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Cheese Curds: A Wisconsin Classic and a Madison Favorite

By Cara Hanson

We all know that Wisconsin is the land of cheese. And while it can be sliceable, spreadable, and sandwich-able, it can also be bite-sized and munch-able. Whether they're chilled and squeaky or hot and melty, cheese curds are a Wisconsin favorite.

Fried cheese curds can be found all over the city of Madison, but there are some restaurants that residents recognize as above-average. There are a few reasons why some fried cheese curds taste simply like delicious melted cheese, and others bring you to that next-level, "am I still on Earth?" feeling. According to Tony Hook, founder and owner of Wisconsin cheese company Hook's Cheese, fresh ingredients are the most important element of a high-quality cheese curd.

"90% of it is the quality of the milk. Good milk makes good cheese," Hook said. "And a little bit of know-how."

Hook began his business in 1976 in Mineral Point, Wisconsin, and since then, his cheeses have won many national awards, according to the Hook's Cheese website. If you're looking for a Madison restaurant that uses Hook's award-winning cheddar for their fried curds, check out *Graze* or *The Great Dane*.

The Old Fashioned is another Madison restaurant that has a reputation of having good fried cheese curds, and Brandon, general manager, agreed with Hook when it comes to freshness.

"The secret to our cheese curds is that we have fresh cheese every day," Brandon said. "They're fresh per order, never frozen."

They use cheddar from Vern's Cheese, a cheesemaker in Chilton, Wisconsin, for their curds, according to Brandon. He also discussed the importance of the batter.

"We use a simple batter because the cheese should do the work," Brandon explained. "It's just butter, milk and flour with 5 different spices."

What makes cheese curds different from other types of cheese is that they are the first form of cheddar cheese that is produced, according to Sandy Smith, representative of Carr Valley Cheese. Carr Valley



Cheese curds from Graze, made with Hook's cheddar curds and served with ranch (photo by Meghan Horvath)

Cheese is another local cheese company, and Smith has worked there for 26 years. According to Smith, you can tell cheese curds are fresh and good when they squeak and have a rubbery texture.

Cheese curds can be bought either fresh or fried in Madison, but according to Meghan Horvath, *Yelp!* elite member and former *Yelp!* employee, the fresh ones are better for snacking at the Dane County Farmers' Market on a Saturday, and the fried ones are better in a sit-down environment.

"There's something more filling and hearty about fried cheese curds," Horvath said.

Not only should the batter be simple for a good curd, but the ratio of ingredients is also important, according to Horvath. Horvath said that to her, breading is probably the most important element for good fried cheese curds.

"In terms of quality with cheese curds, it's most about them not being too breaded or too greasy," Horvath explained. "The cheese-to-breading ratio needs to be on point... The mark of a good cheese curd is when it's a lot of cheese."



Basket of cheese curds from The Tippy Cow, a Madison bar (photo by Meghan Horvath)

However, both Horvath and Brandon explained that there's more to cheese curds than dairy and breading; there's a certain classic Wisconsin culture that residents and tourists alike can appreciate when they sit down to a basket of hot cheese curds with friends or family.

"Cheese curds are a classic staple for Wisconsin, and it's something that really brings people together—either the fresh or fried kind," Horvath said.

The Old Fashioned was featured on *The Food Network* for their curds, and Brandon said their cheese curds have been great for publicity.

"It's nice being known for something that's a Wisconsin staple," Brandon said. "It makes us feel like part of this Wisconsin community."

Horvath went on to say that cheese curds fit nicely in social meetups.

"They pair really well with beer, which makes them kind of a social food," Horvath explained. "So, cheese curds can kind of just go along with hanging out with friends and drinking beer—you know, just catching up."

While fried cheese curds may go well with beer, if you're not of age, you'll find them on the menu as an appetizer at many Madison restaurants. If you'd like to sample the fresh and squeaky variety instead, check out the Dane County Farmer's Market.

If you want a chance to experience a fried Wisconsin cheese curd for yourself, a few of the places with high praise from Horvath and other Madison locals are found on this map:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1b8BQvdGQjVZ9aCIZ9u6hB23ovoo&ll=43.064611015331046%2C-89.41685999999999&z=13>