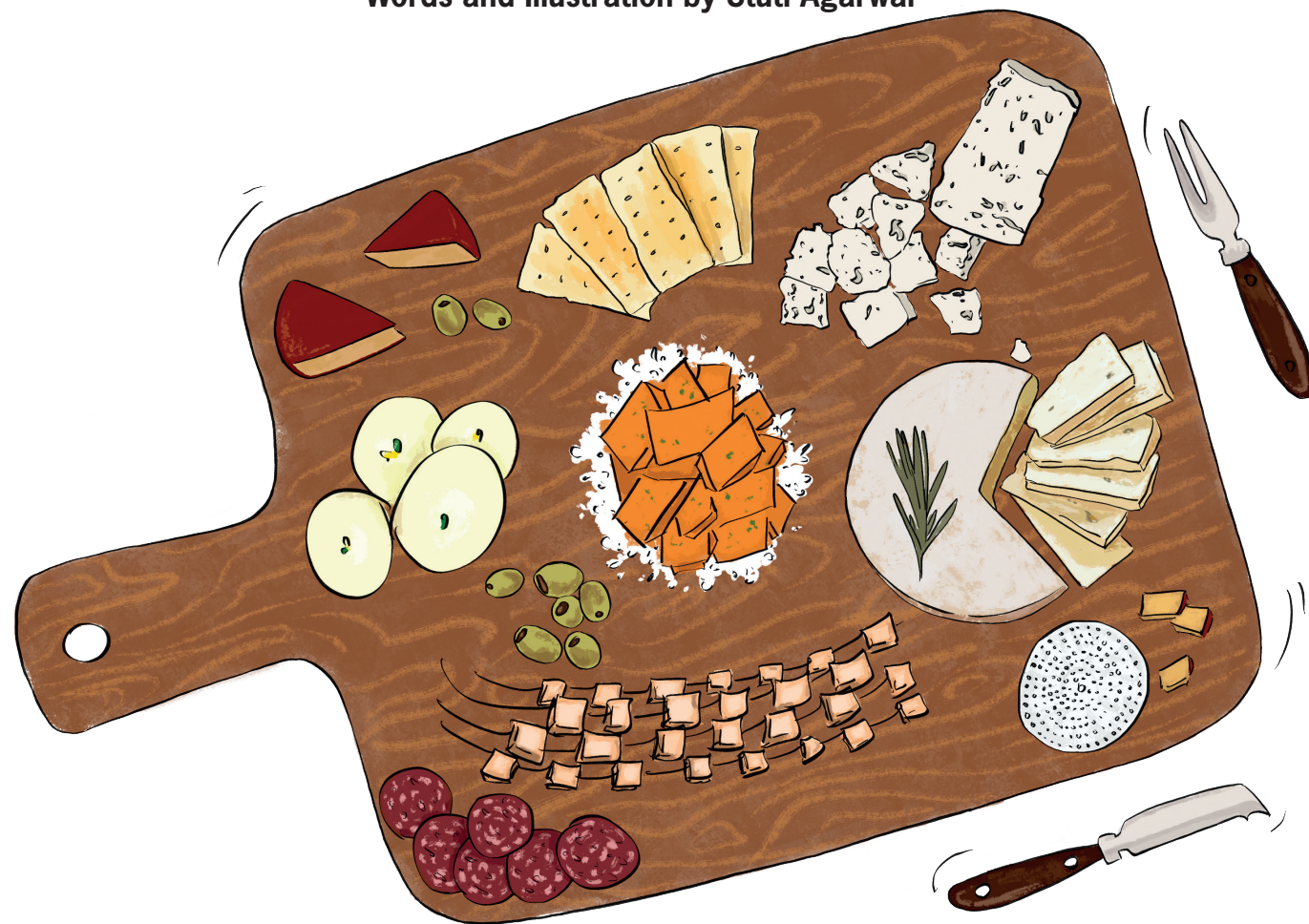


# A cube of Indian

Parmigiano Reggiano may have topped most world cheese charts, but there are homegrown contenders that are waiting in line.

