

# Fear of Fat

You can lose the butterfat without sacrificing flavor

BY SAM GUGINO

Though carb phobia may have trumped fear of fat, there are still many Americans who will look at a creamy wedge of Camembert and blanch at the thought of eating it because they think it has too much fat. Though I belong to the "eat less, eat better" school of cheese (a school that keeps threatening to expel me) there are some low-fat cheeses that are worth trying.

The fat content of cheese is, more or less, on a continuum with many gradations, from low-fat to triple-cream. (Nonfat cheese isn't really worth discussing.)

Fat in the milk used to make cheese varies by animal. Goat's milk has the least fat, followed closely by cow's milk. Milk from sheep or water buffalo has roughly twice the fat of milk from cows or goats. However, it takes 10 pounds of cow's milk to make a pound of cheese versus 4.5 pounds of sheep's milk. (Milk fat, often called butterfat, can also vary by breed: Milk from Jersey cows has more butterfat than milk from Holsteins, for example.)

Next, there is the style of cheese. Most cheeses are more than half water. Since butterfat is measured as a percentage of the dry matter ("DM" on labels of cheese made in the United States; "MG," for *matière gras*, on French cheeses), it stands to reason that cheeses with more moisture have lower fat. So, softer cheeses like Camembert are actually lower in fat than semisoft cheeses (with less moisture), such as Gruyère, or harder, more aged cheeses (with even less moisture), such as a cloth-bound cheddar. Most cheese is between 40 percent and 45 percent butterfat.

That is, until you get to double- and triple-cream cheeses. In both cases, cream is added to the milk before it is processed for cheese. Then the cheese is made like most other cheeses, though triple-creams are more lightly processed than most, which is why they are so delicate. Double-cream cheeses are between 60 percent and 74 percent butterfat. Triple-cream cheeses are 75 percent or more butterfat.

However, all of these figures are for whole milk. Not all cheese is made from whole milk. Parmigiano-Reggiano, for example, is made from partially skimmed cow's milk. Unfortunately, that is offset by 18 to 30 months of aging that concentrates fat (and flavor).

One more thing about terminology, specifically the difference between low-fat and reduced fat: As with other foods, "low-fat" cheese means a greater fat reduction than "reduced fat," according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. For example, low-fat cheddar must have 80 percent of the fat removed. Reduced-fat cheddar needs only a quarter of the fat removed.

To find out how lower-fat cheeses taste, I compared six versions with their full-fat (or mostly full-fat) counterparts. The clear favorite was Vermeer aged Gouda, which was better than a lot of full-fat cheeses I've eaten, including the traditional Gouda, with which most people are familiar. The Vermeer had a rich, deep flavor and an unctuous mouthfeel like many good aged Goudas. And yet it had just 5 grams of fat per



Flavorful low-fat cheeses include (from top) Beemster 2%, Gouda Light and Jarlsberg Lite.

## GRAMS OF FAT PER OUNCE:

Full-fat aged Gouda	8g
Low-fat Vermeer Gouda	5g
Full-fat Beemster	11g
Low-fat Beemster	6g
Full-fat Jarlsberg	8g
Low-fat Jarlsberg	3.5g

ounce, compared with the full-fat version at 8 grams per ounce. A Beemster Light Gouda (called Beemster 2% Milk), which had similar characteristics to the Vermeer but with less intensity, had 6 grams of fat per ounce. And Gouda Light was less complex, but a fine alternative to full-fat.

The other low-fat cheeses I tried didn't fare as well, though some weren't half bad. Jarlsberg Lite, the low-fat version of the popular Norwegian Swiss-style of cheese, has less than half the fat of regular Jarlsberg. The Lite had just a hint of the nutty quality of the regular, which is fairly mild to begin with. And though the texture was somewhat rubbery, the Lite melted as well as the regular. In general, there were similar comparisons between Cabot New York cheddar and Cabot cheddar with half the fat, and a Chimay Grand Classique Trappist cheese from Belgium and a light version that also had half the fat.

There was only one exception to lower fat melting as well as full fat: mozzarella. Lower-fat (usually referred to as "part-skim") mozzarella melted better than whole-milk mozzarella from Galbani, an Italian brand made in the United States. The Galbani was delicious by itself or with tomatoes and a drizzle of olive oil. But on a pizza, it was a watery mess. The part-skim mozzarella melted like a charm, perfectly even and nicely gooey.

Except for mozzarella, my suggestion would be to hedge your bets when melting by using half regular and half lower-fat cheese. As for the Vermeer, eat it any way you want.

Contributing editor Sam Gugino has written for Wine Spectator since 1994.