

## TOP 10 TRENDS FOR 2016

### Soft Cheese Sensations

*With its luscious mouthfeel and dairy-fresh flavor, this category is poised to make big menu moves*

By Katie Ayoub

In a world that seems enamored with all flavors big, bold and funky, it's refreshing to see innovation on the other side of the spectrum. Thanks in part to the burrata boomlet, chefs are taking a second look at soft cheeses, innovating around where they land on menus. The rise in popularity of burrata, that wonderful fresh Italian cheese made from mozzarella and cream, demonstrates a love of fresh, clean dairy flavor. It also reinforces the power of artisanship, a value it delivers with each creamy-soft morsel. And although burrata's sun has not yet set, its warm glow has cast a spotlight onto other beautifully textured soft cheeses, offering a golden opportunity for menu development. Stracchino. Mozzarella and fior di latte. Fromage blanc. Stracciatella. Mascarpone. Ricotta. Farmer's cheese. Some of these are familiar, but they're now showing up in surprising yet welcome ways, like the Avocado Toast at Girard Brasserie & Brucherie in Philadelphia, with whipped avocado, chipotle honey, mascarpone and grapefruit on pumpernickel. Some of these cheeses are less familiar, but they bring with them menu interest, like the buñuelo served at Apeiro Kitchen & Bar in Miami, which features a buttery puffed pastry with stracchino and truffle honey.

Soft cheeses serve up a dollop of culinary pedigree, upgrading everything from pizzas and flatbreads to burgers, artisan toasts, pastas and scrambled eggs.

*"Soft cheeses add a textural component and a neutral flavor, unlike sharp aged cheeses. They add softness, moisture and a color contrast to any menu item from pizza and pasta to salad and vegetables, and complement sweet or savory flavors. A garlic-rubbed crostini topped with fresh ricotta drizzled with a full-flavored extra-virgin olive oil and cracked black pepper is quite craveable."*

- Charlie Baggs



Today's burrata is moving deeper into the menu. Layered into this Roasted Lamb Sandwich with mint pesto, its versatility and premium value shine through.

“Soft cheeses can be a premium upgrade, from a fresh chèvre sourced from a local farm—with the farm noted on the menu, of course—to more simple varieties, like ricotta and farmer’s cheese,” says Brian Darr, managing director at Datassential. That premium value is important to note; the perishability that makes soft cheeses an investment for chain operations also makes them a coveted foodstuff for today’s consumer. As diners look for evidence of real food and clean labels, featuring little touches of soft, luscious cheeses gives proof that sourcing with integrity and authenticity of experience are at play.

Flavor and texture are also paramount in giving this trend staying power. Soft cheese can be used as a soothing counterpoint to char on flatbreads, toasts and pizzas, offered as textural interest in a veg-centric plate of blistered carrots, or featured as a sumptuous element in a bowlful of pasta, lending palate-coating creaminess while imparting a pleasing, milky, subtle flavor.

### Veg-centric partner



Mascarpone brings an indulgent smoothness to sandwiches, like this one with Brie, prosciutto, spinach and fig preserves.

With produce taking center stage, it’s finding flavor allies in elements like crispy pork, salty bacon and dairy-forward soft cheeses. At The Proprietors in Nantucket, Mass., buttermilk-soaked mozzarella shares space with baby kale, carrot hummus, pickled butternut squash and caraway lavash. Francesca’s Restaurant Group, a Chicago-based Italian concept with 33 locations in four states, menus Burrata con Zucca, pairing burrata with roasted acorn squash, oven-dried plum tomatoes and pumpkin-seed pesto. At Cadet in Santa Monica, Calif., a side of wood-grilled carrots, fresh mint and pistou is christened with a luxurious spoonful of fromage blanc. And at Piccolo Sogno in Chicago, a beet salad is crowned with a dollop of buffalo ricotta.

*“Soft cheeses of all types are readily available, and there is a significant opportunity for housemade cheeses in this category that can differentiate a restaurant from its competition. Taking advantage of this trend is as easy as substituting a soft cheese in place of another variety, or in place of a soft-cooked egg on a regular menu item.” - Sharon Olson*

With produce-forward dishes, soft cheeses play a crucial role, offering a textural counterpoint while keeping the dish elevated with yet another strategic culinary touch. The veg-centric trend is catching fire because of its inherent tie to culinary technique. A flourish of ricotta or stracchino or mozzarella keeps the dish special, finishing it with a premium punctuation. “The luxurious gooeyness of soft cheeses plays into mouthfeel,” says chef Kathy Casey of Kathy Casey Food Studios and Liquid Kitchen. “With more producers of these cheeses comes accessibility. It’s an obtainable splurge.”

At Jasper’s Restaurant in Kansas City, Mo., chef-owner Jasper J. Mirabile, Jr., serves Eggplant Othello, an appetizer of eggplant filled with ricotta, sausage and Romano cheese, then rolled, baked and covered with

marinara. “I love the flavor of ricotta,” he says. “I use it a lot at the restaurant. It’s creamy and sweet with a fresh dairy taste. If you add just a touch of Sicilian salt, the flavor really comes out.”

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## **Putting Soft Cheese to Work**

by Ray Martin

The popularity of cheese continues to rise in all forms, but one of the most intriguing trends is the use of soft cheeses in a variety of cuisines and dayparts. Like butter, they can absorb flavors in many ways, and they can really improve the appearance, texture and depth of flavor of the simplest dishes.

