

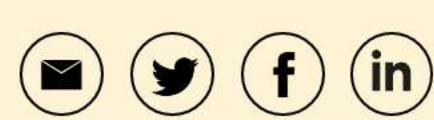


Illustration: Elen Winata for News UK

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WHY SPANISH CHEESES ARE A MUST FOR ANY SELECTION

With 200 gourmet varieties made using traditional artisan techniques, there's more than manchego in the Iberian peninsula's pantry, says **Renate Ruge**



Once nibbled, it's easy to see why nuttily delicious manchego is still one of Spain's bestselling cheeses. Yet many other far less known varieties, such as buttery casin from the Redes Natural Park, ripe blue gamonedo and gooey torta del casar, are also star products.

In fact, as a true powerhouse of cheesemaking with a rich and evolved culture, Spain has more than 200 top-grade cheeses made from different types of milk. Wherever you go, from the rolling hills of the Basque Country to the Balearic and Canary Islands, you'll be enticed by its irresistible cheeses. More than 30 boast a reassuring authenticity guarantee, which grants PDO (protected denomination of origin) status.

Dynamic young cheesemakers are bringing out fresh flavours using innovative techniques

Produced following gourmet traditions honed over centuries and perfected to 21st-century tastes, the country's scooped plenty of prestigious awards, like at the recent World Cheese Awards, where its cheeses took home 566 distinctions – 17 super gold, 95 gold, 172 silver, and 282 bronze awards.

Spain's craft cheese scene is booming, with dynamic young cheesemakers bringing out fresh flavours using innovative techniques. Generations young and old of passionate local artisans are happy to share their wares with hungry visitors. As the saying goes: "Cada queso es un pueblo" (every cheese is a village), making cheese the perfect expression of Spain's cultural, climatic and geographical diversity.



Tasty traditional techniques

Spain's cheese champions



The chiefs of cheese

Craving more? Taste the cheese, meet the makers and passionate producers keen to share their wares, and discover more about Spain's grand gourmet cheese tradition at foodswinesfromspain.com/spainfoodnation



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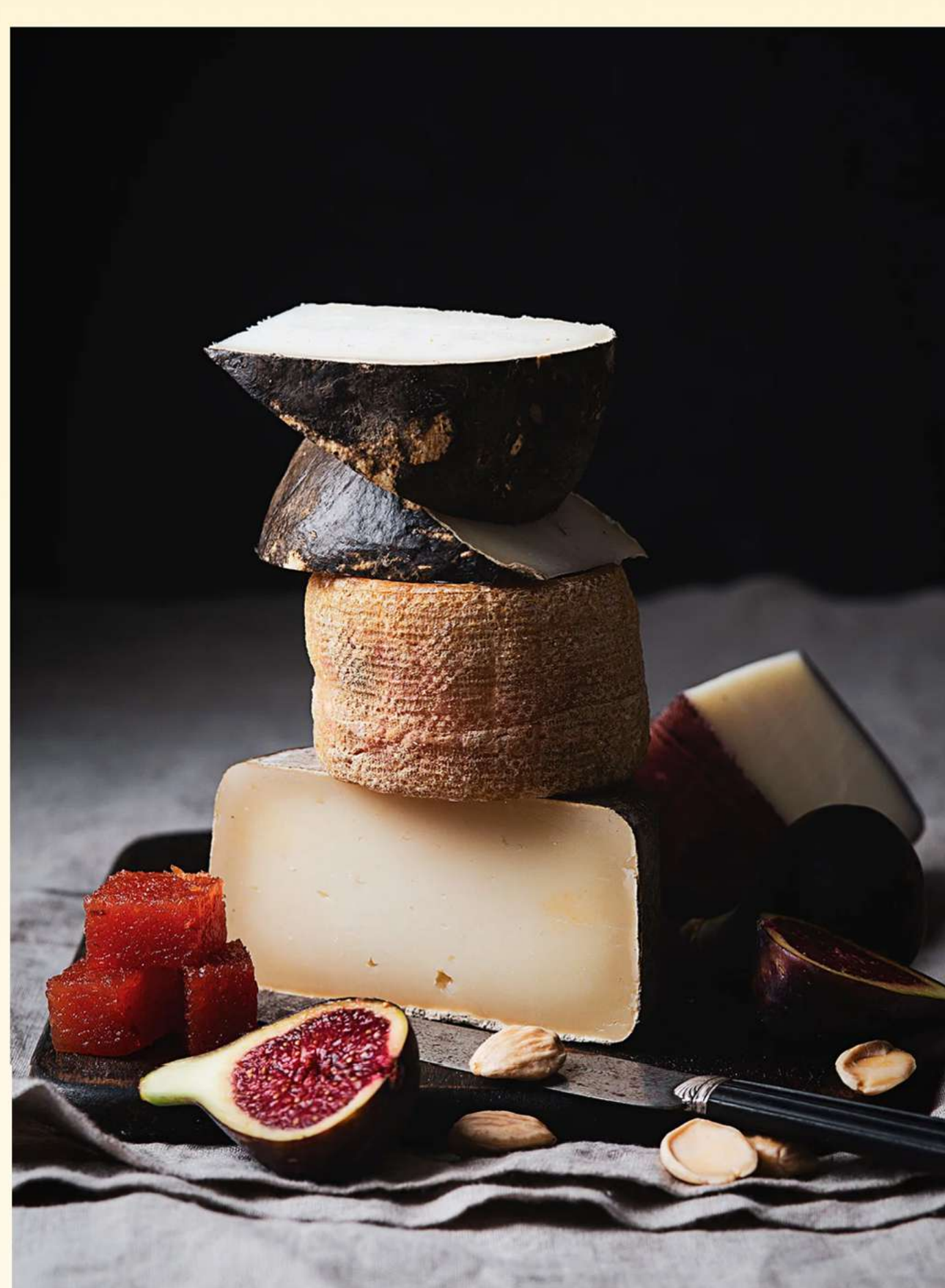
PHOTOGRAPHY: ICEX/MARIE LOBERG

