

**HOLIDAY GIFT IDEAS FOR CHEESE LOVERS**



the word on cheese

# culture



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THROUGHOUT **COSTA RICA**, INNOVATIVE  
CHEESEMAKING RISES AMONG A CULTURE  
RICH IN ARTISTIC TRADITION

TREASURES  
IN THE  
TROPICS

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
GIANACLIS CALDWELL





*Pura  
vida,  
the  
pure  
life.*

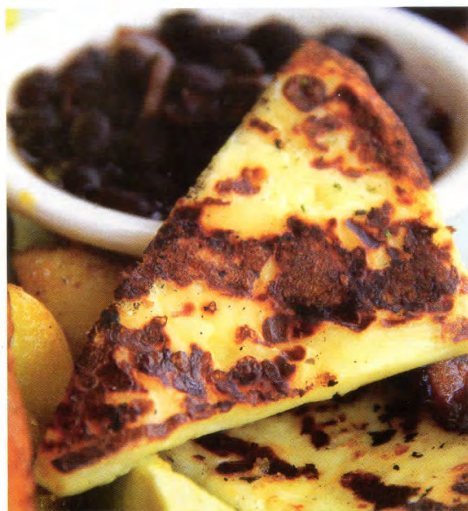
This is the omnipresent, unofficial motto of Central America's tiny gem of a country, Costa Rica. Already a mecca for those seeking biodiversity and tropical getaways, Costa Rica offers the additional appeal of a government-supported hospitality industry and a portfolio of culinary treasures including cacao, coffee, pepper, and exotic fruits. For those of us who consider a true vacation incomplete without fine cheese, the artisans of Costa Rica craft curds that are equal to the best in the world yet also reflect a people and place where "the pure life" is more than a motto.







**THIS PAGE:** Dairy goats graze the hillsides of Costa Rica, left. *Basílica de Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles* stands in Cartago, Costa Rica, below. Fried queso fresco is served with black beans and fried plantains, bottom left. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** *Cabra Rosa* goat's milk cheeses are wrapped in leaves, top. Cloud forests provide forage for goats at Monte Azul Creamery, below.



**C**heese is not new to this region. Fresh, versatile products such as *queso blanco* and *queso fresco* have long served as staples in the Costa Rican diet. Natives, known within the country as *ticos*, enjoy these cheeses alongside other traditional foods such as fried plantains, black beans, rice, and thick handmade tortillas.

Newer to the scene are cheeses appreciated for their own nuanced qualities, including bloomy-rind goat cheeses dusted with coffee berry or cacao bean ash; fresh discs sprinkled with golden specks of bee pollen (from Africanized honey bees, also known as killer bees); and cow's milk wheels of every shape and size—often aged in the open air and ambient temperature of rain and cloud forests.

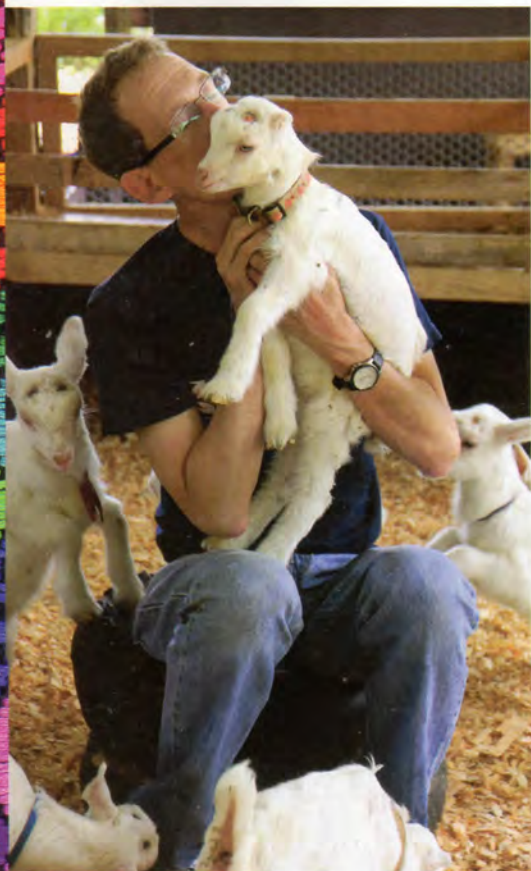
### TROPICAL TERROIR

In a country where every resource, from water to livestock feed, must be managed sustainably, dairy farms take an approach that is both primitive and progressive. Cattle graze where grasses grow, steep hillsides of

fodder are harvested by hand using machetes, wastewater is reused, and even the tiniest cow dairy is likely to use a methane digester to turn manure into electricity. Consequently, cheeses made at these farms reflect the influence of the land on the milk and the cheesemaking process.

