

A photograph of a wedge of blue cheese, possibly Gorgonzola, resting on a wooden cutting board. The cheese is crumbly and has a distinct blue-green mold pattern. To the right of the cheese, two glasses of white wine are partially visible, filled with a pale yellow liquid. The background is a dark, textured wooden surface.

# Cream of California

In the valleys and hillsides just north of San Francisco, artisan cheesemakers are taking advantage of the same varied terroir that produces world-class wines. The result? Unique cheeses flavoured by sea air and forest-lined marshes

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Previous pages: Original Blue, Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company

Left: Audrey Hitchcock Ramini with her calves

Clockwise from top: Loading hay at Ramini Mozzarella; a sample at Ramini Mozzarella; HolyMoly cheese in Bohemian Creamery's ageing room

Dolly closes her eyes and tilts her head towards the sun as I gently brush her wiry, coffee-coloured hair. After a few minutes, her knees buckle and she tumbles down to my feet.

Ngoro trots over, licking my hair with a flick of his lilac tongue before changing his mind and chewing on my jumper. Patti joins us, nuzzling my neck with a wide, wet nose. Seconds later she slumps against my back, sliding to the hay-scattered ground with a soft thud.

Soon, I'm buried in a heap of sleepy water buffalo calves. The official collective noun for the creatures is 'an obstinacy', although 'a cuddle' seems more apt for this particular scenario. Their behaviour is a chemical reaction, explains Audrey Hitchcock Ramini, the owner of Ramini Mozzarella. When they're happy, the decidedly dog-like bovines release oxytocin, sometimes called the 'cuddle hormone'. First, their tails curl, then they drop to the ground in a blissful stupor.

I'm not sure what's most surprising: that water buffalo are so absurdly affectionate, or that they exist in this part of the world at all. Perched high in the village of

Tomales, a few miles from the coast in Marin County, Ramini Mozzarella is part of a growing community of proudly eclectic artisan cheese producers in Northern California. Boutique creameries and farmsteads are scattered around the valleys and hillsides of what locals call the North Bay, stretching north from San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, encompassing the counties of Marin, Napa, Solano and Sonoma.

There's Cowgirl Creamery, where triple-cream Mt Tam — like the silkiest, creamiest brie — is made in a converted barn by Point Reyes National Seashore. The sea breezes blowing through the pastures here imbue the cheese with a delicious marine tang.

At Bohemian Creamery, on a hilltop near Sebastopol, Sonoma, Lisa Gottreich keeps a herd of Alpine dairy goats, blending their milk with sheep's and cows' to create cheeses threaded with wild blue rye moulds. Two







Clockwise from top: Buffaloes at Ramini Mozzarella; broncha cheese from Achadinha Cheese Company; goats at Bohemian Creamery

Right: Donna Pacheco, Achadinha Cheese Company

miles south, at William Cofield Cheesemakers, Keith Adams and Rob Hunter make British-style cheddar and stilton in a corrugated shed at The Barlow, an outdoor shopping area with clothes stores, cafes and beauty salons. Like garagiste winemakers, who source grapes from others’ vineyards, the pair buy their milk from regional dairies.

These are all stops on the California Cheese Trail, an online map, app, and guide that pinpoints 40-odd artisan producers across the state — 16 of them in Sonoma and Marin. Touring and tasting at farms and creameries along the route is an increasingly popular option for those looking for something to do between wine-tastings in Sonoma and nearby Napa.

At Ramini Mozzarella, visitors can sample platters of delicate, creamy and softly spongy buffalo mozzarella before brushing ‘the babies’, as Audrey calls them. It’s the only farm in California making buffalo mozzarella; its uniqueness unusual in the North Bay, an area that runs the gamut of cheese styles. These range from silky cream cheeses to aged, Italian-style hard varieties, and from springy asiago to blue cheeses. The milk comes from goats, cows and sheep.

There’s no regional speciality; if anything, the defining characteristic is that there isn’t one. Just as Sonoma’s wineries successfully grow grapes from pinot noir to zinfandel, the varied terroir here imbues cheeses with a range of different qualities, with the seasons overlaying additional nuances of taste and texture. Audrey explains that Ramini’s delicate mozzarella, for example, tends to have the “sweetness of grass” in spring and summer, especially when there’s been decent rainfall. “It’s more minerally in winter,” she adds.

Cow heaven

At the Achadinha Cheese Company, a family-run, hilltop farm just outside the town of Petaluma, Sonoma, Donna Pacheco supplements her cows’ diet of grass with fermented mash grain from local breweries. She believes this, along with naturally occurring yeasts that drift through the air here, lends complex flavour profiles to her cheeses, which range from addictive squeaky curds to six-month-aged broncha, which dances between fruit and pepper.

“Different breweries impart different flavours,” she tells me, as we stroll through open-sided barns housing toffee-hued Jersey cows and Nubian goats (Donna tells me the latter aren’t fed the brewers’ grain anymore because “they were staggering”). “It’s like a vintage,” she adds. “It gives each cheese a different taste.”

