

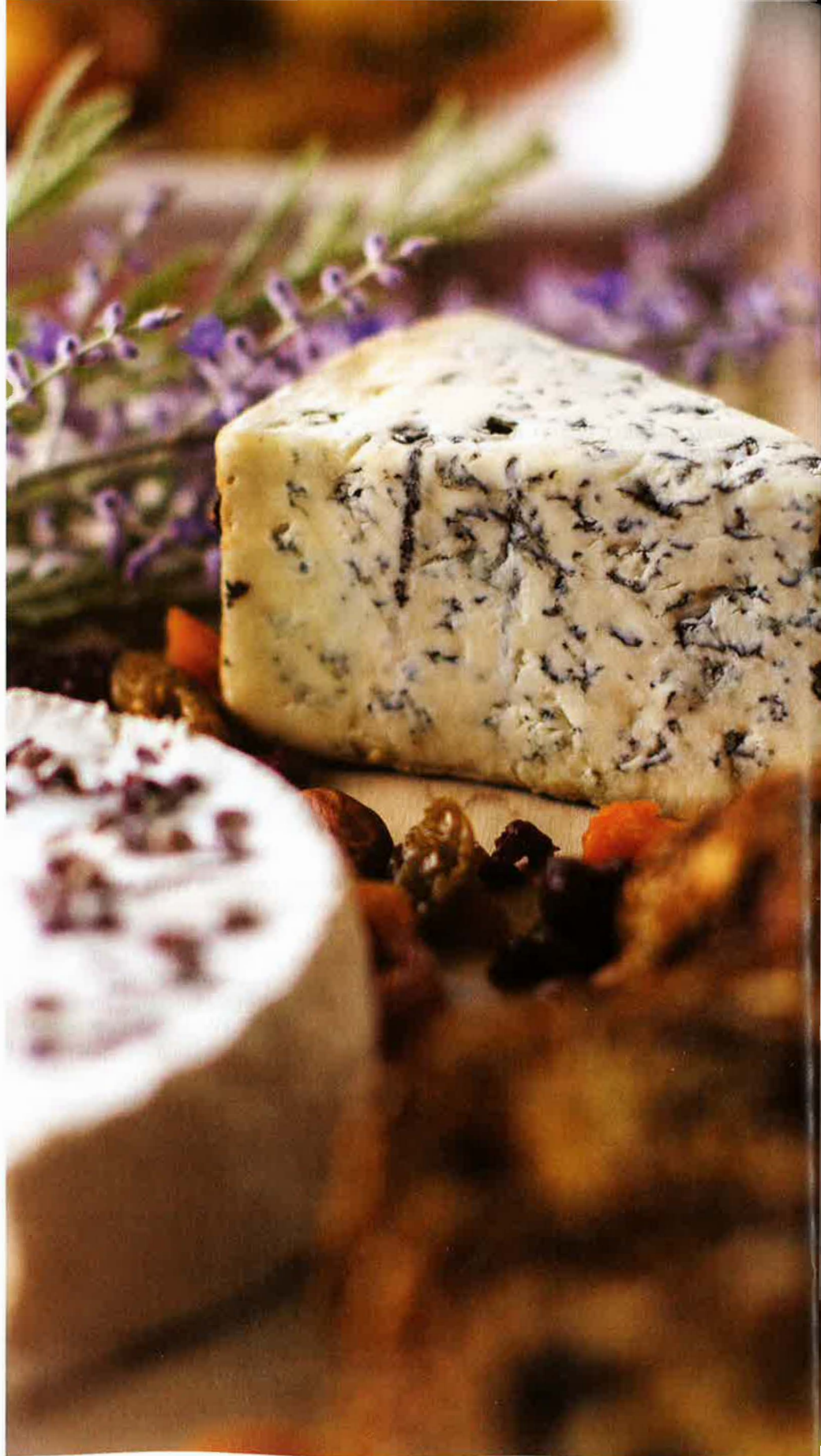
# Big Cheese in the Valley

By Janet Fletcher

**F**or a cheese enthusiast—that would be me—Napa Valley is heaven on earth. I've been teaching and writing about cheese for almost 20 years and have traveled widely to sniff out the best. I've prowled markets across Europe and taught classes from coast to coast. And I'm persuaded that no place on earth has more fine cheese shops per capita than Napa Valley.

My favorite merchants choose their stock carefully and train their staff to understand what they sell. They keep their counters clean and tidy and the cheeses in good shape. They let you taste before you buy, and they will cut you a mere sliver if that's all you want. Most important, they love talking cheese. Ask their advice and you'll walk out smarter than you came in.

**Oxbow Cheese Merchant** in Napa, in the Oxbow Public Market, carries cheeses from everywhere but its Northern California selection shines. Pick up gems from Tomales Farmstead, Nicasio Valley Cheese (I love the Tomino) and Boonville's Pennyroyal Farm. Then ask Peter Granoff at the neighboring Oxbow Wine Merchant to help you find just the right bottle to match.



*Napa resident Janet Fletcher publishes the Planet Cheese blog and teaches cheese-appreciation classes in Napa Valley. View her class schedule and sign up for her free blog at [www.janetfletcher.com](http://www.janetfletcher.com).*

The friendly cheese team at **Whole Foods** in Napa makes shopping there a pleasure. This chain invests a lot in education, and these folks know their stuff. I like to buy fresh cheeses such as ricotta and mozzarella here because the supply turns over so quickly. And the adjacent olive bar has Bernier Lucques, the hands-down best olives in the valley.

**Atelier by JCB**, managed by rock-star cheesemonger James Ayers, brings international cheeses and high-end accompaniments to Yountville. Come here for little-known treasures from Europe, like French Puits d'Astier from France or Camilla, a chamomile-coated aged goat cheese from Italy. Ayers also nabs some of the sought-after cheeses from Andante Dairy, whose owner is hyper-selective about where her cheeses are sold.

In St. Helena, **Dean & DeLuca's** two cheese cases get the neatnik award. They are

always pristine and especially well-stocked with sheep's milk cheeses (the buyer, Jackie Dixon, loves them) and Goudas.

I can count on finding cheeses I've never seen before at **Sunshine Foods** in St. Helena. Cheese buyer Dylan Sharp learned the ropes from Ayers, and he maintains his mentor's devotion to top-flight European and domestic wheels. The sophisticated selection would be noteworthy anywhere, but it's all the more remarkable in a small-town market.

Sometimes even a cheese snob like me has to grab-and-go. That's when I'm grateful for the selections at **Vallerga's** and **Browns Valley Market**, both in Napa. These two independent retailers aim higher than the mid-priced national chains, and I rely on them for everyday basics like Point Reyes Farmstead Toma, Mt. Vikos feta and Cowgirl Creamery's Mt. Tam. **NVL**