

1 Brie de Meaux

Ile de France, soft, made with raw cow's milk, £32.35 per kg, La Fromagerie (lafromagerie.co.uk)

2 Coeur du Berry

Loire Valley, semi-soft, made with pasteurised goat's milk, £4.49 for 150g, Waitrose (waitrose.com)

3 Perl Wen

Wales, Camembert-style, made by Caws Cenarth, £5 for 250g, Marks & Spencer (find it on the fresh deli counter)

4 Sinodun Hill

Oxfordshire, unpasteurised goat's-milk pyramid with a nutty rind, £9.25 per cheese, La Fromagerie (lafromagerie.co.uk)

5 Bix

Oxfordshire, soft, unpasteurised, triple cream from Nettlebed Creamery, £5.75 per cheese, Paxton & Whitfield (paxtonandwhitfield.co.uk)

6 Lincolnshire Poacher Double Barrel

Lincolnshire, hard, from raw cow's milk, £30.30 per kg, La Fromagerie (lafromagerie.co.uk)

7 Stilton Half Baby

English, blue, £29 per cheese, Paxton & Whitfield (paxtonandwhitfield.co.uk)

8 Cheshire Appleby

English, cloth-bound, hard, £6.25 per 250g, Paxton & Whitfield (paxtonandwhitfield.co.uk)

Perfecting the Christmas cheeseboard

Hero Hirsh,
London manager at Paxton & Whitfield

I always start by asking, 'How many cheeses do you want to serve?' Normally, I recommend three or four for a dinner, but at Christmas you've got an excuse to turn it up a notch. You want a generous amount, and remember, you don't need to bring it all out at once. If you are eating the cheese over a number of days, there's nothing nicer than having a fresh chunk to put on the table.

Then think about size - 100g per person is usual, but for festive feasts you could go to 150g. If you are spreading it out over several days consider 200g - it all depends on how many relatives are coming, how many drinks parties you're planning and how many mince pies you fancy.

Next, look for a mixture of different styles, textures and even milks - cow's, goat's and sheep's. For hard cheese, a territorial style such as Cheshire is excellent at Christmas, and seriously underrated. Acidic and fresh, it contrasts with a tangy Cheddar-style wedge perfectly.

Stilton is a must, and half a baby truckle will do several sittings for many people. You might prefer to do a traditional scoop with a spoon or slice out portions - either way, a slightly sweet cracker, made with buttermilk, oats or nuts, is a good match. Brie de Meaux remains incredibly popular at this time of year. In France, it's considered ripe when there is a softer breakdown just under the rind and still a slight chalkiness at its heart; in Britain people tend to love it when it's so runny it's forming escape plans.

My favourite new cheese is Bix, made by Rose Grimond in Oxfordshire with a rind so delicate it looks as if it has been painted on. It's a 'triple cream', meaning cream is added to the cow's milk which results in a super-rich, buttery texture. If you like Brillat-Savarin or Chaource, this is a great modern British alternative - a new creation, in cheese terms, because it has only been produced for two to three years. English sparkling wine would be a lovely match. If you're feeding cheese lovers there is inevitably someone who asks where the stinker is - so keep a Stinking Bishop or another strong, washed-rind cheese in the wings. If you can, bring all your cheeses out of the fridge an hour before you serve them.

To serve, simple crackers and quince paste are the classic because the cheese really is the star. And since you are likely to have moved from fizz through white to red, and might be on to heavier stuff by the time the cheeseboard comes out, I'd recommend port to drink - tawny over a vintage, as it works with so many styles of cheese. If at all possible, move back on to champagne for its versatility - you might not even need an excuse.



WINE GLASS: AARON PROBYN (AARONPROBYN); MARBLE BOARD: THE CONRAN SHOP (CONRANSHOP)