Tasty traditional techniques

How a rich cheesemaking heritage is combining with new technology as beloved flavours make a comeback

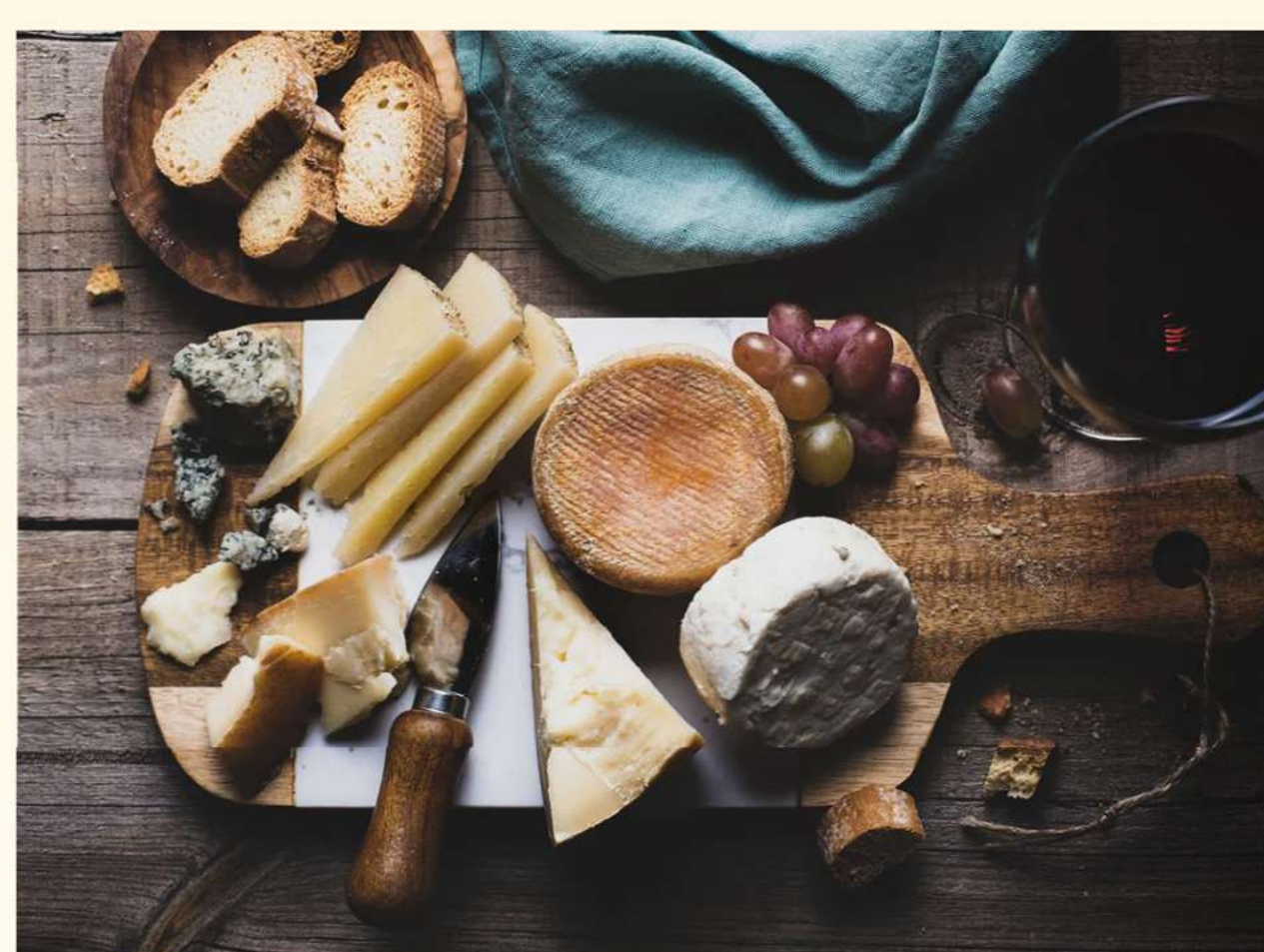
The name of one of northwest Spain's Asturias region's best cheeses, afuega'l pitu loosely translates as "throttle the chicken". It reflects the artisanal way cheesemakers still squeeze the muslin that wraps the curd, extracting the last of the whey - a time-honoured technique and a reason their cheese tastes so good.

