

# A new Norfolk cheese shop with the “world’s best cheese,” a fondue revival and a great Italian sub

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Broccoli dipped in black truffle fondue at Virginia Cheese Company in Norfolk (Matthew Korfhage/Virginian-Pilot)  
Perhaps it is time to reconsider the fondue.

For a certain generation, fondue is still the stuff of ski chalets and the ringleted Swiss, the slight embarrassment of the remembered sexual revolution — a cheese-swaddled promise of sensual decadence.

But for most of the intervening 40 years, fondue has carried all the romance of a hot date at the shopping mall. It has become the province of hokey, dirndl-clad Teutonia and improbably expensive chain restaurants — something you'd have to confess to liking the same way you'd sheepishly admit to favoring the Eagles, or pumpkin-spice lattes.

At the Virginia Cheese Company in downtown Norfolk, however, fondue has received an unexpected update. Here it is thoughtful, comparatively light, and maybe even a little modern.

Ashtyn Greene's little cheese shop and cafe in the Freemason District opened in August as a culmination of a life spent loving cheese — filled with everything that might make a picnic, whether cultivated dairy or luxuries in little jars. It is also home to a few lovely sandwiches for eat in or takeout, and extravagant cheese boards that cause passersby to stop and pay wistful respects.

Every Friday night, Greene turns the place into a pop-up fondue bar, with cheese and boards that rotate weekly, mostly eschewing thick cheddar pots for more esoteric cheeses and accents.

One week, this might be a cheese pot made with pumpkin beer from Williamsburg brewery Alewerks, the next a wine-spiked fontina and Taleggio with black truffles shaved over the bubbling cauldron. On an upcoming Friday, the fondue will be devoted to the earthy Christmas spice of Indian garam masala.



Black truffle fondue with charcuterie at Virginia Cheese Company in Norfolk. (Courtesy Ben Finley)

The cheese's accompaniments tend to be lighter here than the \$40-a-person shrimp and steak umamifests of the Melting Pot. This has the welcome side effect of keeping the shop's fondue significantly less expensive. Expect to pay around \$15 a person for fondue with bread and veg, or \$25 a person if you add charcuterie and also share one of the salad appetizers.

On our visit in mid-November, accompaniments included a cooked medley of purple or white fall potatoes, a panoply of veggies from broccoli to baby corn, a fruit medley and finely cured Italian charcuterie. The bread also veers to lightness, avoiding the thick handfuls of rye that clot up a classic cheese pot. It's a smart update, and disarmingly pleasant. Seats have been fully reserved days before each Friday fondue.

Fondue is, perhaps, an outing uniquely well-suited to pandemic times. During autumn Virginia nights that have tended blessedly mild so far, the Sterno cooker warming your cheese doubles as its own personal outdoor heater, on patio seats nestled against the side of the shop. (A few broadly distanced tables are also available inside.)

You'll need to keep your masks on during your server's brief tableside preparation as the cheese meets warm wine or beer or cherry liqueur, and then stir the pot yourself with a wooden spoon as the cheese melts, so as to limit the time your server needs to stand near you at the table.

But the stirring and the dipping, the managing of the cheese, and the novel combinations you skewer on the fly, are a lot of the reason you're here.

Fondue, like Sichuan hot pot or Korean barbecue, turns eating into an adult activity set, something to do and share during times when precious little entertainment feels safe. It's a style of eating that makes food the focus of the conversation, a self-contained universe tied together by strings made of cheese.

It needn't be romantic. But it could be, if you'd like.



The cheese case and shelves at newly opened Norfolk cheese shop and cafe Virginia Cheese Company. (Matthew Korfhage/Virginian-Pilot)

During its daytime hours, the shop is much more focused on the utilitarian needs of its neighborhood — the sort of local cheesemonger that will hunt down far-flung and hard to-find cheeses upon customer request: an impossibly soft Époisses, say, or a tangy and creamy Brebrousse d'Argental. The shop is mostly Eurocentric, with the most popular cheeses an herb-crusted Austrian alp blossom, and a goat Gouda that mixes the farmy funk of goat with the crystallization of the famous Dutch variety. Local cheeses are thin for now, other than ubiquitous Meadow Creek Dairy; Greene says she'll be able to add more in the spring, as small farmers start up their cheese production again.

But Virginia Cheese Company does carry sought-after American rarities such as the lusciously rich Rogue River Blue from Oregon, the first American cheese

ever chosen by the Italians as the world's best cheese, at last year's annual World Cheese Awards. (As a born Oregonian, and longtime lover of this cheese, I can only agree with the Italians.)

