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Fromage Fête: California Artisan Cheese Festival

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It's time for the 18th Annual California Artisan Cheese Festival, happening from March 22-24. This much-loved festival, dedicated to celebrating the artistry of cheese-making, offers three days of gourmet delight, farm tours and educational experiences.

Since 2007, the festival has evolved into a three-day extravaganza of cheese appreciation, education and festivity, uniting California's foremost cheese artisans. The weekend celebration provides the cheese-curious a chance to savor and acquire new, limited edition and rare artisanal cheeses while mingling with Bay Area farmers, chefs, brewers, winemakers, distillers and gourmet food providers.

The festival kicks off Friday with its signature Farm and Producer Tours spanning across Marin and Sonoma (and even Mendocino) counties. The tours offer an immersive peek into the craft of artisan cheese-making at the source, the farms and places where it all begins.

Saturday attendees will enjoy cheese tastings, expert pairings and informative seminars at a variety of locales throughout Sonoma County, and can finish the day with the Cheese Crawl, a tasty walking tour experience throughout The Barlow in Sebastopol. The festival culminates on Sunday at the Artisan Cheese Tasting & Marketplace with a grand finale tasting event at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds in Santa Rosa.

“We are over the moon with how the 18th Annual California Artisan Cheese Festival has come together for 2024,” says Sarah Simms, president of the California Artisan Cheese Guild and co-founder of the festival. “It will be a true celebration of the best of California cheese and the makers behind-the-scenes who create the real magic.”

For 18 years, the festival has promoted the appreciation of local cheese and the sustainability of the cheesemaking community, educated about artisanal cheeses, and celebrated the creations of California’s farmers and cheesemakers. They have also contributed over \$180,000 in grants to nonprofit partners to foster local sustainable agriculture.

Producer and Farm Tours begin and end at various times and places, so folks can check the website to sign up for the tour that works for their interests and schedule. Tours offer attendees intimate glimpses into farms, creameries and producers showcasing the pivotal role of the farmer in cheese production. It’s a rare chance to enjoy guided behind-the-scenes walking tours where they can meet farmers, the animals and cheesemakers, and taste their creations.

“There is nothing like getting the chance to meet your favorite cheesemaker at the Cheese Crawl or cuddle with a baby goat on one of the farm tours,” says Simms.

The tours include curated offerings for every interest, including: “The Truly Artisan,” “Approachable Yet Refined with Cozy Lunch Vibes” or “Behind the Scenes Wines & Friendly Lunch” (with goats!). Tours will visit places like: Gold Ridge Organic Farms, Silver Penny Ranch, Nicasio Valley Cheese Co., Barber Lee Spirits, Marin French Cheese Co., Valley Ford Creamery, Black Kite Cellars and many more.

Specialized seminars, workshops and pairing sessions will be offered at various locations in Santa Rosa and Petaluma. These interactive sessions offer the chance to learn from industry experts, chefs and cheesemakers. Topics range from crafting one’s own cheese and charcuterie boards, to how to offer guests the ideal cheese and wine pairings, and cheese tasting with beer and aperitifs.

Culminating the event is the Artisan Cheese Tasting & Marketplace, where over 100 artisans gather every year to showcase their handcrafted cheeses, complementary gourmet delights, boutique wines, craft beers and artisanal ciders. Guests can peruse a wide selection of cheese, culinary literature, recipes and tasting experiences amid live entertainment. Children are welcome, but please note that strollers are not permitted.

Since 2007, the weekend-long festival has been dedicated to exploring handcrafted cheeses, alongside artisanal foods, wines and beers from California. Folks can attend one day or all three. With a variety of choices, from lectures, tours and tastings to meeting the farmers, the California Artisan Cheese Festival truly has something for everyone.

*18th Annual California Artisan Cheese Festival, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, March 22-24.
Info and tickets to all events: artisancheesefestival.com.*



Kary Hess <http://karyhess.com>