While Asturian cheese traditions, like those in many parts of Spain, date back centuries, a new generation of producers is popping up. Like in Catalonia, where a nearly extinct goat's cheese, garrotxa, revived by young cheesemakers and farmers' cooperatives in the 1980s, is now thriving. Soft white goat's cheese queso del montsec, and queso de tupi, fermented in a small pot, are Pyrenees classics also making a comeback.



Selection perfection
There's a wide variety of Spanish cheeses to try

Producers and consumers alike are championing the revival of the traditional Spanish cheese industry



The modernisation of large-scale cheese manufacturers in the Eighties saw the emergence of small dairies who, on a mission to retain authentic characteristics and much-loved flavours, continued to produce myriad artisan cheeses, like in the remote western region of Extremadura and its tasty goat's cheeses torta del casar and queso de la serena.

Fast-forward to today, producers and consumers alike are championing the revival of the traditional Spanish cheese industry, which remains rooted in origin and with a laser sharp focus on quality.

Small queserias (cheese shops), dedicated to the artisanal craft, now enjoy an advantage thanks to the latest technology. They're able to uphold exceptional quality by finely controlling temperature, humidity and hygiene for the best preservation of the raw materials, all while increasing production.

Craving more? Taste the cheese, meet the makers and passionate producers keen to share their wares, and discover more about Spain's grand gourmet cheese tradition at foodswinesfromspain.com/spainfoodnation



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PHOTOGRAPH BY PHOTOGRAFIA/ISTOCK

Spain's cheese champions

With Spain's rich and varied landscapes, and centuries-long tradition of livestock farming, half a million tonnes of cheese are produced every year. Made from the milk of native cows, ewes and goats, or blends of each, Spanish cheese really does come in all shapes and sizes



1

Ship-sheep

The free roaming native sheep from across Spain produce the health-giving milk that makes sheep's cheese a brand ambassador for the country's best offering. Scoring big on nutritional benefits with its proteins, minerals and vitamins such as A, D and E, sheep's cheeses using raw milk delight with their nuances in flavour and aroma. Hallowed both on home turf and a popular export, artisanal ewe's milk cheeses fulfil international cravings for natural, traceable field-to-table products and Spain is the EU's third largest producer.

Did you know it can take a whole herd of sheep to make just one kilogram of *torta del casar*, from its namesake the town of Casar de Cáceres? Its slightly bitter taste, derived from wild thistle cardoon, makes the cheese gloriously soft as it matures. Also from rugged Extremadura and revered by cheese lovers the world over is the creamy merino sheep's milk that makes the decadent *queso de la serena*, a local hero where vegetable rennet from artichoke thistle adds bitter hints. Fully matured, its runny consistency spreads perfectly on toast.

