



Hispanic-Style Cheeses Heat-Up Mexican Cuisine

As the Hispanic population in the United States continues to grow, demand for authentic Mexican cuisine is on the rise. Mexican cuisine is quickly becoming mainstream, and ethnically inspired dishes are now common on menus.

From fresh produce and spices to unique varieties of cheese, quality ingredients play an important role in authentic Mexican cuisine. Additionally, Hispanic-style cheese production is growing to meet the rising demand. In 2007, more than 190 million pounds of Hispanic cheese were produced. A large percentage of Hispanic-style cheese is produced in Wisconsin, with the Dairy State accounting for 26 percent of the nation's total production.

But quantity is only part of the Hispanic-style cheese story; quality and variety of these widely appealing cheeses is crucial. The awareness of these cheeses in the broader population has ignited a desire for their versatility, unique flavors and convenience far beyond the traditional Hispanic niche.

One major asset of Hispanic-style cheeses is their mild flavors which complement rather than compete with bolder flavors used in many Latino dishes. In many highly spiced dishes, such as enchiladas or moles, the cheese adds a cooling, soothing creaminess to contrast the bold flavors of chiles and native seasonings.

Here is a sampling of Hispanic-style cheeses made today in Wisconsin:

Asadero – a tangy, slightly acidic cheese with a creamy texture, light, fresh flavor and excellent melting properties.

Sprinkle shredded Asadero on nachos for authentic flavor or layer with corn tortillas and tomatillo sauce for a Mexican-style lasagna. Or, create a dessert taco by mixing shredded Asadero with diced mango, papaya and nectarines and sprinkle with nutmeg and powdered sugar.

Cotija or Queso Anejo – often referred to as the “Parmesan of Mexico,” Cotija is a very dry, hard, crumbly cheese with a strong, sharp flavor. Cotija holds its shape when heated, never melting, making it an ideal garnish or seasoning for Mexican cuisine.

Serve grated Cotija atop tacos, tostadas, salads and Mexican soups.

Queso Anejo Enchilado – this firm, slightly crumbly and salty cheese is rolled in paprika or chile powder to give it a flavor boost and a bright red-orange exterior. The cheese has a firm ivory interior and is often used in combination with other softer, mild cheeses such as Monterey Jack.

Anejo Enchilado is an ideal melting cheese, perfect for quesadillas and enchiladas. Top a Mexican-inspired pizza with shredded Anejo Enchilado, salsa, peppers and black olives, or sprinkle shredded Anejo Enchilado over tortilla soup.

Queso Fresco – this sweet, mild and fine grained cheese variety has been made by Hispanics in their homes for centuries. Today, Queso Fresco is one of the most common cheeses throughout Latin American countries and is growing in popularity in the United States.

Queso Fresco, also sometimes marketed as Queso Ranchero, is often crumbled over dishes such as enchiladas. Sprinkle milky Queso Fresco over roasted poblano chile peppers or layer with grilled portobello mushrooms and red bell peppers topped with a lime-cilantro dressing.

Panela – yet another of the fresh Hispanic-style cheeses, Panela has the fresh, milky taste of the curd and is often sliced to top salads or other cold dishes. A classic Oaxacan dish is smoothly sliced Panela with warm roasted tomato-chile sauce.



Queso Blanco – this fresh, crumbly cheese has a curd-like texture and slightly salty flavor. Queso Blanco with fruit, a specialty of Wisconsin, contains pieces of natural mango and pineapple for a slightly sweet flavor. Queso Blanco is ideal for frying because it becomes warm but does not melt with heat.

Serve crumbled Queso Blanco in enchiladas, chili rellenos and soup. Crumble it over a cactus paddle (nopales) or other green salad or over black or pinto beans.

Queso Quesadilla – a popular melting cheese, Queso Quesadilla has a smooth, creamy texture and mild flavor.

Queso Quesadilla is traditionally used in quesadillas or as a filling for enchiladas. It also makes an excellent addition to breakfast dishes – top authentic huevos rancheros with a Queso Quesadilla sauce or melt the cheese in a spinach and pepper quiche.

Monterey Jack – although not strictly authentic, Monterey Jack varieties have a great affinity for Latin cuisines, especially those from Mexico and the American Southwest. Its buttery flavor and creamy melting properties make Monterey Jack a delicious contrast to bold Mexican flavors.

Wisconsin offers the following Monterey Jack varieties including, Jack with Habanero, Monterey Jack with Chipotle, Pepper Jack and Salsa Jack.

To learn more about Wisconsin Hispanic-style cheeses and to access the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board's recipe database, trend information and foodservice marketing tools, visit

www.foodservice.Wisdairy.com.