**Words and Illustration by Stuti Agarwal**



**N**ot too long into the next month, the Guild of Fine Food UK, a British gourmet food journal publisher for those in the unknown, will announce the results for their now uber popular World Cheese Awards 2024. Surprisingly, or perhaps not so much (it's been the case for four years now), Indian cheeses have made the cut here among and as the global best. Sorry, correction: Indian cheese brands have made the cut. Don't get us wrong, we, of course, will cheer for all Indian wins, but it did get us thinking about the fate of our own cheeses, as opposed to the world-class quality of international varieties that won. Have we forgotten all about our own? Or

are we cityfolks so immersed in world culture that we have limited them to “regional” with our tight hold on consumerism and media?<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the case (an anthropological study to ascertain the culprit seems tough), but we think a shout-out to some of the country's own cheeses is much needed, and “can make an impact in taking forward our cuisines and displaying our craft and culinary diversity,” says Auroi Mookerjee (the must-look-out-for chef and culinary director at Bright Hospitality). Imagine if what happened to Parmigiano Reggiano translated to Kashmir's Kalari, or Sikkim's Chhurpi, or any of the many mentioned in the following pages really!

## KALARI, JAMMU & KASHMIR

From the nomadic Gujjar-Bakarwal community in the splendiferous Rajouri, Udhampur, and Poonch valleys of Jammu comes Doodh Roti or Maish Krej, more commonly called Kalari. The ripened taste of this goat or cow's milk cheese, and the stringy, chewy texture lends itself to a great Mozzarella substitute, although Mookerjee thinks it is more akin to Halloumi (a salty cheese popular in Cyprus). "The texture is firm, like Halloumi, and the way they eat is similar too—grilled on the *tawa* and served as is with some salt, chilli, and lime..." even onions and tomatoes.

There are also the Kalari pakodas, a popular wedding snack, and Kalari kulchas, perfect to satiate a mid-day hunger pang. Chef Manish Mehrotra Instagrammed a Kalari bun with sweet chilli onion that sure sounds like something that could put this one on the food map!



## BANDEL, WEST BENGAL

From the eponymous Portuguese colony in West Bengal, Bandel can be best described as “Labneh meets Feta,” Mookerjee says. Think dry and crumbly with a melt-in- your-mouth creaminess to it. Like Chhurpi, this one has two varieties, a creamy plain variety, and a smokey brown version, both equally salty. The smokey version is a perfect bar snack—even better with some olives, or add it to some crackers with a little pesto or even sautéed mushrooms— and the plain variety is perfect for a salad and pasta. Mookerjee’s latest with this one, his favourite he adds, is a butternut and Bandel hummus, which will soon be on his menu.



## CHHURPI, SIKKIM

A popular snack in the Himalayan belt of Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong, this yak milk (occasionally cow milk) cheese is often used in momo and chutneys too (the soft variety is used in these). The harder variety (the world's hardest cheese BTW)—the one smoked over fire, the one eaten like a chew candy, the one that can go two decades without spoiling, the one sent to Nepal and now world over as dog food for teething puppies (hey! It is yum regardless)—interestingly, works well with pastas as a parmesan alternative, although you might miss the umami in it. Fun fact: This was invented by yak herders who turned the milk to cheese in an effort to preserve excess milk that would spoil before it could be consumed or hauled down to markets since yaks graze only in high altitudes.





TOPLI NU PANEER, MUMBAI

There is no way your bourgeois mind does not go to that orb of fresh Burrata on a hot stone oven pizza, ready to be sliced open as soon as you see the plump, glossy, wobbly “paneer in a basket”. The secret ingredient to this one is rennet pills (the traditional version uses calf intestines or chicken gizzards as a coagulant) that not only separates the milk but also ensures that the cheese retains the design of the basket (topli) it is left to set in. And although unlike the Burrata this one is salty, it is also mostly eaten raw, with a pinch of cumin, often served as a starter in Parsi weddings and navjote, in the community where the origin of this cheese can be traced. “There is also Dhakai Ponir, which we often get in Bengal and is something between Feta for its saltiness with the air pockets like Emmental,” Mookerjee reminds us. Swap your Burrata with a Topli in your summer salad, or even try it on some canapés or bruschetta. The late chef Floyd Cardoz and chef Thomas Zacharias (formerly of The Bombay Canteen) had, on discovery of this cheese, incorporated it in what became a popular vegetarian main course—a bowl of maa ki dal topped with the Topli nu Paneer and served with a sweet potato paratha, pickle, chutney, and raita.