The country is only 175 miles at its widest point, but elevation varies dramatically and microclimates abound. Narrow, winding roads with hairpin turns—some so extreme that trucks block traffic as they perform three-point turns to make it around the bend—are the norm. During just a couple hours of a Dramamine-worthy commute, one can traverse the cool, mid-elevation coffee plantations; the steep, sulphur-scented volcanic mountains of cloud forest dairies; and the hot plains of tropical rainforests, pepper plantations, and lush fields where Brahman cattle fatten. This diversity is reflected exquisitely in the flavors of cheese, as well as in the way that each cheesemaker chooses to craft his or her work.





### NEAR THE CAPITAL

About an hour's drive north of San José is Freddo Leche, a tiny creamery nestled in a cloud forest at 5,000 feet above sea level. The soil here, rich with nutrients expelled by earlier eruptions of two flanking volcanoes, nurtures succulent grasses on which nine Jersey cows graze. On the day of our visit, cheesemaker Sebastian Dobles is busy stirring milk in a vat over an open flame and dehooping some of the farm's fresh mozzarella-style cheese. The dairy has the distinction of also offering a hiking tour to view the active volcano Poás.

Back in San José—the country's capital and largest city, a paradoxical place where a simple turn of a corner might transform the landscape from urban jumble to jungle farm and back again—we visit Ark Herb Farm and Costa Rica Meadery. Mead producer and cheesemaker Alejandra Araya uses single-source honey collected by her beekeeper

**THIS PAGE:** Costa Rica landscapes range from cloud forests to the coast of the Pacific Ocean, left. Randy Langendorfer became a goatherd and cheesemaker at Monte Azul Creamery out of necessity, bottom left. Cheese at Furca Restaurant, below.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Jersey cows graze near San José.

husband, Michael Lindeman, in both her golden fermented beverage and gorgeous Cabra Rosa goat's milk cheeses. A taste of her fig leaf-wrapped, bee pollen- and lavender-dusted, fresh, raw-milk chèvre paired with the farm's six-month-old dry hibiscus honey mead brings tears to my eyes—it's that good. Araya believes they pair so well together "because the goats and the bees are close to each other, 20 minutes apart," she says. "The bees get pollen and nectar from the same type of plants that the goats eat—pairing at the most basic level."

### IN THE SOUTH

Traveling south from San José along the Pan-American Highway (often more of a two-lane road than a major thoroughfare), we cross the Continental Divide and hug the Pacific slope while descending into the valley town of San Isidro de El General. From there it's a short trip to the tranquil Monte Azul Resort, situated near the rugged and unspoiled Chirripó National Park, home to the country's highest mountain of nearly 13,000 feet. The resort, an amalgamation of posh bungalows, artist retreat, and sensory inspiration—including opulent jungle flora and cheeky white-faced monkeys—also produces artisan goat cheeses.

The Monte Azul Creamery sprang from a need for cheese. Owners Carlos Rojas Jara, a native Costa Rican, and partner Randy Langendorfer sought to serve only the best









## Cheesemakers

### Freddo Leche Tours

The farm offers a two-hour tour that includes a view of the Poás volcano nearby and a cheese tasting. Visitors may buy cheese in the farm shop.

Alajuela

+506.2482.1024

[freddolechetours@gmail.com](mailto:freddolechetours@gmail.com)

### Quesos Canaán

Buy cheese or take a cheesemaking class at this quaint, down-to-earth dairy and farm stand.

Canaán

+506.2742.5125

[quesoscanaan@hotmail.com](mailto:quesoscanaan@hotmail.com)



## Food & Dining

### Sibú Chocolate

This chocolatier produces exquisite handmade chocolates with unique combinations, such as fresh lime truffle with coriander, enrobed in milk chocolate, that reflect Costa Rica's bounty. Enjoy a cheese plate along with the sweets in the inviting café.

San Isidro de Heredia

+506.2268.1335

[sibuchocolate.com](http://sibuchocolate.com)

### Furca Restaurant

Farm-to-fork dining unfolds in a modern, upscale yet relaxing atmosphere. A case of local cheeses graces the foyer. Try an excellent Costa Rican craft beer from Quebrador Brewing Company.

