Canada.

## Merchandising is Key

Dairy outperforms every other department with its profit-to-space ratio (which is almost double that of produce). Dairy products are included in more grocery trips than items from nearly every other aisle, and milk, cheese and yogurt are key meal-builders.

Larger retailers have typically merchandised cheese in two separate locations: the dairy aisle, where more mainstream cheeses are featured including cheese slices and grated cheeses along with other domestic varieties; and the specialty cheese section often located adjacent to or within the deli department.

This merchandising set is less typical in specialty stores where there is no departmental differentiation and there is a greater focus on staff and customer interaction. But for mainstream grocers it begs the question about the need for different merchandising strategies for each location, particularly for specialty cheeses that can intimidate the customer.

Should they organize their specialty cheese by country of origin, or by variety, or by brand, for example. These are the questions many retailers are asking themselves. Most consider it more important for the customer to have them grouped by variety.

Some retailers organize their specialty cheese cases by family of cheese. A good example is provided by one New York-based retailer who use an Artisanal CheeseClock system, offering 16 artisan cheeses in four different coloured boxes. The box that houses four 8-ounce wedges of mild cheese is beige. A yellow box contains four 8-ounce wedges of medium cheese. An orange box designates bold cheeses, and a red box designates strong cheeses.

***Having Canadian-produced cheese in the case increases domestic awareness while rightly positioning the products among the world's best.***



Canadian Cheese Ambassador with Dairy Farmers of Canada, David Beaudoin says it's the experience of cheese that is continuing to support its growth.

The system serves two purposes. First, the colour-coding scheme can be used for cross-merchandising wine or beer with neck tags, to help shoppers make the most appropriate pairing. Second, the "Clock" illustrated in point-of-sale materials encourages shoppers to arrange cheeses from mildest to strongest on a plate, and always to try the mildest cheeses first during a tasting, so that their taste buds don't become overwhelmed.

## Canadian Specialty Cheese Shine

Canadian Cheese Ambassador with Dairy Farmers of Canada, David Beaudoin, says it's the experience of cheese that is continuing to support its growth.

"People want to get together and break bread, just like the good old days," he says. "When I teach about cheese boards and charcuterie with cheese boards, it's all about accompaniment that creates experiences."

The experience may include a truffle flavoured cheese, which Beaudoin says is trending currently. He's also seeing cheese and wine or cheese and beer pairings holding steady but pairing with non-alcoholic beverages is picking up steam.

Canadian cheeses dominate his fridge. The first mentioned is a semi-soft called Le Douanier from Fritz Kaiser in Quebec.

"It's a beautiful looking cheese as well," he says of the washed rind and edible vegetable ash layer through the wheel.

From BC, he likes Kootenay Alpine Cheese's nostrala which he describes as being like an Italian style gouda that tends more towards a gruyere as it ages.

"It marries so well with a little lighter wine," he says. "It's made from beautiful,

organic milk from Creston.

Cow's Creamery's in PEI makes Avonlea cloth-bound cheddar traditionally to deliver an earthy, rich flavour.

"We make the best cheddar in the world," he says. "This is made traditional with the cloth. It gives that earthiness with the cotton and the lard all around. It's sweet and it's delicious. It's best with a big red."

From Maple Ridge, BC the brie-style from Golden Ears Cheesecrafters features strongly in his fridge.

"It's very high fat, delicious milk," he says. "Their brie has a similar muskiness to the rind. It's an amazing pairing with wine."

Beaudoin notes that some retailers may be unable to bring in as much Canadian cheese as they would like to due to partnerships and contracts that put an emphasis on imported products. He would like to see more effort go into support and education around Canadian cheeses.

Canadian milk is known for its high quality, so it's only natural that its cheeses take some of the spotlight as well. Learning about cheese and sharing that education with consumers will go a long way to boosting opportunities within the section and moving shoppers to increased sales per basket. ●

## Store Spotlight

# THE CHEESE STANDS ALONE

For some retailers, cheese is just one item in the full scheme of offerings, but at Benton Brothers Fine Cheese, located in BC's Granville Island Market, it's the pièce de résistance. Co-owner Andrew Benton says it's all cheese all the time, but he's quick to challenge the perceptions that cheese is something only certain people truly understand.

"I think it's all about the customer service and the demystification of it," he says. "It's just a simple product that is really well made. It's good for everyday."

The shop opened in 2013 and showcases about 150 different types of cheeses in just 300 square feet. Merchandising is done by type within the displays.

"We go by styles," he explains. "All the blues together, all the alpiners together, all the goat cheeses together."

Benton Brothers uses a chalkboard sign to draw customer attention to new cheeses or something special. However, with new types of cheeses arriving every two weeks, it's impossible to point to everything worth exploring. Part of the success of the brothers' two shops is that they have established a following of loyal cheese lovers who have shared their tastes and are willing to try the recommendations offered.

Many of those recommendations are Canadian produced cheese. About 40 per cent of the offering in the case is domestic cheese. He says it delivers a bigger bang for the buck with delicious flavour.

"Our main focus is the small production, artisanal stuff," he says. "We try to focus on stuff you can't get anywhere else."

While this strategy may not work for a traditional retailer, there is advice to be shared that fits. "Now that we're getting into the summer, some of the softer stuff is good for the salads," he notes. "Buffalo mozzarella, goat cheese, alpine cheeses and stuff like that."

Observing seasonal trends is important, but not at the expense of the typical highly-requested offerings like cheddar and brie-styles.

Educating customers about cheese and providing good service is the key to demystifying this customer favourite and creating an enjoyable experience for everyone.



Andrew and Jonah Benton of Benton Brothers Fine cheese, located in BC's Granville Island Market.