

# Ask Culture

CHEESE EXPERT GIANACLIS CALDWELL ANSWERS YOUR BURNING QUESTIONS



PHOTO: Andrew Purcell

**Q:** I've heard it's best not to eat cheeses directly from the refrigerator. Why?

**A:** Although many cheeses burst with flavor and aroma when warmed to room temperature, there's absolutely nothing wrong with noshing a quick slice straight from the fridge. In fact, some taste terrific when cold, particularly soft, fresh styles (such as fromage blanc and chèvre). Powerful palate punchers, such as natural-rind blues and washed-rind stinkers, usually have enough chutzpah to delight in this way, too. But when it comes to hard, aged wedges with plenty of miles on their affinage odometer, warming them to room temperature can awaken subtle aromas and flavors that may otherwise be undetectable.

**NOTE:** From a food safety perspective, some cheeses are definitely best kept cool—and not warmed and then re-cooled again—to prevent the growth of unwanted bacteria. Soft-ripened Brie styles and washed rinds are at greater risk due to their lower acidity level.

**Q:** People often talk about how “sharp” a cheese is. What is sharpness, exactly?

**A:** “Sharp” is a colloquialism. Typically we don't use it when judging or grading cheese, and it has no legal definition. You'll hear it most often in the context of cheddar, where it's sometimes synonymous with “aged.” For example, young cheddars are called “mild,” while those over a few months old might be called “sharp” or “extra sharp.”

While the word is also interchanged erroneously with qualities such as “tangy,” “sour,” and “acidic,” descriptions of sharpness might recall a completely different notion: that of “bite,” according to cheesemonger Gordon Edgar, author of *Cheddar: A Journey to the Heart of America's Most Iconic Cheese* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2015). Research indicates that aged cheddars described as “sharp” contain more bitter peptides that shape flavor. A little bit of bitterness enhances this pleasant bite.

Of course, the concept of sharpness varies among individuals—but so do other cheese descriptors. Talking about cheese is an ever-evolving practice of building vocabulary. Beyond sharpness, try to sense bitterness, acidity, and subtle aromas while nibbling—you may find other words to express what your taste buds are telling you. **C**

**GIANACLIS CALDWELL** was the cheesemaker at Oregon's Pholia Farm for over a decade and has written several books, including *Mastering Basic Cheesemaking* (New Society Publishers, 2016) and *Holistic Goat Care* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2017).

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Got a question for the culture crew?



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