Up north, traditional farmhouse *idiazabal* comes both smoked and unsmoked from the lush green pastures of Navarre, while on Spain's central plains of Castilla-La Mancha, native manchego sheep roam the lands Don Quixote once did. The signature taste of Spain's king of cheeses starts here in the field, with the sheep transferring the richness of the native flora to the milk. Its temperature is then lowered to 4C, before the curd, pressed by hand, is finished with a distinctive herringbone basket weave. Expert maturers know exactly when the cheese is perfectly ripe: when it is semi-cured, you'll notice flavours of fruit, grass and hay; when cured you'll notice nutty, caramel notes; and when matured you taste a butterscotch-hued *viejo*, which is crumbly and sweet.



2

Cow for now

Spain's rugged northwest is cow's milk-cheese country from where a third of the country's production hails. Maintaining the fertility of the land and revitalising the countryside is key to new generation cheesemakers who want to ensure the huge volume of milk produced here continues to be made into traditional cheese. How they feed the animals and care for the land at Galicia's heart is the lush meadows of the Ribeira Sacra is what makes the local cheese so good.

The pastures of the rainy, mountainous strip along the northern coast, separated from the rest of the peninsula by the Picos de Europa, Montes de Galicia and the Pyrenees, provide fodder for more than 15 native cattle breeds. One favourite local cheese from this isolated area is *tetilla*, whose name translates as "nipple" thanks to its pear shape and pointy top. Made of Friesian, Swiss brown and Galician blonde cow's milk, the resulting semi-hard cheese is mild and buttery with aromas of vanilla and walnuts.

Another northern star is *l'alt urgell y la cerdanya* from Catalonia, made of Friesian cow's milk and beloved for its soft, creamy texture with small holes, sweet aroma and mild, salty flavour. While over in the Balearics, malton cheese, named after Menorca's largest town, is aged underground in dry, salty caves designated a Unesco Biosphere Reserve. Its bold flavour is attributed to its one-of-a-kind environment. Sold at different stages of maturity, vintage *mahon* is a flaky, tangy, spicy delight.



3

Vote goat

Goats have roamed the Iberian peninsula since at least the 1500s, so it's likely the cheese has been made there for similarly long. Once known as the "poor man's cow", goats took up less space and were generally easier to care for. Now their cheese is much sought after, with Spanish ones some of the best, like the stellar *garrotxa*. As they are able to eat plants and access pastures inaccessible to other farm animals, goats are often reared in the austere landscapes along the Mediterranean coast.

Moreish *monte enebro* developed in Avila, by the renowned cheesemaker Rafael Báez, is sometimes called "pata de mulo" or "mule's hoof" after its rectangular shape. Its earthy blue flavours are addictive. Down in southeast Spain, a goat's milk cheese bathed in *jumilla* wine is aptly named the drunken goat, *murcia al vino*. And over in the sunny Canary Islands, *palmero*, from La Palma, and *majorero*, from Fuerteventura, are similarly delicious. *Palmero* cheeses, and *majorero*, using milk from the *palmera* goat breed, have aromas of warm almonds, Canary pine needles and dry prickly pears. Cheese made from *majorero* goat's milk is sometimes mixed with ewes' milk, and when ripened, is super creamy.



4

Magical mix

Flocks of sheep, especially in central Spain, often include mixed breeds, resulting in local cheeses being made from mixed milk, almost all year round. They're often cylindrical in shape, like the mild *iberico* cheese, whose defined flavour has a touch of acidity due to its high proportion of cow's milk, slight piquancy from goat's milk and buttery notes from ewe's milk.

Up in the mountainous region close to the Bay of Biscay, natural caves create exactly the right degree of humidity and cold air for the development of moulds that gradually penetrate the local blue, soft-paste cheeses that mature there. This is what gives multi-award-winning *cabrales* its characteristic blue veining.

One of the world's great blues is produced in a tiny village of the same name in Asturias. Locals here can tell which cave the cheese was matured in just by the taste. The milk could be cow's, sheep's, goat's or a blend. After drying, the wheels are aged in millennia-old limestone caves at elevation of some 700-1,500 metres. Here, the temperature of 8-12C helps the cheese to develop in its signature mould.

Made from mixtures of cow's, ewe's, or goat's milk, from Tudanca, Swiss brown and Friesian cattle, *Latxa* sheep, Pyrenean and Picos de Europa goats, greeny-blue *picon bejes-tresviso* is another grand cheeseboard choice. Cured in natural caves, its intense flavour packs a tasty punch.

