

Cheese Takes the Cake

Overseas, and now in the United States, cheese lovers order wheels for wedding cakes

WRITTEN BY LYNN FREEHILL-MAYE



While Christine Sotelo was daydreaming about her wedding last year, an idea popped into her mind. She didn't like frosted cake. Her French groom loved cheese. They were having a rustic reception at a Northern California lodge. What if they stacked cheese wheels like a tiered cake for dessert?

The Cheese School of San Francisco made it happen. Owner Kiri Fisher layered five cheeses, from Piedmontese selections to Cypress Grove chèvre. Sotelo's florist provided flowers, and Fisher added farmers' market produce. They served it with such gourmet touches as French cherries, truffle honey, and rose petal preserve.

Sotelo felt a little nervous that people would miss a bakery cake. But her guests ate up the cheese tower with surprise and delight. "It was by far the most talked-about thing in our wedding," Sotelo says. "People still come up and tell me how cool it was."

They may have thought of it on their own, but Sotelo and groom Hasan Daj had stumbled onto a popular international idea. Cheesemongers in countries such as Australia, Great Britain, and South Africa do good business in cheese wheel wedding cakes.

In England one of the foremost sources is the West Country-based Cheese Shed. Company director Ian Wellens sold 1,100 cheese wheel cakes last year, up from 820 the year before. The Cheese Shed's brisk trade is aided by its online "cakebuilder." The tool lets buyers drag and drop more than one hundred cheeses to see how they would stack up.

The virtual cakebuilder has proved addictive. Wellens isn't surprised. Customers can create up to 15 layers, playing with sizes and colors. They respond to a tower's striking looks, he believes.

"This pyramidal stack of cheeses is a way of presenting a cheese course in a dramatic, theatrical way," Wellens says. "As we know, cheese is not just exciting in terms of taste, but exciting aesthetically as well—the textures, colors, shapes, rinds. It takes advantage of those visual qualities and really foregrounds them."

In South Africa Valerie Elder owns the Real Cheese Shop in Cape Town. During the wedding season, she has completed two or

three cheese wheel cakes weekly for the past five years. Local palates are shifting away from sweet and toward savory, she believes.

The leftover wedding tower cheese also works well with the South African tendency to go on a post-wedding safari. "It's versatile," Elder says, "with an extended overseas bridal party able to eat the cheese over a weekend or a few days away in the bush."

In Australia the sister companies Cheese Culture, a wholesale business, and Say Cheese, a retail store in Adelaide's Central Market and an online shop, report ample orders for cheese wheel wedding cakes, typically served as the final course, but occasionally cut at the beginning of a reception. All together, the business makes or supplies cheese for 150 to 200 cakes a year.

Their first effort came a decade ago, when the sister-in-law of account manager Tania Cavaiuolo balked at the traditional Australian fruitcake. Cavaiuolo surprised her guests and served cheese instead. She still laughs, remembering the woman who poked the cheese wheels to see what they were made of. But in the end, Cavaiuolo says, it was a "roaring success." Now Cheese Culture annually provides wheels for about a hundred cakes, often to caterers who need expert help in creating them.

Say Cheese, meanwhile, created more than 50 cheese towers last year. The shop just showed examples at a bridal expo for the first time, and "the reaction has been very positive," assistant manager Jen Pedder says.

Back in the United States the trend seems poised to grow as it has abroad. Northern California's Cheese School had seen the idea popping up in the press, Kiri Fisher says. She then took more detailed inspiration from photos of towers made by England's Fine Cheese Company. Since depicting the idea on its website three years ago, the American

company has created about 20 cheese wheel wedding cakes.

Fisher's hopes are high. Americans' cheese consumption, appreciation for artisan-made products, and desire for unique weddings all seem to be on the rise. She predicts they'll dovetail into the cheese tower trend. "It's so easy to get pushed through the wedding mill," Fisher says. "This provides a way to do something that's traditional, but in a way that feels fresh." **C**

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Katherine and Stefan Fischer cut their cheese wedding cake at at Kunde Family Estate in Kenwood, Calif.