



## Beyond Manchego: 5 of Spain's best cheeses

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Spain is home to over 150 varieties of cheese, many of which are relatively unknown in the UK but just as delicious as anything you'd find in France or Italy. Take a look at just a few Spanish cheeses you should be keeping an eye out for.



Great British Chefs is a team of passionate food lovers dedicated to bringing you the latest food stories, news and reviews.



France and Italy might get all the attention when it comes to European cheeses, and most of us can name a good few varieties from each country. But when it comes to **Spain**, we're not as knowledgeable. It's hard to understand why – for those in the know, Spanish cheeses are unbeatable in terms of variety and taste. Manchego – that delicious hard sheep's cheese which goes so well with membrillo (quince paste) and a glass of Rioja – has managed to make a name for itself, but the hundreds of other cheeses from across Spain are yet to enjoy widespread recognition in the UK.

We want to change that. Spanish cheese is just as complex, nuanced, varied and tasty as its French, Italian and British counterparts, and while there's no denying how good Manchego is, there's plenty more to get stuck into. With at least 150 Spanish cheeses out there, twenty-six of which are PDO-protected, there's a whole wealth of flavours and textures to discover.

In short, Spanish cheeses can be divided into four categories. *Fresco* cheese is not aged at all, often eaten within days of being produced, so you can usually only find it in the Spanish region it's made in. *Tierno* (which literally translates as 'tender') are aged for under two months, meaning they're often very creamy and rich. *Semi-curado* are semi-hard, often aged for around five months, and then *curado* are firm, nutty, crunchy cheeses that are aged for five months or more.

You'll find all sorts of amazing Spanish cheeses at cheese counters and delis all over the UK, but if you don't really know where to start, the five PDO-protected varieties below showcase just how delicious, unusual and varied Spain's many cheeses can be.

### Cabrales PDO (Asturias)



A seriously intense blue cheese, PDO-protected Cabrales holds no punches when it comes to flavour. Made using specific, traditional production methods at the foot of the Picos de Europa mountains in northwest Spain, the cheese is usually made from cow's milk, but can also be blended with goat's and sheep's milk, before being aged for up to four months in the region's limestone caves. What makes it an interesting blue cheese is that it's ripened by mould that grows on the outside of the cheese, whereas the majority of other blue cheeses are injected with penicillium using metal rods.

Sharp, salty and pungent, the texture of Cabrales is quite creamy, which makes it a popular cheese for cooking with as well as serving as part of a cheeseboard. Pair it with a super-sweet dessert wine or a big, bold red, alongside membrillo or figs.

### Torta del Casar PDO (Extremadura)



This pretty little cake-shaped cheese made near the Portuguese border also enjoys PDO-protected status, and is one of the more unusual cheeses found in Spain. That's because the curds are coagulated using vegetable rennet, specifically rennet from cardoons – a bitter, thistle-like vegetable that tastes similar to an artichoke. It also has to be made with milk from Merino and Entrefino sheep, two breeds usually known for their wool.

The soft yellow crust gives way to an incredible creamy centre, which can turn almost liquid when served at room temperature. Flavour-wise, it's incredibly rich, with a pleasant saltiness and subtle bitterness throughout. Spread (or spoon!) it onto good bread and enjoy it with a glass of dry red.

### Mahón-Menorca PDO (Menorca)



The Spanish island of Menorca is responsible for this colourful, buttery cow's milk cheese. Brined, drained and then aged in caves, it's rubbed with a mix of butter, oil and pimentón (Spanish paprika), which is what gives the rind its eye-catching colour.

Mahón can be found aged for just a few months (*tierno*), up to five months (*semi-curado*) or for over five months (*curado*). When young, the cheese is soft, pale and buttery with a bright orange rind, but as it ages nuttier, saltier, more complex flavours come to the fore, and the bright orange rind turns a darker brown. Mahón at every age is delicious, but as a rule the younger cheeses are used for cooking, while the older cheeses are enjoyed with fruit and nuts as part of a cheeseboard.

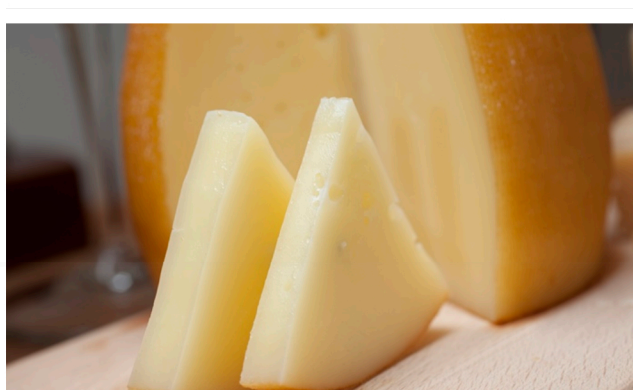
### Tetilla PDO (Galicia)



The unique shape of this cheese is how it got its name – *tetilla* is Galician for 'small breast'! Made from cow's milk and PDO-protected since 1992, it's a cheese with hardly any rind at all, with a dense yet soft texture that has a few little holes within.

As its yellow colour might suggest, this is a very buttery cheese that has quite a clean, mellow flavour. You can find slightly firmer, older versions of Tetilla which fall into *semi-curado* territory, too. It goes very well with white wines from the region and full-bodied sherries.

### Idiazabal PDO (Basque Country)



Northern Spain is where you'll find this hard sheep's cheese which, if you like Manchego, is a must-try. Traditionally made at the beginning of summer, then left to mature in the rafters of the shepherd's huts for a few months, the result is one of the most beautifully flavoured cheeses in the world. This is thanks to the lack of ventilation in the huts – as the fireplaces crackled away, they imbued the cheeses with an incredibly aromatic and smoky flavour. While the production process has moved on from shepherd's huts to something a little more contemporary, it's a PDO-protected cheese which means everything is strictly controlled.

The taste of Idiazabal has been described as smoky like bacon, sweet like caramel and with the characteristic tang of sheep's milk. Firm, oily and dense, you'll find different varieties of the cheese depending on what sort of wood has been used to smoke it and for how long it has been smoked. You can also find non-smoked versions of Idiazabal, which are mellower and butterier than their smoke-filled counterparts. Enjoy this cheese on its own with a good Spanish red to really appreciate its flavour.