Recognisable by its maple leaf wrap, the earthy mushroom aromas of *valdeon* are worth sniffing out too. This creamy blue's buttery melting texture and savoury, spicy flavours, blending cow's and goat's milk, makes it delicious by itself or in cooked cuisine.

Craving more? Taste the cheese, meet the makers and passionate producers keen to share their wares, and discover more about Spain's grand gourmet cheese tradition at foodswinesfromspain.com/spainfoodnation

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↑ BACK TO TOP

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PHOTOGRAPHY: GUY ARIEL

THE CHIEFS OF CHEESE

The couple helping the UK fall in love with Spanish cheese – and their ideal after-dinner selection

Cheese maestros Monika and Rupert Linton of Brindisa are pioneers and passionate supporters of the Spanish cheese revolution. Their range of quesos artesanos grows every year and they love to showcase new craft discoveries from dynamic young cheesemakers, alongside the big names.

After more than three decades proving there's life beyond manchego, the company is still on a mission to bring the finest Spanish cheese to the UK. Rupert says: "We started Brindisa in 1988, nearly 35 years ago, always selecting products of outstanding quality, and now represent an idiosyncratic collection. You don't need to be an expert to tell if it tastes good; whether it's a cheese, an almond or slice of ham, you'll know instantly."

Rupert's story

I was brought up in Spain. My family lived there for 25 years. As a student I did my bit as a goat herd in the summer holidays. The goats' owner showed me how to make cheese up in the mountains of Extremadura, which started my love affair with cheese.

Cheese is also the reason Monika and I met and got together, when she first started Brindisa. Often visiting Madrid, she'd been to meet a cheesemaker about a cured churra sheep's milk cheese (sold in a tin immersed in olive oil) and we clicked over our shared love of small production cheese from tiny Spanish villages. Later, however, our children would beg us to please not take them to anymore "interesting cheese dairies". The variety of cheeses you get from Spain's diverse ecosystems is what makes Spanish cheese so special.

In the north's rainy, mountainous pastures, you find quite assertive blues like cabrales, valdeon and picon bejes-tresviso. Go south along the Picos de Europa mountains to the plains of Castile and you'll find amazing semi-hard, boldly flavoured sheep's milk cheeses like manchego, zamorano and castellano. Then there's roncal, found up in the Pyrenees, and idiazabal, the Basque milk cheese; so there is a whole swathe of Spain where complex sheep's milk cheeses have been made for centuries. Further south again, you'll find the majority of the country's goat's milk cheeses.



The artisan cheese world is very fashionable in Spain and enjoying something of a renaissance right now

A rare find
Rupert is always searching for new flavours to showcase

Traditional techniques of Spanish cheesemaking have survived into the 21st century. The caves of Cabrales are something else. One of the requirements of the PDO is to have water running through your cave, from the mountainous landscape's underground rivers. Part of the ecosystem that makes the cave work is water dripping down through the stalactites that maintains humidity creating this unique environment where roqueforti bacteria thrive.

Over in Menorca, at a small family dairy that supplies us, a brother-and-sister team makes cheese as soon as they've milked in the morning – the milk, rich in flora, goes immediately from the milking parlour into the making of the cheese without chilling, which is essential for creating an outstanding artisan cheese. What's so intense is that they milk twice daily, so make cheese again come evening.

What we love about cheese in Spain are the bold flavours and unique recipes. Visiting the makers, learning about their rare breeds, terroir and sharing their way of life is a fascinating aspect of what we do at Brindisa.

A lovely way to discover Catalan cheese is to go to the Lactium festival in Vic, the city where Monika worked and lived for many years. For the event, the town centre is taken over by artisan cheesemakers and cheese lovers galore, evidencing a genuine renaissance of artisan cheese appreciation across Spain.

Our chosen cheeseboard

Rupert and Monika's best Spanish cheeses for your festive feast



1. In winter, my favourites are cured **11 to 14-month matured manchegos**. I love torta de barros too, and mahon melts so well. Just combine it with spreadable chorizo-style sobrasada, drizzle with honey, and toast.

SERVING SUGGESTION

I would serve my cheeses with muscatel raisins, membrillo (Spanish quince paste) and I really love pickled figs, especially the bittersweet ones preserved in aguardiente, a strong alcoholic beverage.

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