The California Cheese Trail has been hugely beneficial to farms like the Achadinha Cheese Company, which now runs tours and cheesemaking classes. This is exactly what Vivien Straus, a local with years of experience in dairy production, was hoping for when she devised the trail in 2011, she tells me. Vivien, who grew up on her family’s dairy in Marshall, California, was keen to help struggling farmers stay in business by creating interest in agritourism. “More cheesemakers, due to the map [of the trail], are now open to the public and it’s become a crucial part of their businesses,” Vivien says. “One told me that it sends them 80% of their business.”

Some people might be surprised that the US produces any decent cheese at all — a prejudice that seems to stem from sticky slices slapped on burgers and bags



LOCAL HEROES

Five cheeses to try in Sonoma and Marin

FOGGY MORNING, NICASIO VALLEY CHEESE COMPANY

This fromage blanc-style award-winner is wonderfully fresh and milky. Its purity allows the terroir to shine — from the sweetness of the grazing pastures to the subtle, salty tang of the misty morning fog. [niciasiocheese.com](http://niciasiocheese.com)

RED HAWK, COWGIRL CREAMERY

The cheese that put this creamery on the map was created by accident, when a batch of the signature Mt Tam developed a red crust instead of its usual white bloom. With umami and peanut flavours, it’s like chicken satay in cheese form. [cowgirlcreamery.com](http://cowgirlcreamery.com)

TRIPLE CREME BRIE WITH TRUFFLES, MARIN FRENCH CHEESE

Founded in 1865, Marin French Cheese is the US’s longest continuously operating cheese

company, and its triple-cream cheeses — where extra cream is added to the milk — have won international awards. This truffle-speckled specimen has a mushroomy quality that cuts through the sweetness. [marinfrenchcheese.com](http://marinfrenchcheese.com)

ORIGINAL BLUE, POINT REYES FARMSTEAD CHEESE COMPANY

This raw milk cheese is as meltingly creamy as semifreddo, with veins of blue. It’s peppery and fruity, with a hint of Pacific fog and salty air. [pointreyescheese.com](http://pointreyescheese.com)

MEZZO SECCO, VELLA CHEESE COMPANY

Based in downtown Sonoma, Vella is known for its Monterey Jack cheese. The dry Mezzo Secco is particularly striking, aged for up to seven months and coated with a fine black pepper crust that gives way to a sweet, creamy and subtly spicy cheese. [vellacheese.com](http://vellacheese.com)





of plasticky grated stuff. The stereotype is unfair, however; some states, such as Vermont and Wisconsin, have long been famed for standout dairy products, while Oregon's Rogue River Blue beat Italian, French, Swiss and UK finalists to the top spot at last year's World Cheese Awards.

Although cheese tourism is relatively new in Northern California, its cheesemaking history stretches back to the 1750s, when Spanish missionary Father Junípero Serra introduced dairy cows to the region. During the Gold Rush of the mid-19th century, Point Reyes peninsula — dubbed 'cow heaven' because of its salt-sprayed grasslands — became a hub of dairies supplying butter and cheese to San Francisco's miners.

In the years since, the number of dairies in Marin County has plummeted, dropping from 200 in 1950 to around 30 today, largely due to market fluctuations and increasing demand for land from developers. In the late 1970s, Point Reyes was earmarked for new freeways and shopping malls. Ranchers, environmentalists and community leaders teamed up to prevent the development and, in the process, formed the Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT) in 1980. Many farms on the California Cheese Trail are protected by the trust, meaning the land can only be used for agriculture.

Today's surviving dairies focus on handcrafted cheeses, often produced with milk from certified organic farms. It's a smart move in an area known for world-

class wines and farm-to-fork restaurants that draw from abundant local produce — both of which attract people from around the world.

## Culinary landscape

Driving to the Nicasio Valley Cheese Company, close to Point Reyes, it's difficult to contemplate all this beauty could have been bulldozed away. The road wiggles beneath vertiginous redwood trees and past fields grazed by black-and-white holstein cows, offering occasional glimpses of salt marshes and the silvery-sapphire of the Pacific.

The family business was begun as a dairy in 1919 by Rick Lafranchi's grandfather, who immigrated from Maggia in the Swiss Alps. It wasn't until the ranch was passed down to Rick and his siblings that they began making cheese — partly to realise a long-standing ambition of their father, Will, who died in 2002.

Rick and his brother Scott spent some time in Maggia, learning to make Swiss mountain-style cheeses before returning to perfect their art at Nicasio. "In Maggia, cows grazing on one side of the valley produce a different-tasting cheese than cows grazing on the other side," says Rick. The terroir here in this part of California is equally complex and unique, he claims, boasting some of the best cattle pastures in the world. "People have said the North Bay area could be to cheese what Napa is to wine," he adds.

