



Whey to go!

How far do you have to travel to taste the best cheeses on the planet? Well, you could actually stay home as it turns out SA officially makes some really big cheese. World Cheese Awards judge Jules Mercer has the inside scoop



Fairview Brie de Roche (exclusive to Woolworths)

lanolin flavour, which is a little overpowering for me. But, oh, the *brunost*! It's a soft, salty, caramelised cheese made from cow's milk that might sound weird but, choose wisely (as with most things in life, you get what you pay for) and it will make you question everything you ever thought you knew about flavour. After pairing it with local cider, we felt suitably introduced to the local terroir before getting down to the real business at hand...

Experts from 29 countries – an inspiring mix of academics, scientists, food writers, chefs and master tasters representing diverse cultures and cuisines – gathered at Bergen's Grieg Hall, where we were faced with what can only be described as a dazzling vista of cheese (did I mention I love my job?). Each

judge – people with some of the finest palates and noses in the world – had to taste around 60 samples, and that's when some fantastic heated debate came into play. How much milk from how many animals was used? What is the unique skill of each cheesemaker? Is this a perfectly aged Gouda? What does it take to make the delicate wrinkled rind of a soft goat's cheese? Grassy? Creamy? Nutty?

It took a few hours to choose the top 16, then it was over to the international super jury to debate which one would be awarded top honours in a live-streamed judging session that I wouldn't hesitate to watch again – the humour, friendly jibes and camaraderie between different nationalities was pure entertainment.

And the winner was... Fanaost, an artisanal aged Gouda made near Bergen



“A caprino-style goat's-milk cheese made the top 16 and was declared best South African cheese”

using milk produced by a herd of just 12 cows, imparting the unique flavours of the fjords and earning it the title of World Champion Cheese.

Then came a wonderful dose of Mzansi pride. A hard caprino-style goat's-milk cheese called Kilembe from Belnori Boutique Cheesery not only made it to the top 16, it was also declared best South African cheese and won a Super Gold award, putting Ekurhuleni on the local culinary map (three cheers for Bapsfontein!). According to cheesemaker Rina Belcher, the name references one of her former homes: “Although we moved from East Africa many years ago, I left a piece of my soul there and many of our cheeses have East African names, hence Kilembe. As with all our cheeses, I add our own little twist. I must confess to being quite chuffed with the results this year!”

Yet another local Super Gold winner (78 were awarded in total) was the Fairview Brie de Roche, a white-mould-style cheese made using Jersey and goat's milk, and available exclusively at Woolworths*. As if there wasn't enough reason for me to feel patriotic and raise a glass of my favourite Norwegian cider to the craftsmanship and quality of South African producers. We really are showing the whey! **W**

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*Woolworths' cheeses took home more top awards: look out for the Roydon and Overberg (silver winners), and the Vintage Cheddar, Royal Ashton and De Leeuwen (bronze winners) at selected stores.

Norway is the last place I ever thought I'd end up eating biltong. But their version – cured lamb called *fenalår*, along with the famous *brunost* (or brown cheese) was one of the first things I ate in Bergen, gateway to the country's breathtaking fjords. I was in town as one of 230 judges tasked with choosing the best cheeses in the world at the World Cheese Awards. But before getting stuck into the mammoth job of whittling down 3 500 candidates to a single overall winner (in just one day of judging!) we had to experience some of the finest local foods on offer. Because travel with your palate you must, I believe, and both these delicacies have strong roots in the hilly coast near Bergen.

My verdict on the *fenalår*? Don't tell the Norwegians, but I could take it or leave it – dehydrating lamb seriously intensifies its