San José

+506.2220.4909

[furca.cr](http://furca.cr)

### Cocina Al Mercat

Chef-owner José Pablo Gonzales combines the influence of his studies at the Cordon Bleu, the bounty of Costa Rica, a respect for the land, and love for cheese in this special farm-to-fork dining and shopping experience.

San José

+506.2221.0783

[almercat.com](http://almercat.com)

### Mercado Central

San Isidro de El General and San José both have bustling central markets (think full-time farmers' markets) that sell produce, local crafts, prepared food, and cheeses from across the country.



## Accommodations

### Monte Azul

This resort and dairy boasts luxurious bungalows in a jungle setting. The property is filled with paintings, sculptures, hiking trails, goats, and wildlife, as well as a world-class restaurant and bar. Near San José, Monte Azul cheese is available at Supermercado Saretto in Escazú. San Isidro de El General

+506.2742.5222

[monteazulcr.com](http://monteazulcr.com)

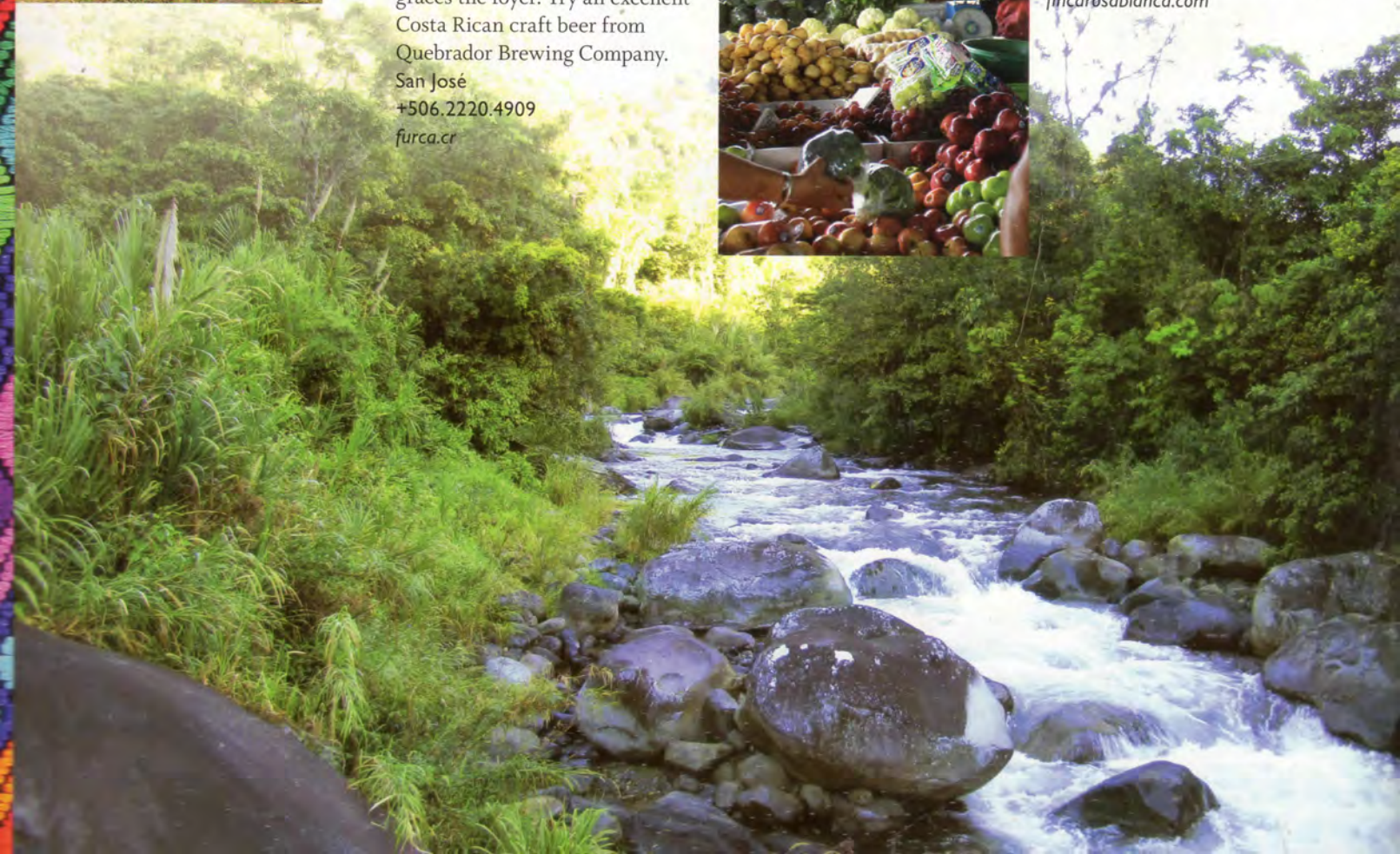
### Finca Rosa Blanca Coffee Plantation Resort

This novel, comfortable hotel on an organic coffee plantation is near many activities, yet secluded and quiet. The service, food, and accommodations are incredible.

