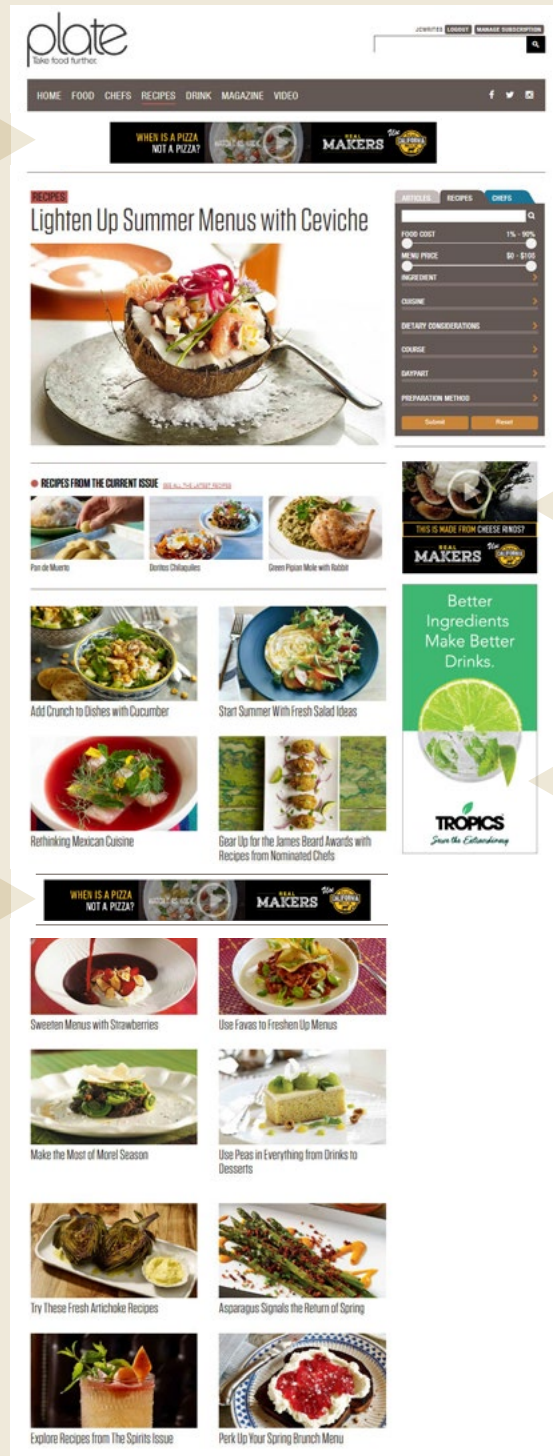


Leaderboard Top
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or Video
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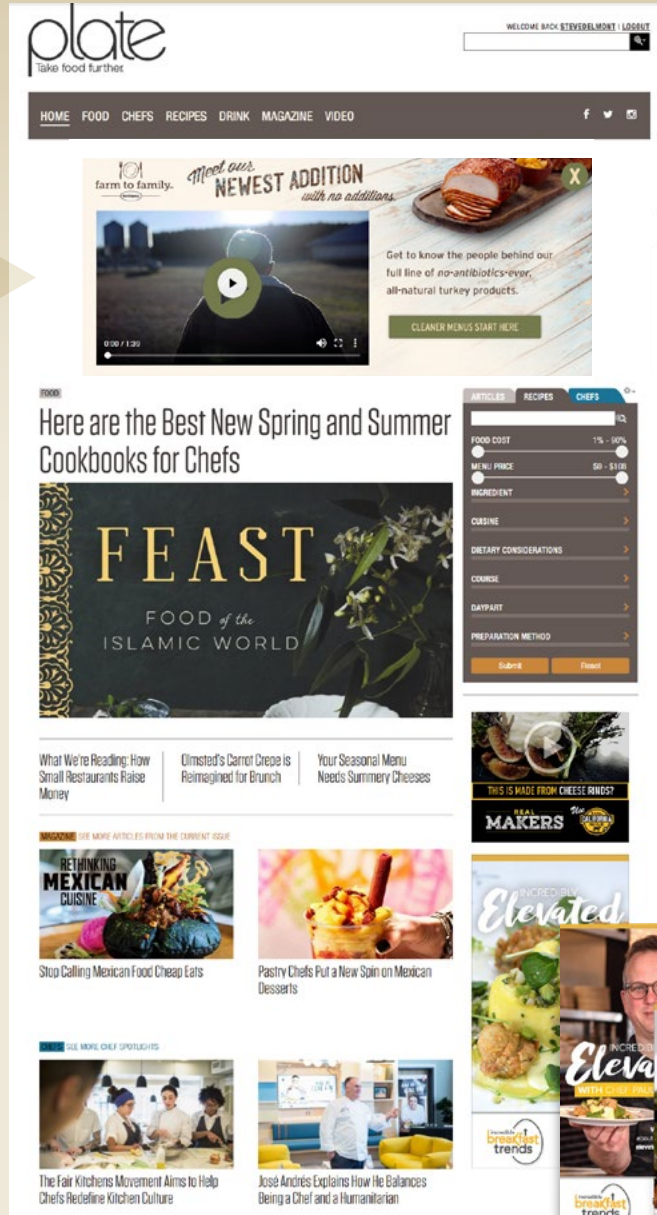
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Picture a wooden board groaning with gooey cheeses ... a funky blue, an oozy Brie, a rich Alpine next to a hearty loaf of bread. It sounds perfect, until you check your calendar and realize that such a wintry cheese assortment doesn't work for a summer afternoon eating and drinking on a sunny patio.

But you don't have to drop your cheese plate in warmer weather. Spring and summer are perfect for cheese and beverage paired thoughtfully and with a lighter touch. It's all in the cheeses you select: warmer temps call for cheeses that can stand up to the heat, especially accompanied by refreshing seasonal nibbles and sips.

Rosé wines go beautifully with most soft cheeses, particularly tangy goats, which sing beside the wine's fresh fruitiness. Icy beers and ciders work even better: their dry fizziness races through rich creamy cheeses on the palate, setting off the fat with the bitter flavors of hops or the sourness of a lambic. And don't forget the broad array of summery cocktails that are also friends of cheese. Citrus-based drinks scream summer, and that acidity in your spiked lemonade will refresh those fruity cheddars. Mules made with sharp ginger beer are keen pairings with harder, stronger cheeses and the salumi they share a plate with.

