

# The Etiquette of Cheese

*Mr. Social Grace answers questions on cheese etiquette*



Etiquette expert and writer Charles Purdy, a.k.a. “Mr. Social Grace,” lives, works and enjoys local cheeses in the San Francisco Bay Area. He’s the author of *Urban Etiquette* (Wildcat Canyon Press, 2004) and his common sense advice has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Real Simple* magazine and many other publications.



**Dear Mr. Social Grace,**

**I enjoy brie and other soft cheeses, but I don’t care for the rind. If I’m at a party, may I use a cracker to scoop the good part out?**

**Many thanks,**

**“Brie Lover”**

Dear Brie Lover,

Absolutely not! Scooping the center out of a soft cheese is not only inconsiderate to other guests (who will arrive after you to find an empty rind where cheese should be) and to your hosts (who must then take time to trim the rind so the cheese is presentable), but also an insult to the cheese. Most rinds are edible – however, you don’t have to eat the rind. Simply take the full piece of cheese and remove the rind when the piece is on your plate.



**Dear Mr. Social Grace,**

**I was at a cocktail party recently and the hostess served a cheese that smelled absolutely horrible! I had to move far away from the buffet table! What would have been the appropriate thing to say to the hostess?**

**Sincerely,**

**“Holding My Nose”**

Dear Holding My Nose,

I would suggest that you hold your tongue, too. If you don’t like the look, smell or taste of something served at a party, the polite thing to do is to not

have any, with no comment (beyond “no, thank you,” if necessary). Any negative comments would be wildly inappropriate. Besides, you wouldn’t want to draw attention to what some people would consider an “unsophisticated palate,” would you?



**Dear Mr. Social Grace,**

**I’d like to serve some fancy cheese at my next party, but I don’t know much about cheeses or how to match them with wines and so on. What should my first steps be?**

**Thank you,**

**“Cheese Novice”**

Dear Cheese Novice,

You have nothing to fear. The simplest way to do this is to pay a visit to a specialty cheese seller or the cheese counter at a grocery store (the staff will be happy to answer your questions and let you try some samples). Even if you don’t have access to a cheesemonger, many books and articles have been written on fine cheeses and how to pair them with wine and food accompaniments – and this information is also easy to find on the Internet. But remember that if you like a pairing, it’s a good one. With only a little bit of research, you’ll be ready to do some cheese and wine tasting on your own.

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Dear Mr. Social Grace,  
What is the proper way to serve cheese at a cocktail party or other social gathering?  
Sincerely yours,  
“Harried Hostess”

Dear Harried Hostess,  
Remember a few basics: cheese should always be served at room temperature, so remove it from the refrigerator an hour or two before serving. Serve your cheeses without too much garnish and place the cheeses far enough apart so that guests can easily reach them. When serving a hard cheese, precut at least a few slices so guests can see an example of how it should be cut. Provide a knife for each cheese and make sure that there are enough plates and napkins for each guest. For “advanced” cheese tastings, you should place your cheeses on the cheese board or platter in the order in which they are to be tasted.



Dear Mr. Social Grace,  
How can I know whether I’ll like the taste of a cheese? What if I put some in my mouth and then don’t like it? Or what if I try a cheese rind that I don’t like the taste of? What should I do then?  
Best,  
“Picky Eater”

Dear Picky Eater,  
This is one of the many reasons why our parents instructed us to take small bites, as it’s much easier to swallow a small bite of unpleasant-tasting food than a big one. (While it’s not impolite to remove inedible things such as a bone or an olive pit from your mouth, chewed food is another matter altogether.) And keep in mind that when you are faced with an unfamiliar cheese, asking polite, interested questions is perfectly appropriate. Ask your hostess what kind of cheese it is and whether it’s similar to anything you might be familiar with.

Dear Mr. Social Grace,  
I was at a party recently, and several cheeses were served — each with its own knife, as I know is proper. However, I noticed at some point that the knives had gotten mixed up. Should I have said anything to the host?  
Sincerely,  
“Perplexed Partygoer”

Dear Perplexed Partygoer,  
Yes, but do so discreetly. Keep in mind, however, that it’s neither kind nor thoughtful to point out problems that are not temporary or accidental (or that may be embarrassing). You may tell a host that his cheese knives have gotten mixed up (or that his sink is overflowing, or that the police are at the door, and so on) — but you may not let him know that you don’t care for his floral arrangements or that his table is incorrectly set. This can be a fine line, so be careful not to cross it.



Dear Mr. Social Grace,  
I know about asparagus. I know about crisp bacon. Is cheese, too, one of those things you can eat with your fingers? I was at a cocktail party recently and the hosts had set out many finger foods and some cheeses — but there was no silverware for guests to use.  
Yours truly,  
“Afraid of Faulty Fingering”

Dear Afraid of Faulty Fingering,  
Although a thoughtful host will provide silverware (or even plasticware) for those guests who want to use it, you may eat cheese, or cheese on a cracker or a piece of bread, with your fingers. But don’t handle the cheese left on the tray. (Many cheese knives have prongs, which you use to transport cheese from serving tray to plate.) And anything that has touched your mouth should not touch food others will be eating! Double dipping is always a no-no.

