

## Soft Cheese Sensations

With its luscious mouthfeel and dairy-fresh flavor, this category is poised to make big menu moves

By Katie Ayoub

### Veg-centric partner

With produce taking center stage, it's finding flavor allies in elements like crispy pork, salty bacon and dairy-forward soft cheeses. At The Proprietors in Nantucket, Mass., buttermilk-soaked mozzarella shares space with baby kale, carrot hummus, pickled butternut squash and caraway lavash. Francesca's Restaurant Group, a Chicago-based Italian concept with 33 locations in four states, menus Burrata con Zucca, pairing burrata with roasted acorn squash, oven-dried plum tomatoes and pumpkin-seed pesto. At Cadet in Santa Monica, Calif., a side of wood-grilled carrots, fresh mint and pistou is christened with a luxurious spoonful of fromage blanc. And at Piccolo Sogno in Chicago, a beet salad is crowned with a dollop of buffalo ricotta.



“Soft cheeses of all types are readily available, and there is a significant opportunity for housemade cheeses in this category that can differentiate a restaurant from its competition. Taking advantage of this trend is as easy as substituting a soft cheese in place of another variety, or in place of a soft-cooked egg on a regular menu item.”

- SHARON OLSON

With produce-forward dishes, soft cheeses play a crucial role, offering a textural counterpoint while keeping the dish elevated with yet another strategic culinary touch. The veg-centric trend is catching fire because of its inherent tie to culinary technique. A flourish of ricotta or stracchino or mozzarella keeps the dish special, finishing it with a premium punctuation. “The luxurious gooeyness of soft cheeses plays into mouthfeel,” says chef Kathy Casey of Kathy Casey Food Studios and Liquid Kitchen. “With more producers of these cheeses comes accessibility. It’s an obtainable splurge.”

At Jasper's Restaurant in Kansas City, Mo., chef-owner Jasper J. Mirabile, Jr., serves Eggplant Othello, an appetizer of eggplant filled with ricotta, sausage and Romano cheese, then rolled, baked and covered with marinara. “I love the flavor of ricotta,” he says. “I use it a lot at the restaurant. It’s creamy and sweet with a fresh dairy taste. If you add just a touch of Sicilian salt, the flavor really comes out.”