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Cheese is so hot right now. More and more, Americans, particularly New Yorkers, are passing on Kraft Singles and seeking caved aged gruyere. Everyone who's anyone knows that this season Cheese Whiz is out, camembert du Normandie is in. In a city brimming with old-world specialty stores, some classic New York cheese shops are experiencing a renaissance. So next time your chic downtown friends throw a wine and cheese soiree in their renovated loft space, dare to be the one who shows up with the round of petit billy and the wedge of hoch ybrig. You'll be the star of the party.

Murray's Cheese Shop

254 Bleecker St (b/w 6th & 7th Ave) • 212-243-3289



photo: David Freedenberg

The granddaddy of Manhattan cheese shops, Murray's was opened by Murray Greenberg upon his return from volunteering in the Spanish Civil War. Just over a year ago, the establishment moved into much roomier digs across the street from its former location. Since the move, Murray's, like the surrounding neighborhood, has gone way upscale. With cheese-aging caves in the basement that look like something out of medieval France, Murray's now ages each of its three hundred plus varieties of cheeses to perfection before they reach the counter. The prices may be shocking, but the onsite affineur guarantees you'll never even see a cheese that isn't at its ripest. To boot, the team of cheesemongers happily doling out samples ensures that you'll take home exactly what your belly desires. The new spacious quarters allows Murray's to offer their throngs of loyal customers everything from milk fresh from the farm to prosciutto that is the pride of Parma. The pannini in the front window are some of the tastiest in the city. And cheese classes on such varied topics as "Sake and Cheese Pairings" and "Sexy Cheeses" will have you talking like a connoisseur.

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Joe's Dairy

156 Sullivan St • 212-677-8780



photo: David Freedenberg

It's one those tiny holes in the wall people are so proud that they know about. Hidden in plain sight in the heart of SoHo, Joe's Dairy sells a few hard cheeses, oils, and antipasti (stuffed peppers being the highlight). But Joe's does one thing better than anyone else in the

city: fresh mozzarella. Boxes of whole milk mozzarella curd overflow to the tiny sales floor from the back room where mozzarella is made fresh all day long. If you want to sample mozzarella while it's still delightfully hot, you'll have to travel all the way to Mike's Deli inside the Arthur Avenue Retail Market in the Bronx. However, Joe's will do the next best thing and sell you a healthy sized ball, salted or unsalted, just moments after it has taken its cold bath. You can buy Joe's mozzarella at Murray's too, but to snag one in its infancy, still malleable as a stress ball, you'll have to find the hole in the wall.

Before his latest stint as a cheesemonger, Dave worked as a pickle man on the lower east side, a hot dog vendor in the stands at the minor league ball park in Coney Island, and a bread truck driver all over the city. He moonlights as a cabbie and offers private, customized eating tours out of his yellow taxi. The Famous Fat Dave's Five Borough Eating Tour website is temporarily housed at www.adam.belsky.com/ffdave.

East Village Cheese

40 3rd Ave • 212-477-2601



photo: David Freedenberg

Launched in 1981 on the advice of the great Murray Greenberg, East Village Cheese has become a culinary institution of its own. Aside from equally enthusiastic and knowledgeable cheesemongers, Murray's and its crosstown rival are almost polar opposites. East Village Cheese buys up surplus cheese in bulk and prices it to move. If only in the interest of customer turnover, sampling is taboo. As a result, the most expensive cheese at East Village Cheese is about the same price as the least expensive

cheese at Murray's. The windows are completely covered with magic marked poster boards advertising deals unheard of in New York's cheese world. The minimum cut they will sell is twice as heavy as it is at Murray's, but at these prices, they're doing you a favor.

Bedford Cheese Shop

218 Bedford Ave, Brooklyn • 718-599-7588 • www.bedfordcheeseshop.com

Hours: Mon-Fri 11 am-9 pm; Sat-Sun 10 am-8 pm



photo: David Freedenberg

Generally stores that can be found in mini-malls don't make it into NFT. But the Bedford mini-mall is no ordinary mini-mall, and Bedford Cheese Shop is no ordinary cheese shop. The minuscule store on Williamsburg's main drag is operated with a hipster flare usually reserved for places like Kim's Video. Before Murray's expanded, Bedford Cheese Shop actually topped Murray's for New York Magazine's 2004 "Best Cheese Shop in New York City" honors. Today, they don't have much on Murray's aside from the hilarious labels they use to describe their cheeses. Labels that boast such qualities as "like eating popcorn and bubblegum at the same time but not so gross" and "as close as your mouth can come to having an orgasm" will have you smiling before you even down your first sample.

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