



Cheese in Latin American Cuisine

From Patagonia to the Rio Grande, cheese is an ingredient used in many Latin American dishes. Although most people may not think of cheese when they think of Latin American cuisine, it's featured in soups, *antojitos* (Latin-American street food) and main dishes.

Historically, cheese arrived with the Spanish and Portuguese settlers. Europeans brought with them cows, sheep, and goats to supplement their diets with some meat and milk. Therefore, most Latin American cheeses have their origins in European traditional cheeses. South America is famous for its large-format mountain cheeses, including Reggianito from Argentina and Uruguay, Queijo de Minas from Brazil and an aged Gruyere-style from Ecuador. Central America and Mexico tend to have fresher or semi-aged cheese. The region is mostly known for its cow's milk cheese, but increasingly new cheesemakers are developing artisan cheese using sheep and goat's milk.

Cheese in Latin American cooking is sprinkled, melted as a base for a creamy sauce, and sometimes used as a stuffing. Fresh cheese in the region is also eaten along other foods as a side dish. Traditionally, all cheese in the region was made exclusively with raw milk; unfortunately this is no longer the case due to the often-unknown quality of commodity milk abundant in some Latin American countries. However, artisanal producers, where the cheesemaker maintains a small herd of animals, may still produce cheese using raw milk. These farmstead cheeses are most commonly found in small cities and local markets rather than in large supermarkets.



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In the United States, most ethnic markets, as well as large supermarket chains carry fresh cheeses made in Latin American styles such as *queso blanco*, *queso fresco* and *queso panela*. When buying cheese, avoid commercial cheese that uses chemical additives, preservatives or hydrogenated oils. This industrial cheese tends to be very salty, less flavorful and not a healthy choice for a

balanced diet. Instead seek out more traditional cheeses made using pure milk, especially that made with milk free of recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH), also know as recombinant bovine somatotropin (rBST).

Each bite of a traditionally-produced cheese delivers more flavor so you'll feel sated with smaller portions. **Studies** have shown that cheese plays a role in a healthy diet especially when eaten in moderation. It delivers calcium and protein, and because most cheese is fermented, provides beneficial bacteria good for gut health, too.