## WINE & CHEESE PAIRING

### Cabernet sauvignon

Sonoma's cabernets tend to be packed with sharp notes of blackcurrant, spices and, sometimes, chocolate. They need cheeses that stand up to them, such as blue cheese with punchy, piquant flavours softened by a creamy texture.

### Sparkling

The sharp acidity and mousse (foam) of Sonoma's sparkling wines (made using the same method used to produce champagne) are perfect for slicing through the richness of triple-cream cheeses. The bubbles can cleanse the palate, too.

### Viognier

Thanks to the cool, coastal breeze, the viogniers here tend to be crisp and floral with subtle notes of stone fruit. So there's enough acidity to balance and cut through buffalo or cow mozzarella, without overwhelming its delicate flavour.

### Pinot noir

With a distinct flavour and complex palate, coastal pinot noirs have a lot in common with brie. Each brings out the other's earthy, mushroomy notes, while the wine's hint of raspberry adds a welcome, yet subtle, dash of sweetness.



On the California Cheese Trail, looking out over Tomales Bay

Previous page:  
Nicasio Valley Cheese Company's factory; Nicasio Valley Cheese Company's tomino cheese in the ageing room

The century-old ranch, grazed by around 450 cattle, is located a few minutes down the road. The shop where they sell their produce is small, backed by a huge window through which visitors can watch the cheesemaking process.

I work my way through nine tasting samples, laid out on a long wooden table. They include Locarno, a thick, velvety brie; snow-white Foggy Morning, a fromage blanc-type cheese; and Nicasio Reserve, a Swiss mountain-style cheese, aged for 150 days yet pale as whipped butter, that's nutty with notes of dried apricot.

Nicasio Valley Cheese Company's story speaks of another reason this area has such a rich variety of delicious cheeses: immigration. Just as San Francisco's culinary landscape has been knitted together by many different nationalities and cultures, so the North Bay's cheesemaking is enriched by global flavours and influences. At Joe Matos Cheese Factory, in Santa Rosa, Sonoma, Joe and Mary Matos make semi-hard St Jorge cheese using a recipe from their native island, São Jorge, in Portugal's Azores archipelago. Valley Ford Cheese and Creamery, meanwhile, specialises in Swiss-Italian cheeses made from Jersey cow milk.

There's a palpable entrepreneurial spirit here, too. As with fine wines, making superior cheese requires an optimal blend of terroir, science and luck, combined with a stubborn refusal to give up.

## Maternal bond

At Ramini Mozzarella, nap time is over, at least for now. Audrey gently rouses the dozing calves to reunite them with their mothers, who've been keeping watch from the next pen. Several other water buffalo — including

a female with a newborn calf — graze pastures in the valley below.

Audrey started the business in 2008 with her husband Craig, who died in 2015. It was "his baby", she admits, adding that it was her love for the animals that kept her going. That and pure adrenalin, perhaps. It vibrates from her as she flits between the buffalo pen and the tin-roofed milking barn, tidying things away and making sure her animals are relaxed. The mothers are only separated from the calves for milking once a day, and Audrey believes they're happier — and produce better milk — because of the closeness they're able to maintain.

What began with five buffalo is now a herd of 66. "It was a crazy idea," says Audrey. "But then I just fell in love with these guys." Shirley (named after the singer Shirley Manson, of the band Garbage; all the buffalo are named after musicians) trots up behind us and gently nudges at Audrey's hip. She crouches for a quick cuddle, tickling Shirley's snout with her ash-blond hair.

The adoration is clearly mutual, and Audrey happily admits she loves her animals far more than the cheesemaking process. Still, the end product is delicious — and there's high demand for it in restaurants across the region.

As I leave the farm, the sky is streaked with a pale, honey-hued light, deepening to a sunset the colour of peaches. I skim past velvety blond hillsides dotted with cypress trees, a chilly Pacific breeze drifting through the car's open window. The air feels almost crunchy with salt, with a slight sourness from the mingled scents of marshland and pine. Maybe it's all the cheese I've eaten, but I swear I can taste the terroir. ●

## ESSENTIALS

### GETTING THERE

Airlines serving San Francisco from the UK include United Airlines, British Airways and Virgin Atlantic from Heathrow, and Norwegian from Gatwick. KLM flies from Manchester, Newcastle and Edinburgh via Amsterdam. [united.com](http://united.com) [ba.com](http://ba.com) [virgin-atlantic.com](http://virgin-atlantic.com) [norwegian.com](http://norwegian.com) [klm.com](http://klm.com)

### WHERE TO STAY

Doubles at Hotel Petaluma from £80 a night, B&B. [hotelpetaluma.com](http://hotelpetaluma.com)

### HOW TO DO IT

America As You Like It has a seven-night Northern California's Wine Country and Coast fly-drive from £1,032 per person, including flights, accommodation and car hire. [americaasyoulikeit.com](http://americaasyoulikeit.com)

### MORE INFO

California Cheese Trail: [cheesetrail.org](http://cheesetrail.org) [visitcalifornia.com](http://visitcalifornia.com)