

# The Big Cheese

In one month's time, Café Georges at Le Meridien Hotel welcomes back its favourite Frenchman, a *fromagier* extraordinaire, for his 12th annual visit. With a degree in botanic science and his finely tuned sense of smell, Gerard Poulard can identify the plant flavours that influence the taste of milk.

Cheese was invented to preserve milk and other nutrients during cold winter months; one good reason why it's not a big part of Southeast Asian cuisine. But Le Meridien's manager Claude Rath thinks cheese is soon to be a big part of life around here. "Ten years ago," he begins, "wine was not in the Asian culture. That is changing – it's a social evolution. Some Singaporeans know wine better than us Europeans."

The same could happen with cheese because, like wine, the food is part of a much bigger culture, a culture Claude tries to bring out in fun and interesting ways at the French-born hotel. Also like wine, cheese culture revolves around the food's origin, known as *terroir*. Soil conditions and climate two of the major factors. "In France," he says, "you can really get a different taste from one village to the next."

Claude says Gerard is one of the few remaining cheese masters in an age when stricter hygiene standards and export costs make rare cheeses unavailable abroad. But in partnership with Carrefour, several unusual varieties will be made available for purchase after the festival. Gerard is planning to bring 150 varieties to Singapore, of some 1,500 in his native country. "It's like fashion," Claude says. "He's got an autumn and a spring collection."

He'll arrange from six to eight representative samples on a plate clockwise from mild to strong. "He recognizes a person's taste by watching them to see how they respond."

Eric Chua, Singapore's tea master, will work with Gerard to select pairings between the two based on their plant and herbal properties, as well as taste.

With his son, a pilot, Gerard travels all around France to search out new cheeses; he often names them after their makers, generally farm wives, "to give them honour." Beyond the story of what a cheese consists of, a description of taste, aroma, and recommended pairings, each selection has a deeper story about where it comes from. By recalling his expeditions, Claude says Gerard is "telling his life story through his work".



**Cheese master Gerard Poulard will be on hand during lunch and dinner at Le Meridien from 12 to 21 October. For reservations call 6733 8855.**

The cheese course is served after dinner, just before dessert, and Claude insists it's a must for hosting a nice meal. He offers a few tips for the novice:

- A vendor in France asks when the cheese is meant to be served, whether it is that day, tomorrow or in two days' time. This ensures that the cheese will have adequately matured before the meal.
- To store a fine cheese, wrap it in plastic and put it in the fridge. But you must change the plastic every day to keep the cheese fresh. "Cheese undergoes a fermentation process," he says. "We can't forget that."
- Take the cheese out of the fridge before dinner, allowing it to warm to room temperature before serving for the best possible texture and a full flavour.