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The keys to cheese merchandising

[Andy Nelson \(/authors/50-andy-nelson\)](#)

Sep 17, 2026

The most effective cheese merchandising programs today aren't built around products.

They're built around occasions.

For years, specialty cheese departments were largely organized by type, brand, or country of origin, said Chris Eastwood, business development manager, US retail, for the California Milk Advisory Board.

While those fundamentals still matter, leading retailers are increasingly merchandising around how consumers actually shop: entertaining, grilling, brunch, holiday gatherings, and everyday meal solutions.

“The opportunity is simple. Most shoppers don’t walk into a store looking for a specific cheese. They walk in looking for ideas. Retailers that cross-merchandise specialty cheese alongside complementary items — fresh produce, charcuterie, crackers, nuts, spreads, and proteins — help remove friction from the shopping experience while increasing basket size.”

Just as important, he added, is helping shoppers understand why products belong together. The most successful merchandising programs pair placement with education through recipe cards, shelf talkers, QR codes, and sampling.

A display featuring burrata and mozzarella, tomatoes, and basil, for instance, is far more effective when it also provides inspiration for a quick summer meal. Likewise, a holiday entertaining display becomes more compelling when shoppers are shown how to build a complete board rather than being left to figure it out themselves.

“The retailers seeing the strongest results recognize that specialty cheese isn’t simply another category — it’s often the ingredient that transforms a purchase into an occasion,” Eastwood said. “The future of cheese merchandising isn’t about finding more space in the case. It’s about creating solutions that help shoppers confidently bring home everything they need for the moment they’re planning.”

Top tips from cheese.com

Shelving. Invest in shelving that allows you to display cheeses at eye level.

A Diverse Selection. Offer a diverse range of cheeses to cater to various tastes. Include popular choices alongside lesser-known or unique options. This variety caters to your existing customer base and invites adventurous palates to explore.

Create a visual feast. Visual appeal is crucial. Incorporate whole cheese wheels, blocks, and pre-cut portions on the shelves or cold food display cabinets. Cheese knives, cutting boards, and garnishes such as fresh herbs, edible flowers, or sliced fruit enhance the presentation. The colors and textures of cheeses can be visually stimulating.

Information and signage. Provide informative signage for each cheese variety. Include all possible details about the cheese and any awards or accolades it has received. Sharing this information helps educate your customers and improves the shopping experience.

Pairing suggestions. Recommend pairings with wine, beer, crackers, fruits, and condiments. Display these suggested pairings alongside the cheese to encourage cross-selling. Customers who see complementary items right next to the cheese are more likely to make additional purchases.

Seasonal displays. Keep things fresh by arranging cheeses in cold display cases or shelves to reflect the seasons. Create thematic displays for holidays, seasons, or regional cheese showcases. These displays highlight your creativity and capture the essence of the moment.

Cheese boards. Simplify the shopping process by creating pre-made cheese boards or platters with various cheeses, accompaniments, and suggested wine pairings.

Packing. Use clear or transparent cheese containers or packaging to allow customers to see the cheese's appearance and quality before purchasing. Transparency builds trust and encourages customers to try new varieties.