You can buy those cheeses to take home, or sample them as part of an extravagant cheese board.



A cheese board with Chimay Rouge, Rogue River Blue and Ossau Iraty cheeses at Virginia Cheese Company in Norfolk. (Matthew Korfhage/Virginian-)

**Greene traces her shop's roots** to a massive grazing board she made for her husband years ago for his birthday, a cheese spread to end all cheese spreads. And so the boards she now makes at her shop are also uncommonly broad and well-considered, with a spread that might include pistachio, hazelnuts, toasted-cinnamon almonds, off-beat crackers and the sweet-tart snap of bright orange cape gooseberries. When asked to choose your meat, skip the lackluster pate; go instead for the prosciutto.

For now, you'll need to pick out your cheeses yourself from the retail selection, opting for the sliver-cut, two-ounce wedges in the main cheese case. The board will add a \$10.25 to the price; in practice, you'll end up with around a \$25 board if you choose a few higher-end cheeses.

Soon, says Greene, she hopes to be staffed-up enough to do custom-cut house boards with cheeses she selects in advance. And for the sake of customers

likely to be staring gape-mouthed at a valley of unfamiliar rinds and rounds, we hope this will be sooner than later.

Otherwise, Virginia Cheese Company offers an excellent if small beer and cider selection, and \$11 sandwiches made with local breads from the Bakehouse and La Brioche. The gentle ingredients in a vegetarian halloumi sandwich, unfortunately, go lost in chewy focaccia. But the shop also offers something improbably difficult to find in Norfolk: a very good variation on the Italian hoagie.

On a chewy French-baked baguette, The Provolone Amore sandwich layers excellent salami and capicola and provolone with the comfort of ham, plus oil-and-vinegar-laden shreduce, peppers and onions. In its mix of bright acidity and chew, the sandwich is a fatty treasure.



The Provolone Amore sandwich, with capicola, salami, ham and provolone cheese, at Virginia Cheese Company in Norfolk (Matthew Korfhage/Virginian-Pilot)

But born Northeasterners take note: This is still Virginia, and so by default Virginia Cheese Company also layers in the unctuousness of mayo, though in small enough amounts you might not even notice it's there. If you're a hoagie purist, you'll still need to remember to stop this from happening, lest you be forced to conduct the arduous purification rituals required by Italian Americans after accidentally consuming mayonnaise.

If you're French, on the other hand, chances are you've been coming to this shop since it opened. Greene says the local French crowd already comes here in force, picking up those La Brioche baguettes if they didn't already stop by the bakery that day. And even before they say a single word, Greene will know they're French from the everyday cheeses they bring to the register: a cave-aged, unpasteurized Comté, and a triple-cream Délice de Bourgogne.

"If I see those two cheeses, I know they're French before they say a single word," she says.

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If you go

**The spot**

Virginia Cheese Company, 501 Botetourt St., Norfolk

**The vibe**

Bright, small cheese shop and cafe with pickles, jams, beer, cider, wine and a few indoor and outdoor seats for cheese noshing or Friday-night fondue

**Order this**

Rogue River Blue cheese, Ossau-Iraty sheep's milk cheese, goat Gouda, cheese boards, Provolone Amore sandwiches, fondue on Fridays, French cider on tap

**Hours:** 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesdays to Fridays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Fondue nights by reservation, 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. Fridays.



**COVID protocols:** Masks, patio, online ordering for pickup, very distanced tables

**Food prices:** Artisan cheeses, \$20-\$60 a pound; salads, \$10; sandwiches, \$11; fondue, \$30-\$45 for two;

**Drinks:** Craft beer, \$3-\$8; draft French cider, \$7; draft wine, \$6; wine bottles, \$14-\$50; hard seltzers, \$3

**Kid-friendly?** Kids get lunchables. Only mom gets the wine and cheese board. (But sure, it's a store, and perfectly friendly to tots.)

**Vegan/veg/gluten:** Vegetarians will have no trouble here, and the gluten-free need only request boards without the bread. But this is no hotbed of vegan cheese.

**Disabled-access?** Yes, though the surrounding cobblestone streets of Freemason are a bit rough.

**Reservations?** For the fondue night, reserve by calling 757-937-9950

**Parking:** Street, usually available within a block.

**Contact:** 757-937-9950, [virginiacheeseco.com](http://virginiacheeseco.com)