

## Sheese - Mozzarella, Cheddar, Smoked Cheddar, Gouda, and Edam Styles (Vegan, Gluten-Free)

By Hannah Kaminsky, author of *My Sweet Vegan* - News travels pretty fast within the blogosphere; Good or bad, interesting tidbits are guaranteed to be sprayed across the web mere minutes after their initial announcement. Lately, a new product has set the vegan food-blogging world ablaze, spreading curiosity amongst readers and fellow bloggers like wild fire. For weeks I watched with envy as others sang the praises of a new cheese substitute going by the name of Sheese. Currently it is marketed in only five states within the US, none of which are easily accessible from my own. I doubted that I would ever get the chance to sample this mysterious dairy-free cheese myself. Well, imagine my joyful surprise when I returned home from school one day to discover a veritable treasure trove in the guise of a cardboard box, brimming with the very same stuff, straight from the manufacturer no less!

Tearing excitedly into the flimsy packing material to exhume my prize, my package divulged five different types of Black Duck Imports' hard 'cheeses,' Mozzarella-, Medium Cheddar-, Smoked Cheddar-, Gouda-, and Edam- Style Sheese. An impressive array in its own right, it's hard to believe that this selection is barely even the tip of the iceberg in terms of Black Duck Imports' full offerings! Producing no fewer than nine varieties, there are choices enough to satisfy even the pickiest connoisseurs. They certainly could give most legitimate cheese sections in standard grocery stores a run for their money, too!

Still, knowing the limitations of vegan cheeses I had sampled in the past, I remained skeptical. The packaging was bright and eye catching; The wheels of 'cheese' solid, appearing comparable to the real thing&hellip; But what about the taste? Moreover, does it melt?

First up on the chopping block was an old standby, Mozzarella. Probably a flavor that I would naturally reach for first, everybody can appreciate this all-purpose workhorse of a cheese. Good for pizzas, pastas, casseroles &ndash; Just about any dish could pair nicely with the traditional version, so I feel that it's important for this particular Sheese to make the grade if the product has any shot at making it on the mass market.

As I carefully peeled away the plastic seal, I first noticed a mild but detectable aroma that caught me a bit off guard. I suppose it shouldn't have been so surprising, but I couldn't help thinking ecstatically to myself, Wow, it smells like&hellip; Cheese! Removing the pale disk and making my first incision, my slice was easily yielding to the knife, soft, slightly crumbly. Although this texture wasn't quite spot-on, as soon as I brought this mysterious substance to my tongue, it seemed to dissolve into an unbelievably smooth, creamy, and rich consistency. Mildly flavored and just a bit salty, I couldn't argue if someone had told me that this was in fact authentic mozzarella. Truly an amazing sensation to feel as though I was actually eating cheese again after all of these years, I couldn't help but repeatedly read over the ingredients again and again to make sure it was vegan!

Now knowing the true potential of this product, I was clamoring to get my hands on that package of Gouda waiting patiently in the fridge. As a kid, this was perhaps my favorite variety of all time. It wasn't so unusual for me to take a sizable chunk with me in my little plastic lunchbox during elementary school! To my knowledge, Sheese makes the only vegan Gouda out there, so I was thrilled to have the privilege of sampling this rarity.

The immediate scent of this one was a bit stronger than the previous, but didn't strike me as specifically Gouda &ndash; Without being told the identity of the source, I might have guessed that it was actually a Parmesan variety instead based on the smell. Presenting itself with the same sort of composition, it had a fairly mellow profile at first, but then introduced a slight bite at the back of my throat as I swallowed. Somewhat tangy, it had some added interest and was overall pleasant&hellip; But I can't say that this one completely satisfied my Gouda craving. I also detected some slightly sweet undertones that I didn't feel were the best match for such a cheese, and if anything made eating more than a small slice at a time rather off-putting. Perhaps if it had been smoked the flavor profile would have been closer to what I was used to, but sadly, that doesn't seem to be in the plans anytime soon. I don't think that I would buy this one if given more options.

Unable to resist the familiar and comforting fluorescent orange coloring displayed by the Medium Cheddar wheel, it was

up next on my hit list. Normally I would argue that it's unnatural to eat any food that falls into this extreme area of the color spectrum, but in the case of Sheese, no artificial colorings are used &dash; This particular shade is actually achieved through the use of small amounts of paprika! Feeling much better about what I would be consuming, I felt no guilt as I whacked off a block and popped it in my mouth&hellip; Followed by another, and yet another.

Of all the &ldquo;cheeses&rdquo; thus far, this one really blew my mind. Slightly firmer and more crumbly than the others, I couldn't believe that this was really vegan. Honestly, there is no other way to describe the flavor than cheddar! I was so taken aback by the realistic taste that I quickly called over my mother to try some as well to confirm this phenomena. After chewing thoughtfully for a moment, she proclaimed in agreement, &ldquo;It tastes like cheddar!&rdquo; Coming straight from an omnivore's mouth, this is some amazing stuff. Apparently this is their most popular variety, and I can definitely see why.

