

CHEESE! GLORIOUS CHEESE!

From Slack Ma Girdle to Crocodile Tears, **Morels French Steakhouse & Bistro** at The Palazzo has one of the world's widest selections of *fromage*. *By E.C. Gladstone*



The world of gastronomy holds many wonders, but perhaps none more fascinating than cheese—*caseus*, *kaas*, *käse*, *queso*, *formaggio*, or as the French so famously know it, *fromage*. For a food that is basically just coagulated milk, it's astounding how many variations exist—England, France, and Italy all estimate at least 300 varieties each.

Morels French Steakhouse & Bistro at The Palazzo doesn't have every one of them, of course, but on any given night, they offer a menu of 59 regular selections and an additional 10 or so specials, running the gamut from cow, goat, sheep, and blended milk varieties. If that seems like an estimable number, you're right. Jake Sigl, Morels' cheesemonger, believes that it's the largest quantity available at any dining establishment in the entire western US. "In Vegas you have to do everything bigger," he says with a chuckle, noting that the Morels in Los Angeles only carries about half the quantity.

Though you're certainly free to make your own selections, Sigl and Morels' other mongers are eager to assist. "I go to the tables, and once I speak with them for a little while, I'll get kind of a cheese profile," he says. "If it's a five-ounce selection, I'll do soft all the way through firm, and always try and cover all three milk categories if I can, so that they can get a taste of goat, sheep, maybe one or two cows, and a bleu. We have about nine bleu cheeses on our menu." The enological system at Morels, offering an almost equal number of wine selections by the ounce, makes pairing an equally daunting and rewarding pursuit.

Sampling a baker's dozen of Sigl's offerings, ranging from the earthy, soft, wash-rind Epoisses AOC to the firm super-aged Gouda, a crunchy, tangy 10-year-old cheese that's closer to a Reggiano than its softer namesake, was an epicurean

photograph by Tomas Muisictonico

adventure. In the bloomy category, Sigl calls out the “creamy, pungent, rich” Mt. Tam and whimsically named Stinking Bishop. A soft goat cheese we both love, known as Crocodile Tears, is “fairly dense, a little creamier toward the rind, a little chalkier toward the center, with deep tangy notes and almost citrus flavors.”

In the semi-soft range, a blended-milk cheese called Tomme de Recollets, which strikes me as a balance between a Parmesan and Havarti, has an herb crust that permeates the cheese as it ages. “It can vary,” Sigl notes. “The batch right now has a lot of sage. You get this earthiness, which I really love.”

Another two impressive firm cheeses are Hook’s 10-Year-Aged Cheddar (“It’s extraordinarily sharp and gets this salt crystallization, this nice crunchiness and smooth finish to it”) and Mimolette Extra Vieille (which *Wine Spectator* has called “one of the most distinctive cheeses in the world”). “Mimolette has this really brilliant orange color,” Sigl raves, “[and] this mild, bacon smokiness and beefiness to it.”

Those looking for an out-of-this-world *fromage* experience should try Cashel Blue, a hardy bleu with a creamy texture and less saltiness than most bleus, which alternate monger Joseph Rawls describes simply as “the most complete bleu cheese I’ve ever had.”

Sigl goes on to recommend Slack Ma Girdle (“nice and supple, enrobed with nettle leaves, which is an herb close to a cross between parsley and thyme, with a little bit of a lemony flavor”); Chimay Grand Cru, produced by the same Trappist monks in Belgium who produce Chimay beer (“some wheat, grassy notes to it, a fresher, crisper earthiness”); goat’s milk Montenebro (“really creamy, lemony citrus notes, but a peppery finish”); and sheep’s milk Ombra (“caramel-butterscotch notes, some crystallized protein, which gives you this crunchy texture, a really nice mouth feel”).

Naturally, many of the cheeses are European,

but a surprising number of their finest come from all around the US. “I’m a huge supporter of our domestic cheeses,” Sigl says. “There are a lot of fabulous cheeses, where they’ve taken recipes and traditions from European countries, and then produced the cheeses here to a USDA and FDA standard.” That makes the task of carrying so many selections slightly easier, though the monger claims there are still challenges. “We try to carry more artisanal cheeses, farmhouse, traditional cheeses, and the availability is not always there,” he says. “You could have cheeses from a farm with only 10 to 15 cows, [and] the milk production slows down in the winter months.”

While few would indulge in this much cheese in one sitting—after all, the bistro offers a full menu of creative French fare, including an Emmenthaler/Gruyère fondue—Sigl notes that he has many repeat customers, both local and visiting. “I have people who keep the cards [that come with the cheese] and bring them back, asking for the same ones again.”

So how does one come to carry the “monger” mantle, anyway? “There’s really no qualifications, such as with a sommelier,” Sigl admits, “but it’s very intense, you have to read a lot, and taste a lot of cheese, outside of work as well. There’s always something new to be found out in the world of *fromage*.” ■



A sampling of some of the more than 60 varieties of cheese served at Morels French Steakhouse & Bistro.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Morels’ cheese monger Jake Sigl.

