

Taste

All-rounder
at any time

CHEESE is much more versatile than we sometimes give it credit for. It lends itself to being incorporated into delicious sweet and savoury dishes as well as starring by itself.

Of course, there's cheese and *cheese* — some beautifully crafted products that stand out from the crowd. If you plan to serve a cheese platter, look for some of Tasmania's beauties. I could fill the page with possibilities but here are just a couple:

Jon Healey, of the Pyengana Cheese Company, produces a cloth-bound cheddar which, when mature, is a fine cheese. It's available from several good food stores; Wursthau Kitchen stocks it, cut from a large round when it's sufficiently aged. The next cutting will be on May 7.

Heidi Gruyere, deservedly, also has a great reputation and can be eaten as it is or, as a wonderful melting cheese, it makes a fine fondue for chilly days.

Cheese is high in the popularity stakes but has a hard time with those watching the fat content of their diet. In most instances it contains no more fat than chocolate but has the added advantage of being high in calcium and a good source of vitamins and protein. Try some of the fat-reduced cheeses or fetta if you need to restrict fat in the diet.

Another point in its favour is that it could help avoid the dentist's drill. Casein and whey protein have been shown to reduce the loss of minerals from tooth enamel and chewing cheese stimulates saliva flow, which neutralises the harmful acids that decay and erode teeth. Studies show it can even protect teeth when sugary foods have been eaten.

The calcium content of cheese can also play an important role in protecting against osteoporosis (brittle bones). Eating cheese helps because not only is it high in calcium — the major mineral for strengthening bones — but it also supplies Vitamin D, which is essential for the calcium to be absorbed.

Cheese can be incorporated into a meal or snacks in many ways — stirred through pasta dishes, as a filling in jacket potatoes, cream cheese in pastries and as a spread, pizza topping, in salads, soups and vegetable dishes, to mention a few.

Old favourites, such as macaroni cheese, toasted cheese sandwiches, Welsh rarebit and cauliflower cheese, have remained popular because they're easy to prepare and taste good.

Another long-time favourite is cheese-



Eating in

Judith Sweet

topped onion soup. I picked up this recipe on a trip to England. (There are a few suggestions to prevent tears when peeling and slicing the onions: I find if I leave the root end intact while slicing, it helps; others suggest putting on glasses, peeling under running cold water or chilling the onions before handling them.)

The soup below is thick, hearty and a meal in itself. If you want to serve it as a starter to a meal, add more stock to thin the consistency. Remember to check the seasonings. For best results you will need a tureen or individual bowls that can withstand the heat of a grill. This amount serves four generously but the recipe can be successfully doubled. Stock cubes can be used but be aware of the salt content in some stock cubes and powder.

Gratineed onion soup

6 large brown onions, about 1.35kg

50g butter

1 rounded tbsp plain flour

1 level tsp mustard powder

1 litre vegetable stock, boiling

1 tsp fresh thyme leaves

225g mature cheddar or Gruyere, coarsely grated

4 thick slices of French bread

Freshly ground pepper and salt to taste

Peel the onions and slice thinly into rings.

Melt the butter in a large pan over a moderate heat and add the onions, stirring them to be coated in the butter. Reduce the heat to low, cover and leave to sweat very gently for about one hour. Stir from time to time.

When the onions are meltingly soft, remove the lid, turn the heat up and allow any excess moisture to evaporate.

Remove the pan from the heat and stir in the flour and mustard powder. Return to heat and cook for about five minutes until the mixture begins to brown. (Be careful not to let the onions catch and burn.)

Add the hot stock and thyme leaves



SAY CHEESE: Jon Healey inspects rounds of cheddar at his Pyengana factory

and bring to the boil, stirring until thickened slightly. Reduce the heat to low, cover with the lid and simmer for 30 minutes. Check and adjust seasonings.

Preheat the grill and place the grill tray on the lowest shelf.

Remove the soup from the heat and strain through a colander into a large bowl.

Put a good spoonful of the onions into each bowl and divide half the cheese between the bowls.

Place one slice of bread in each bowl and top with the remaining onions, then the remaining cheese.

Pour the stock over the bread. Put the bowls on a baking tray and put them under the preheated grill until the cheese is golden and bubbling. Serve immediately.

NOTE: Be very careful not to burn the cheese, as it will be bitter and horrid.

Honey poached pears with creamy blue cheese

This combination of flavours works well. A mild goat's cheese would also be good in this.

Before measuring the honey it helps to run the spoon under hot water. Figs, halved and added to the pears as they cool, make a lovely addition to this dish. Serves 6.

3 tbsp runny honey (not leatherwood)

6 small pears, with stalks (not too ripe)

110g soft blue cheese

250ml white wine (chardonnay is ideal)

250ml water

Zest and juice of 1 large, washed lemon

1 vanilla pod, split

140ml thick cream

Put the honey, wine, zest, juice and vanilla pod into a wide pan and simmer over a gentle heat.

Peel, halve and core the pears, leaving the stalks intact. As you peel the pears put them into the simmering liquid to prevent discolouration.

Cover the pan and poach until tender — the time will depend on the size, ripeness and variety of pear. Check after 15 minutes.

When cooked, remove the pears to a bowl with a slotted spoon.

Turn up the heat and reduce the poaching liquid by a third. Pour over the pears and allow to cool. Mix together the blue cheese and cream and serve in a side dish. You may wish to serve some extra honey on the side.

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