

# Say CHEESE!

The Cheese Course market and bistro offers a distinctive foodie franchise.

*June Allan Corrigan*



Six years ago, businessman Enrique Altamirano was curious about an establishment he'd noticed in an upscale shopping center in Weston, Florida. He walked through the doors and immediately fell in love with the concept behind the European-inspired cheese market and bistro. As luck would have it, the owner was interested in selling her business known as The Cheese Course. Altamirano saw an opportunity and seized it.

At the time of purchase, The Cheese Course existed as a single store. In the space of three years, however, the enterprising Altamirano opened four more locations in and around Florida. At that point he decided to start franchising the business to spur even faster growth and reach other areas of the state and country. A tenth location of The Cheese Course recently opened in The Woodlands, Texas.

It appears the public can't get enough cheese. The fact that it pairs beautifully with countless wines and beers further boosts its popularity. The Cheese Course offers over 150 artisanal cheeses imported from dairy farmers all over the world. It features cheeses from Spain, France, England, Switzerland, Germany, and even one from Colombia. American cheeses are well represented too. "Many of our cheeses are from right here in the U.S. We're very proud and happy about that," says Shamarie Marrero, marketing and business development specialist for The Cheese Course.

## From farm to table

Each location of The Cheese Course boasts a farm table and other rustic décor touches like a red barn door. Images of cows, sheep, goats and water buffaloes adorn walls and allude to the four milk classes of cheese the stores offer. The walls themselves are white tile and the countertops are white marble to hint at the product's creamery beginnings. "We want guests to be aware of the source of our product, where the cheese they're buying comes from, how it's made," says Marrero.

Display cases overflow with cheese and surfaces and shelves everywhere feature ideal accompaniment items. The Cheese Course sells bottles of wine, crackers, jars of cornichons, jams, honey, fig and plum pastes, olive oils, pestos, balsamic vinegars, baguettes—anything and everything to do with cheese. People looking to find their favorite cheese or wishing to learn more about untried ones,



and the best accompaniments, can ask each store's specially trained resident cheesemonger who is more than happy to provide information.

### More than a market

Fittingly, customers can enjoy cheese courses prepared especially for them right in the shop. That's because The Cheese Course is not only a market but also a bistro. Inhabiting the fast/casual segment, its menu includes sandwiches, salads, soups and quiches. One bite and guests soon discover why artisanal cheese makes food especially delicious. More often than not, they'll be back to select party platters—both custom and ready-made.

Sometimes customers' interest in cheese is piqued enough for them to want to take an in-store class. The Cheese Course offers classes on cheese and beer pairing, cheese and wine pairings, cheese and accompaniments pairings, even a hands-on mozzarella-making class. All are fun for groups and make excellent team-building exercises.

Establishments like Panera Bread, Corner Bakery Cafe, even Whole Foods, provide competition in the same fast/casual segment but none come close to focusing as keenly as The Cheese Course does on its premier product.

### Cheese spread

In addition to its Texas branch, The Cheese Course boasts eight locations in Florida and one in Boulder, Colorado. Most are situated in neighborhood shopping plazas although the one in Aventura, FL, is housed in a traditional mall.

Altamirano's sights are set on positioning The Cheese Course in states across the country. It's encouraging that franchisee interest continues to grow. Generally, the company looks for individuals who have a business



background and experience in operating multi-unit operations. The franchise fee is \$40,000. Build-out costs are estimated to run anywhere from \$433,000 to \$811,000 depending on site and location. Franchisees pay a 5% royalty fee and a 2% marketing fee on gross monthly sales.

The Cheese Course's definitive European style and proud organic farm roots attract seasoned cheese lovers and casual passersby alike. Many locations feature outdoor seating complete with awnings and umbrellas, flower and greenery—perfect spots to while away an hour or two. At The Cheese Course, “[Your customers] can pull up a chair, enjoy a piece of cheese and a glass of wine, take a little break and enjoy themselves,” says Marrero.

*Freelance writer June Allan Corrigan addresses a wide range of topics including business, medicine, parenting and education. She's a fitness enthusiast and also makes a mean apple pie. Visit her website at [junecorrigan.com](http://junecorrigan.com).*