Readying myself to taste the next fake cheese, I wasn't sure what to expect. Never before had I even heard of Edam, let alone eaten it, so I really didn't have anything to compare this one to but itself. In and of itself, I found it to be a fine &ldquo;cheese&rdquo;&hellip; but not necessarily a flavor that really struck my fancy. Seemingly quite similar to the Gouda, it also smelled of Parmesan and bore a slight sweetness that didn't really play nicely with the competing seasonings. Mild, just a bit salty and tangy, this one also had some very quiet sour notes to round it out. Described according to Wikipedia as a &ldquo;nutty&rdquo; sort of cheese, I wasn't sure that this entirely did the original justice. However, since I've never even seen the original in real life, I suppose I wouldn't be the best judge of that! Maybe my palate just isn't refined enough for such an obscure delicacy. See for yourself if this one will still make your taste buds sing, but personally, it didn't make my mouth water.

Finally, I dug into the flavor I had the highest hopes for: Smoked Cheddar. There's something about smoky flavors that just compliment salty and savory items so well. It adds a whole new dimension to flavor profiles, increasing their tasty potential exponentially. Now I'm no expert on this - Start talking about the nuances between hickory smoked and apple wood smoked and you've lost me. I just know that smoke can make for some serious good eats, not just burnt food.

Once I sensed the potent aroma immediately filling my nostrils when the seal had been broken, I knew I was already sold. With such a tantalizing scent, it was an impressive feat to control myself long enough to cut a slice, wanting instead to skip the formalities and just take a bite out of the whole thing instead. As I luxuriated in my first bite, I knew that this exquisite &ldquo;cheese&rdquo; is perhaps one of the most convincing arguments I could make to say that vegan cheese products are just as good as their dairy-laden counterparts. A perfect balance of smoky flavor allows the taster to enjoy its presence, but not be so overwhelmed by it that it's like eating a big strip of smoking wood. Salty, mellow, creamy, and above all, delicious, I could eat this one unadorned all day long.

These were all sampled alone, so that I could get a good idea of their own individual flavors without the influence of other ingredients. In short time however, I was trying Sheese at every opportunity I had. Wanting to try some sort of quick-fix meal to test out its melting capability, I went for the simplest comfort food a vegan could lust after. Can you say, &ldquo;Pita pizza&rdquo;?

Using an equal ratio of mozzarella and medium cheddar on top of tomato sauce and a whole-wheat pita, it took a maximum of five minutes of prep before my dinner was in the toaster oven. Most impressive was the grating ability of the Sheese &dash; Easily sliding across the grater and producing delicate strands of &ldquo;cheese,&rdquo; the whole thing looked amazingly similar to the traditional approach. Still, I would have traded this aspect in return for a more impressive melt&hellip; After 10 &dash; 15 minutes at around 400 degrees, the Sheese did become nicely warmed through and soft in a way that it seems to melt in your mouth&hellip; But it didn't really melt. Strangely enough, after it began to cool down again, the strands on top actually started to become crunchy &dash; Not a deal breaker, but not something I really loved either.

A few days later, my dad also tried out the mozzarella for himself (Thank you so much for giving it a shot, dad!) by slicing it up and setting it on top of a baked ziti dish. Under the broiler the whole thing went, and five minutes went by&hellip; And then ten&hellip; And then fifteen. Looking for the top to be melted and bubbly like normal cheese, he wasn't sure that it had even cooked, as it continued to look eerily similar to when it came out of the package. Eventually we determined it must be done, judging by the edges that began to burn, but it was very unsatisfactory to my dad. Appalled by this strange substance contaminating his dinner, he proclaimed that it tasted dry, chalky, and nothing like any mozzarella worth its stuff should. Every single shriveled slice was painstakingly removed from the pasta, and thrown dejectedly into the trashcan.

Perhaps that could have gone better if we weren't all a bit stressed out that dinner, or if it had been a different type of Sheese. Still, unsatisfied by this rejection from my omnivorous parent, I sought a different way to utilize such an innovative product. Certainly there was some application that could bring out its full potential and prove its worth!

Cheddar scones did the trick, most definitely redeeming its name. Buttery, flaky, and undeniably cheddar-like, it's never been so good to be so cheesy. The Sheese baked beautifully, keeping the biscuits moist and soft, but retaining its structure so as not to ooze out the sides. Between my mom and myself, I don't think that this batch of a half dozen lasted even 48 hours.

So, taking all of these trials and tribulations into account, where does that leave us? In my opinion, it leaves us with a damn tasty vegan cheese that completely blows all of the other alternatives out of the water. Excellent eaten chilled, either unadorned or with the simply addition of basic crackers to enhance the textural interest, the flavors of the majority of what I was privy to sample were spot-on as far as I could recall of the real thing. Some I might pass on, like the gouda- or edam-style, but everything else truly delighted my palate in ways that I haven't experienced for years. For the fussy vegan searching for a perfect cheese replacement that behaves precisely the same as the coagulated blocks of dairy that it imitates, melting and bubbling on the top of a pizza... You may still have to wait for that ship to come in yet. In the mean time though, an ample supply of Sheese will happily occupy the "dairy" drawer in my fridge all the same.

#### How to Purchase:

- Manufactured by Bute Island Foods of Scotland, Sheese is available in natural food retailers throughout the U.K. However, if you can't find it, then you can order it from Goodness Direct.
- In North America, Black Duck Imports is diligently working to get Sheese in stores. See their website for a store locator. It can also be ordered online from Vegan Essentials. Hannah Kaminsky is the author of the indulgent dessert cookbook, My Sweet Vegan. She also keeps a personal blog of crafts, baking and photography at Bittersweet Blog.