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SPLURGEWORTHY SELECTIONS FOR THE CHEESE BOARD

— The holidays are all about splurging, right? That means loosening up the wallet to purchase a cheese you wouldn't allow yourself otherwise.

At about \$32 a pound, Vermont Shepherd occupies the top price tier for domestic cheeses, but in the estimation of many, it's in the top quality tier, too. "It's as good as anything you can get from the Pyrenees," says James Ayers of Sunshine Foods in St. Helena. An aged sheep's milk cheese from raw milk - one of the few in the United States - Vermont Shepherd is modeled after France's Basque cheeses, such as Ossau-Iraty, and offers similar brown butter and toasted nut aromas. A cheese for connoisseurs. Pair with a serious Cabernet Sauvignon.

If you're traveling for the holidays, pack a 1-pound mini-wheel of Humboldt Fog (about \$20), the goat cheese with a ripple of ash in the middle. It's a Northern California classic, made in Humboldt County, and edible proof that California's goats are happy, too. Be sure you can keep the cheese reasonably cool while you travel. As it ripens, Humboldt Fog softens from the outside in; a perfect wheel will be creamy under the rind and still firm at the core. Walnut bread makes an appealing companion, along with a bottle of Honig Sauvignon Blanc.

With the dollar in free fall, fresh truffles probably won't be on many holiday tables this year, but truffled cheeses remain relatively affordable. One of the better ones in this crowded category is Sottocenere (about

\$25 a pound), a cow's milk cheese from Italy's Veneto region with a gray ash coating, black truffle in the interior and truffle oil rubbed on the rind. To my taste, it's overly aromatic for the cheese board but would be sublime in a Christmas morning omelet, melted over polenta or stirred into a sophisticated macaroni and cheese. Accompany with Champagne or Pinot Noir.

For novice cheese enthusiasts, a wheel of French P'tit Basque is a gentle introduction to aged sheep's milk cheeses, some of which can be aggressively piquant. At about 1 1/4 pounds (and about \$22 a pound), it allows you to make the elegant gift of a whole wheel without spending more than you want to or burdening the recipient with too much of a good thing. Mellow, nutty and sweet, with a caramel aroma that reminds me of creme brulee, P'tit Basque is one of those cheeses that, to borrow a phrase, nobody doesn't like. An off-dry fortified wine, such as a Spanish Amontillado, partners it beautifully.

A luscious, sexy cheese from France's Franche-Comte region, Fromager des Clarines comes in its own little round wooden box. This petite cow's milk cheese weighs about 12 ounces and, when ripe, will be fragrant, slightly sunken on top and possibly too runny to remove from its package. The producer, Jean Perrin, suggests scooping it straight from the box. Wrap the package with a ribbon and offer it with a bottle of Burgundy.

Although it's never inappropriate to serve cheese all by itself, a well-chosen condiment can dress up the cheese board. Blue cheeses and aged cheeses, in particular, welcome a sweet complement to their saltiness.

Jars of Branches Honey from Napa Valley's Katz and Co. (17 ounces, about \$10) are already prettily wrapped in parchment, in varietal flavors like citrus blossom and raspberry flower.

From the Italian firm of Colavolpe, famous for its Calabrian dried-fig confections, come Baked Montagnoli Figs (1 pound, about \$20) dipped in syrup and divine on a cheese board.

Anjou Bakery, a Washington state enterprise, had the clever idea to slice its fruit and nut loaf thinly and bake the slices into crunchy crostini (10 ounces, about \$12), a crisp contrast to creamy cheeses like Bellwether Farms Crescenza.

The price just keeps climbing on Spain's Marcona almonds (12 ounces, about \$18), but consumers can't seem to get enough of these buttery salted nuts with the rounded shape. Pack in a decorative jar and offer with one of Spain's premier cheeses, such as a sheep's milk Roncal or Zamorano.

Tools of the tray: Cheese experts forgo the fancy accessories because all one really needs is a good set of knives. Staff members at Cowgirl Creamery (1 Ferry Building, San Francisco; 415-362-9354) are particularly fond of Sagaform's Edge cheese knife (pictured above, \$39.95). The folks at 24th Street Cheese Co. (3893 24th St., San Francisco; 415-821-6658) say a cheese plane (pictured above), a soft-cheese knife and a cleaver are must-haves, and offer a set of all three from Swissmar (\$30).

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