

Sweet cheeses!

Surely, asks Margaret Barca, food-mad Melbourne is the only city where a late night, licensed cheese shop would not just be considered... but considered necessary?



A picket fence on the footpath in St Kilda's ever-trendier Fitzroy Street? Holy cow! We're full of cheese jokes as we wander along one evening looking for Melbourne's newest fromagerie, Milk the Cow. When we get a little closer we see that as well as outdoor tables there's a rocking chair, and two cattle feeders (complete with plastic teats) hanging on the pickets. We're starting to wonder if this is going to be just a little bit Farmer Jones, but when we step inside it's definitely more dairy shed meets designer chic.

Melbourne prides itself on catering to every foodie whim, with sweet teeth especially well looked after. Churros and chocolate at midnight? Certainly. Panna cotta with a cheeky prosecco? Of course. Three-course dessert menu for dinner... well, why not? But a decent cheese platter – very hard to come by. Which is why Daniel Verheyen opened this savoury solution, and added a late-night licence for good measure.

The longish, narrow room has plenty of polish, as well as whimsical nods to the countryside origins of its produce. Cattle bars form a sturdy grid along the upper walls, framing fine wines, while hanging over the bar are what look like cow

chandeliers – udderly delightful light fittings made from milking machines. A wall of faux grass adds a... well, adds a grassy touch, while seating, naturally enough, is a combination of grass-green upholstered benches and a contemporary take on milking stools.

The soul of the fromagerie, however, is the sleek, four-metre long humidity-controlled display cabinet, with more than 100 artisan cheeses from around the globe. Everything is stacked, labelled and laid out with a food stylist's eye for detail.

It's a balmy evening and we sit at a tiny table just near the front windows where we can take in the action inside, and also see across to the park and the city skyline just starting to twinkle.

The staff, like the crowd, are young, trendy, friendly. Our waiter explains the menu and we launch ourselves with a 'Cheese & Wine Tasting Flight' for \$18 (there's also a beer flight and a spirit flight, \$16 and \$20 respectively). Four glasses (15–20ml a glass) and four cheeses are matched by the fromagère and sommelier, with a new selection once a week. It's a brilliant way to sample, with the cheeses perfectly paired.

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My platter includes a Zardetto prosecco with a lovely soft bead matched to a 12-month-old Spanish manchego, a blush-pink French rosé with a sliver of silky Le Dauphin brie and a syrupy Pedro Ximenes sherry with a sharpish Monte Enebro goat's cheese.

You can also sample a 'Cheesemonger's Choice' platter, choose wine by the glass or bottle and make your own cheese selection, or ask the fromagère to find a cheese to match your drink. There are little extras you can order as you go: quince paste, truffle honey, fig and walnut rolada, glace figs, crispbreads.

While our waiter seems knowledgeable, it's not



until we step up to the counter and start speaking to the fromagère herself, the big cheese, Laura Lown, that we really start to understand what Milk the Cow is all about. Laura, who worked with Paxton & Whitfield (the 200-year-old London cheese shop that supplies the Queen) before arriving in Australia just months ago, is young, passionate and impressively well informed. She's a fount of information on all things cheese, from style, making method and maturation, to amusing anecdotes about the origin (or possible origin) of some of the products in front of us.

Pointing to a wheel of cheese in the cabinet, Laura explains that it's a Perenzin formajo cioc al vino rosso (\$14.36 per kilo), a 'drunken cheese'

from the Venice region, developed with its merlot-coloured rind because it was traditionally hidden in wine barrels to keep it from the taxman (and why not, we say?). The cheese is pale and waxy with a subtle wine aroma.

The Rogue River Special Reserve Blue (\$200 per kilo) is another revelation, a cave-aged creamy blue from Oregon, USA, only made with milk from Brown Swiss and Holstein cows sourced during the autumn equinox before the winter solstice. How amazing is that? Hand-wrapped in shiraz vine leaves marinated in brandy, it has a creamy texture, ribbons of slightly crusty blue, and complex layers of flavour.

There's a roll call of Australian cheeses as well:

local ashed goat's cheese, soft farmhouse cheeses from Yarra Valley, L'artisan French-styles from Timboon, seasonal nasturtium-wrapped cheeses from Woodside in South Australia and more.

If you don't want to eat in, you can have a bespoke cheese platter for a picnic or buy any cheese to take away.

And Milk the Cow is open till the cows come home... well, 1:00am anyway. We take our box of cheeses and head into the night. ■

The Details

The verdict

It's specialist but well done and, like a good cheese, could mature into a Melbourne classic.

The score

17/20; excellent

We rated

Discovering the back story to some of the cheeses.

We hated

Only getting one crisp bread on our 'wine flight' platter.

Where

157 Fitzroy Street, St Kilda

Contact

03 9537 2225; milkthecow.com.au

The AT scoring system

Our review scores are based on a series of points, awarded across a number of categories including service, amenities, design, location, value, food and beverage offerings, and that elusive wow factor.

19-20 exceptional; 17-18 excellent; 15-16 great; 13-14 good; 11-12 satisfactory.

FABULOUS FROMAGERIES

Three other top Melbourne eateries you'll find cheese to please.



Richmond Hill Café & Larder

Cool, old school fromagerie harbouring 'barnyardy' smells and maturing cheeses of varied shapes, sizes and origins. We love the Langres, a traditional soft cheese from the Champagne region, with orange-coloured squiggly rind, washed in champagne during the maturation process. The cheese staff here know their stuff. Order a picnic cheese hamper, or a cheese tower for a big occasion. 48-50 Bridge Road, Richmond; rhcl.com.au



La Latteria

Melbourne's mozzarella Mecca – aficionados cross town for their fix of the best fiore di burrata and buffalo mozzarella this side of Roma. If you love fresh cheeses, this simple little shop is Italian formaggio heaven: cloud-like ricotta, pillows of mozzarella oozing cream, divine little diavoletti (smoked provolone stuffed with an olive and fresh chilli). The fresh cheeses are hand-stretched here daily – true artisan cheeses. 104 Elgin Street, Carlton; latteria.com.au



The Cheese Cave

A cave this ain't – it's light, bright and on a smart corner in 'the Village' (that's Toorak, for out-of-towners). It has a wall of well-labelled fine cheeses and helpful staff. Sample the Colston Bassett Shropshire Blue: bright orange-coloured and unexpectedly creamy, like a mild Stilton. The Wyngaard Chèvre Affiné, a lovely waxy goat's cheese from Holland is also delicious. 429 Toorak Road, Toorak; thecheesecave.com.au