

## GUASTELLO'S VILLAGE MARKET

# The French Cheese Course

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Serves a crowd

### Ingredients

3 assorted cheeses: soft cheese, semi-hard cheese, hard cheese

Savory extras: marinated olives, raw nuts, smoked nuts, prosciutto, salami, bread sticks, artichoke hearts. Check the olive bar and bulk bins for good deals on olives and nuts.

Sweet extras: fruit (any kind but especially grapes, berries, apricots, and fresh figs,) dried fruit, jam (my favorite is fig jam,) honey.

### Instructions:

How much and what to buy: To figure out how much cheese you'll need to buy, plan on 3-4oz of cheese per person. No matter how many people you'll be serving, include at least three different types of cheese on the platter. I like to include a soft cheese, like brie or camembert, a semi-hard cheese like an aged cheddar, fontina, or smoked gouda, and a hard cheese like Parmigiano Reggiano (make sure you're getting real Parmigiano Reggiano - it should have the name stamped on the rind.) Blue cheese is popular to include on a cheese platter but I find people either love it or hate it, and unless it's a big party, or you know your guests love blue cheese, I personally wouldn't spend the extra money.

Follow the formula: For a well-rounded cheese platter, follow my 3x3x3 cheese platter formula: include at least three types of cheese on the platter, three savory extras, and three sweet extras - plus crackers, of course (I used Breton gluten-free crackers.) Here are some of my favorites:

Savory extras: marinated olives, raw nuts, smoked nuts, prosciutto, salami, bread sticks, artichoke hearts. Check the olive bar and bulk bins for good deals on olives and nuts.

Sweet extras: fruit (any kind but especially grapes, berries, apricots, and fresh figs,) dried fruit, jam (my favorite is fig jam,) honey.

Seek help: New to the cheese world, or know what flavors you like but aren't sure which cheese fits the bill? ASK FOR HELP. The people at the cheese counter at my grocery store love helping me pick out new cheeses. They're the experts and can describe the flavor and texture profiles better than anyone. Furthermore, they can cut wedges of cheese from the big wheels in whatever size you want so you don't buy too much for the crowd you'll be serving. Regular grocery stores have come a long way in their cheese offerings, and nowadays rival any specialty grocery store (at least around here.) A specialty cheese shop is a real treat to visit and shop from, but if your budget is important, check out your regular grocery store first.

Let the cheese rest: Let the cheeses rest on the counter for at least 30 minutes before serving as it tastes totally different at room temperature vs cold. Also think about letting guests slice their own semi-hard cheese vs pre-slicing it, as cheese slices can dry out around the edges if left to sit for too long. Hard cheeses like parmesan are ok to crumble a bit to show guests how to enjoy it.

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Raid your kitchen: Keep costs down by using what you've already got at home on your cheese platter. Raid your fridge and pantry for olives, crackers, dried fruit, and nuts.

Label, label, label: Make sure each cheese is labeled to indicate what kind it is, and include a separate knife for each cheese. Blue cheese swirled with brie? No thanks. I found these cute chalkboard labels in the Target \$1 aisle!

Simple is best: Don't stress about having the perfect-looking cheese platter. I think the most inviting ones have casually-arranged ingredients on a clean, wooden cutting board. You don't have to put all the fruit in one corner and all the meats in another corner either. Separate items to fill in the cracks, and to make sure everyone can get a little bit of everything no matter where they're standing around the board.

Have fun! Call me crazy but thinking about making and serving a cheese platter literally puts a smile on my face. I just love that there's something for everyone and it's so fun to try new and different cheese. Furthermore, for me, it's less stressful to assemble a fun and colorful cheese platter than cook or bake something for a holiday party when I don't know about guests' dietary restrictions, having to time cooking with their arrival, etc. And, while cheese platters are a hit at holiday parties, they're also great for dinner every once in a while. Sometimes Ben and I will assemble whatever cheese and meats we've got in the fridge, grab a bottle of red, and call it a day. Either way, you can't lose!

***Credit: [iowagirleats.com](http://iowagirleats.com)***