I like making flavorful sandwich spreads with ricotta or cream cheese as the base, maybe adding Sriracha, jerk spice or horseradish. A popular new sandwich chain adds horseradish to ricotta cheese and spreads it on the sandwich roll before topping with warm braised short rib. Not only does it add flavor, it acts as an insulator and prevents the roll from becoming soggy.

Poutine with mascarpone dollops is amazing, as is breaded and lightly fried burrata, as a garnish to a hearty Mediterranean kale salad. The variety of textures and hot/cold ingredients make it a true delight on the palate.

## **On the Menu: A layer of indulgence**

Toast toppings are just one area where soft cheeses are making big plays, elevating all forms of toasted breads.

Whipped ricotta, olive oil, Grana Padano, grilled rustic bread — *Thistle Hill Tavern, Brooklyn, N.Y.*

Pumpkin bruschetta with trumpet mushrooms and mascarpone — *Roof, Chicago*

Cold-smoked salmon toast with farmer’s cheese, shaved red onions, capers, dill, Acme levain, simple green salad — *Plow, San Francisco*

Melted leek toast with burrata cheese and pickled Fresno chiles — *Love & Salt, Manhattan Beach, Calif.*

Apple Toast: Multigrain bread, fromage blanc, mint and pine-nut vinaigrette — *Publican Quality Meats, Chicago*

Roasted maitake mushrooms with arugula and smoked ricotta on toast — *The Finch, New York*

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## Boosting Toast and Brunch



The toast trend helps spark innovation and versatility among soft cheeses, with grilled bread a safe platform for unique flavor pairings.

Artisanal toasts keep making in-roads on menus, shapeshifting into bar bites, lunch entrées and brunch items depending on what’s adorning them. Soft cheeses are gaining visibility from artisanal toast builds, where diners are responding to the creamy, cool elements they bring to the table. At Stir Market in Los Angeles, the Fig & Ricotta Toast is finished with lavender honey and pomegranate seeds. At AQ by Acqualina in Sunny Isles Beach, Fla., the Greek toast stars mascarpone-feta mousse, quick-pickle cucumbers, marinated Castelvetrano olives, heirloom tomato jam, olive oil, red onion and micro cilantro on a ciabatta bun. Soft cheeses give toast stature, firmly defining them as a menu item and not a side dish. And with an assist from inclusions, they can help tell a flavor story.

“With the popularity of toast, it’s a perfect fit for soft cheeses and makes an easily executable menu platform,” says Casey. She suggests adding savory inclusions to whipped ricotta, with ingredients like harissa, preserved lemon and toasted Marcona almonds, for instance.

Soft cheeses are also making waves on brunch and breakfast menus. It’s yet another example of how they can help elevate a dish, giving it a creamy elegance and added menu distinction.

## Upgrade opportunities

Soft cheeses carry serious menu credibility, with both freshness and artisan cues. Along with their versatility, that makes them an ideal component in a number of builds. “The texture of soft cheeses can be a game changer on a menu item,” says chef Cristi Shipley with Food IQ. “A soft cheese on a hamburger brings a completely different experience than a slice of cheese.”

*“Infused mozzarella, cheese curds, stracciatella and quark are on more menus as operators are looking for an effective way to deliver the sweet, fatty benefits of a dairy inclusion that makes simple menu items shine.”*

- Mike Buononato

The Wood-Grilled Hamburger at Deli at Little Dom’s in Los Angeles stars burrata, pickled green tomato and bacon. A caprese salad gets a premium tweak by switching out mozzarella for salted burrata at the Twisted Grove Parlor & Bar in Scottsdale, Ariz. At Oscar’s Alehouse in Eldersburg, Md., pulled chicken is tossed in a Buffalo sauce with mascarpone, blue cheese and herbed cream cheese. Rigatoni alla Palermitana at Francesca’s Restaurant Group includes sautéed eggplant, zucchini, red and yellow pepper, onion, tomato and basil, but stands out more with its snow-white orb of fresh ricotta spooned on top.



A generous serving of ricotta upgrades the Pappardelle with Braised Colorado Lamb Ragù at Beast & Bottle in Denver.

Flatbreads and pizzas are turning to soft cheeses as finishing touches that showcase handmade artisanship. The Lasagna Pizza at Pizzeria Bianco Rosso in Camarillo, Calif., sports housemade meatballs, fior di latte, garlic and dollops of ricotta. As textural counterpoint on the thin-crust, brick-oven flatbread at Palladino's on Passyunk in Philadelphia, a stuffing of stracchino adds creamy texture and mild, dairy flavor.

Through their many attributes that resonate with today's diners, soft cheeses build an emotional connection from brand to consumer—an invaluable talent in foodservice today.

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## Spotlight on Soft Cheese

by Rob Corliss

Burrata paved a path, generating interest, but it can be cost-prohibitive for some operators. Now, chefs are looking to see what could be the next burrata. It is also about the “next news” in cheese coming from a formerly under-appreciated form. It's time soft cheeses start sharing the spotlight of aged hard cheeses.

### Menu advantages:

Texture - Soft cheeses deliver a pleasing texture that is an immediate complement to menu features.

Freshness - Fresh cues strongly resonate with a broad consumer base.

Artisan/Craft Appeal - Soft cheeses have artisan, hand-crafted attributes, important with consumers today.

### Application ideas:

As a topper on sandwiches, tacos, burgers, fries, pizzas, pastas, French toasts, omelettes

As a mix-in to hummus

As a creamy note on baked potatoes and steaks/proteins, almost like a compound butter

Whipped and used as a spread or as a dip

Create soft-cheese craft sauces to drizzle or dollop atop pizzas, nachos and more

Pair soft cheese with fresh seasonal fruit for a naturally savory-sweet dessert offering