(Topli) [INSTAGRAM / CHFKUNAL](#); (Chhena) [COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG / SATDEEP GILL](#); (Goan Perad) [COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG / YOTON](#)



CHHENA, WEST BENGAL

An Indian mother’s favourite for its easy-to-make recipe (heat milk and curdle it with some buttermilk or lemon) and lightness on gut, this one from Bengal is often featured in popular desserts—you’ve obviously heard of rasgulla (in picture), rasmalai, cham cham, you can guess the others. Although, its crumbly and soft texture, much like Ricotta, works really well on toast. Add some pesto, even olive oil grilled garlic tomatoes for quite the gourmet bite.

QUDAM, JAMMU & KASHMIR

This one made and found only in traditional Gujjar-Bakarwal homes of Jammu and Kashmir is as rare as a cheese comes, which is why there is little known about it other than its rubbery, but easy to crumble texture and salty taste, since this is made using the leftover whey from Kalari cheese and dried with salt to ensure a long shelf life.

GOAN PERAD, GOA

Another one with Portuguese roots, the Goan Perad or guava cheese is quite the festive favourite around Christmas and very different from all the others given that it is made from, well, guavas! Slow cooked until fudgy, the jam is then infused with spices and left to set. Perfect as a snack, this one is also a great addition to salads for the sweet fruity burst and even tarts.



(Khoya) [COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG / MIANSARI66](#); (Bandel) [COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG / TRINAYAN13](#); (Cheese cart) [GETTY IMAGES.COM](#)

CHURU, SIKKIM

An integral part of the now-made-famous-by-Deepika-Padukone Ema Datshi or rotten cheese soup, the national dish of Bhutan, this one comes closest to Blue Cheese, even Limburger. Churu, in Nepali, means ‘spoiled cheese’, and is extremely aromatic, blue, with a pungent flavour and a mouldy rind. Let’s just say it is not everyone’s cup of tea, but if you don’t mind an experiment, might we remind you of chef Manish Mehrotra’s much lauded Blue Cheese naan at Indian Accent that might do with a Churu replacement, or perhaps Sikkim’s use of Churu in meat stews is the way to go.



KHOYA

You’ve probably heard of this one, more so if you live with halwa loving (and cooking) people, but it is possibly the most used cheese of the country, after paneer. Unlike most others, Khoya is made using milk and not whey, and by reducing milk to a solid consistency. Also unlike the others, it is integral to sweets more than savoury—pedas, kalakand, of course halwas being some of them. Not to say there aren’t savoury applications. Its creaminess lends it to be a great addition to gravies and curries, although Khoya kachoris are also a great blend of sweet-saltiness!



WHERE TO BUY

**Kalari**, ₹770 (500gms)  
**Buy it here:** [himalayancheese.com](#)

**Chhurpi**, ₹300 (250gms)  
**Buy it here:** [himalifresh.com](#)

**Topli nu Paneer**  
**Buy it here:** Get in touch with Delna Tamboly, a Parsi home chef at +9198206 60994 for a fresh batch.

**Goan Perad**, ₹150 (200gms)  
**Buy it here:** [pedropao.com](#)

**Kalimpong Cheese**  
**Buy it here:** Get in touch with Samuel Yonzon of [healthilicious\\_kalimpon](#) at +91 95477 62500 for a fresh batch.

**Khoya**, ₹650 (500gms)  
**Buy it here:** [kazeliving.com](#)

While Chenna is easily available in any sweet shop near you, some (as of now) will require a bit of a culinary journey, although, who knows, if the others become popular, all of them might be a click away too!



KALIMPONG CHEESE, WEST BENGAL

Back to the hills, this one made in, duh!, Kalimpong is a semi-hard cow’s milk cheese and a close cousin of Gouda. It was first founded by Brother Abraham, a parish priest in Sikkim, and brought to the town in the 19th Century by Swiss missionaries. Think Gouda-like smoothness with a slight crumble, distinct acidity, and a mild flavour that can grow when matured. We’ve made many a grilled cheese with this, although it also fits perfectly on a charcuterie board. But our favourite has to be on pizza as it is often used in the region.

“And...I might be throwing a curveball, but we can’t talk about Indian cheeses without talking about Amul cheese! After all, it continues to be what most of India knows and consumes as cheese. It truly defines home and street cooking,” says Mookerjee. But, for this one, we might have to let it “enjoy the rewards and not care about the awards” (get it, get it?), nevermind.