

Premier cheese shops of Napa Valley

By [Janet Fletcher](#)

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Come for the wine, stay for the cheese. Napa Valley's cheese counters may not be this wine region's main tourist bait, but they can enrich the itinerary of anyone planning a diet-be-damned getaway. Even over a long weekend, you can't experience *that* many of the valley's 400-plus wineries. (And please don't try. Three tasting rooms per day is enough.) But you can make a dent in the inventory of the leading cheese retailers, whose sophisticated selections equal or surpass those in other Bay Area shops. Whether you want to provision a Wine Country picnic or just upgrade your B&B's happy hour, these premier cheese shops have the goods you need:



Cheese monger Justin Grodivant at
The Oxbow Market

•**Oxbow Cheese Merchant:** This shop in Napa's Oxbow Public Market shares space and management with Oxbow Wine Merchant, synergy you can best experience from a seat at the bar. Order a glass of sparkling wine, a flight of reds or a pint of Deschutes Black Butte Porter and challenge the mongers to assemble a cheese board to match. They are up to it. The cheese staff here is knowledgeable, the selection well curated and neatly maintained. Northern California creameries get a lot of space — not surprising given the venue's heavy visitor traffic — but you can also count on spotting some of the top new arrivals from Europe, like Quadro di Bufala and Bufala Nera, two exquisite Italian imports from water-buffalo milk. Manager Justin Grodivant stocks 275 to 300 cheeses, including some of the flawless Swiss wheels from importer Caroline Hostettler.

Cheeses to try: Oxbow is the place to try the new Bellwether Farms Blackstone, an aged peppercorn-studded cheese from cow's and sheep's milk; La Oveja Negra, a Manchego from Spain's endangered black-footed sheep; and the luscious Tomales Farmstead Teleeka, a three-milk blend. *Oxbow Cheese Merchant, in the Oxbow Public Market, 610 First St., Napa; (707) 257-5200*

•**Sunshine Foods:** Twenty miles up valley, Sunshine Foods' cheese department services the tables of well-to-do St. Helena. Probably few other towns of this size — St. Helena has 4,500 residents — could support such a large and ambitious cheese counter, but the locals demand awesome cheeses for their awesome red wines. Former monger James Ayers, who ran the department for 18 years, set the tone here, cramming the shelves with little-known, low-production cheeses from around the world and hand-selling them. Ayers recently moved on (to the new Atelier by JCB, see below), but his protege Dylan Sharp continues in the same vein. The

selection seems a little slimmed down — Sharp says he'll have 200 choices in peak summer season — but still reveals many treasures that even cheese aficionados won't know.

Cheeses to try: Pick up a wedge of Bio Urchruter, an organic Swiss alpine wheel; some Belgian Cabricharme, a stinky washed-rind goat disk; Persillé de Rambouillet, an uncommon French goat blue; or Omorro Amanteigado, a Portuguese beauty that's about as scarce as some of Napa Valley's cult Cabernets. Sunshine also has what may be the planet's best collection of Andante Dairy cheeses from Sonoma. Andante proprietor Soyoung Scanlon is notoriously choosy about who sells her wares, so that's a relationship to brag about. *Sunshine Foods, 1115 Main St., St. Helena; (707) 963-7070*

•**Atelier by JCB:** A swank fine-foods emporium in Yountville from vintner Jean-Charles Boisset houses the valley's newest cheese counter. Boisset, scion of a prominent Burgundian wine family, had an unlimited budget and exceeded it, installing parquet flooring, gold-leafed shelving, Pierre Frey wallpaper and a swooping Baccarat chandelier. Do not come looking for Monterey Jack.

Cheeses to try: Cheese buyer James Ayers has filled his glass cases with gems worthy of the setting, like Swiss Hornbacher, Von Trapp Farmstead's Mad River Blue and the rare Sarró de Cabra, an aged Spanish goat wheel. Complete your glam picnic with high-end crackers (try the tozzetti made with water-buffalo butter), some hand-sliced jamón de bellota and a bottle of JCB sparkling wine. *Atelier by JCB, 6505 Washington St., Yountville; (707) 947-7106*

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A hand carved single rock old fashion at Goose and Gander in St. Helena