San José

+506.2269.9392; 1.305.395.3042

[fincarosablanca.com](http://fincarosablanca.com)







Wilberth Mata and his son, Christian, make cheese at Queso Canaán, above. Queso Canaán produces small batches of Swiss-inspired cheese, left.



local foods at the hotel's open-air restaurant, Café Blue. Out of necessity Langendorfer became both goatherd and cheesemaker.

"We founded Monte Azul on the principle that people are capable of doing more than they realize," the affable Jara explains. "It is one of the reasons we left our previous jobs and lives in California. Moving to the mountains and isolation of Costa Rica allowed us the freedom, and motivation, to be more self-sufficient."

It's an understatement at best. The pair has learned not only to make cheese but to construct buildings and furniture; design, print, and assemble bedding; and create seasonal, local, gourmet menus—all services they now offer to other hotels.

I doubt that any farmstead creamery in the Americas inhabits a more breathtaking locale. The goats, housed near the top of a ridge high above the guest casitas, enjoy life in paradise, roaming precarious slopes for forage and lounging in the dairy barn. With the Chirripó Pacifico River thundering in the background and steep jungle looming, it's fitting that the Monte Azul cheeses, which are named after stunning natural features (and one favorite goat, Bettina), are delicious works of art.

A few miles farther, across a fjord-like valley of terraced pastures (created by grazing cows' natural pathways), is Quesos Canaán, the small farmstead of Wilberth Mata and his wife, Kattia Hernández. Named after the local village, the creamery produces small batches of Swiss-inspired cheese made from the milk of a few Jersey and Jersey-cross cows. The couple decided to make these cheeses after a chance meeting with a Swiss cheesemaker; Mata has fond memories of eating similar cheeses as a child—cheeses that were sent to Costa Rica through aid programs to feed the needy. Mata and Hernández invited their new Swiss friend, Martin Chatagny, to teach a two-day cheesemaking class at their farm. By the end of the class, only two of the original 17 students remained: Mata and Hernández. The farm, powered entirely by energy from the couple's small methane digester, is visited regularly by tourists and *ticos* alike, many of whom buy wedges of the complex, nutty, open air-aged cheese—often for sustenance during a hike up the towering Chirripó.

Upon returning to the chill of winter in Oregon, I savor the last bit of cheese purchased from one of the many bountiful farmers' markets, sip a cup of Costa Rican coffee, and nibble on a cacao nib as I ponder the trip. If asked for a single word to describe Costa Rica, I would say "art"—whether designed by nature or created by its inhabitants. A sense of art pervades everything Costa Ricans do, from hospitality to food. Cheeses crafted by these new artisans reflect the spirit of this incredible country, and they taste of *pura vida*, indeed. **C**

Gianacis Caldwell is the author of *Mastering Artisan Cheesemaking*, among other books. She manages the goat herd and makes cheese at Pholia Farm Creamery in Oregon.

## THE COFFEE, CHOCOLATE, & CHEESE TRAIL



This guided and hosted tour highlights the culinary treasures and tourist comforts of Costa Rica. The weeklong adventure, which includes transportation, begins at Finca Rosa Blanca Coffee Plantation and Inn. The itinerary from there evolves, but here is a taste of what you can expect.

Over the next few days you will visit the San José farmers' market, experience a coffee "cupping," learn about chocolate making at Sibú Chocolate, take a cooking class, and of course eat great meals, including local cheeses, at the hotel's restaurant. Then you will travel south, enjoying a *tico* lunch along the way, to your next accommodations at Monte Azul. Over the next few days you will take a cheesemaking workshop, hike, and visit Monte Azul's personable goat herd. There are also options of learning to make soap or enjoying spa and yoga indulgences. As at Finca Rosa Blanca, meals are included and feature locally sourced products and their own handmade cheeses.

Contact Finca Rosa Blanca Coffee Plantation and Inn for details.