Cheese platter accompaniments also need to lighten up. Skip the heavy breads in favor of something more crunchy and crispy to serve alongside: popcorn, flax crackers, caramelized seeds and spicy nuts all bring excitement to palates dulled by hot weather. And serve them with condiments that lend the experience brightness and a little spice, like jalapeño jelly, pickled fruits and kimchi.

There's one more reason to rethink your summer boards—seasonally. Traditionally, cheese is produced seasonally, relying on the natural rhythms of animal husbandry and lactation. While cows produce milk year-round, in most climates, sheep and goats give birth in late winter. The richest, most delicious milk of the year comes soon after, as the moms graze on the first grass growth of spring pastures. These cheeses offer "a legitimate taste of spring" just when we need it, notes Jonathan Richardson, national sales manager of Columbia Cheese, importers of European cheeses and producers of the biannual Cheesemonger Invitational. A fine example from their roster is L'estive, a limited-time-only sheep and goat blend from the Pyrenees that captures the moment in a natural rinded peasant tomme.

If you count backwards, a cheese that's aged three to four months that was made from gorgeous spring milk is going to be at its best from June to September—just in time for your summer cheese board. "That fresh sheep or goat cheese you feature in June and July, it's going to be the best you taste this year," says Richardson.

Here are a few favorite cheeses for your warm weather cheese plate:

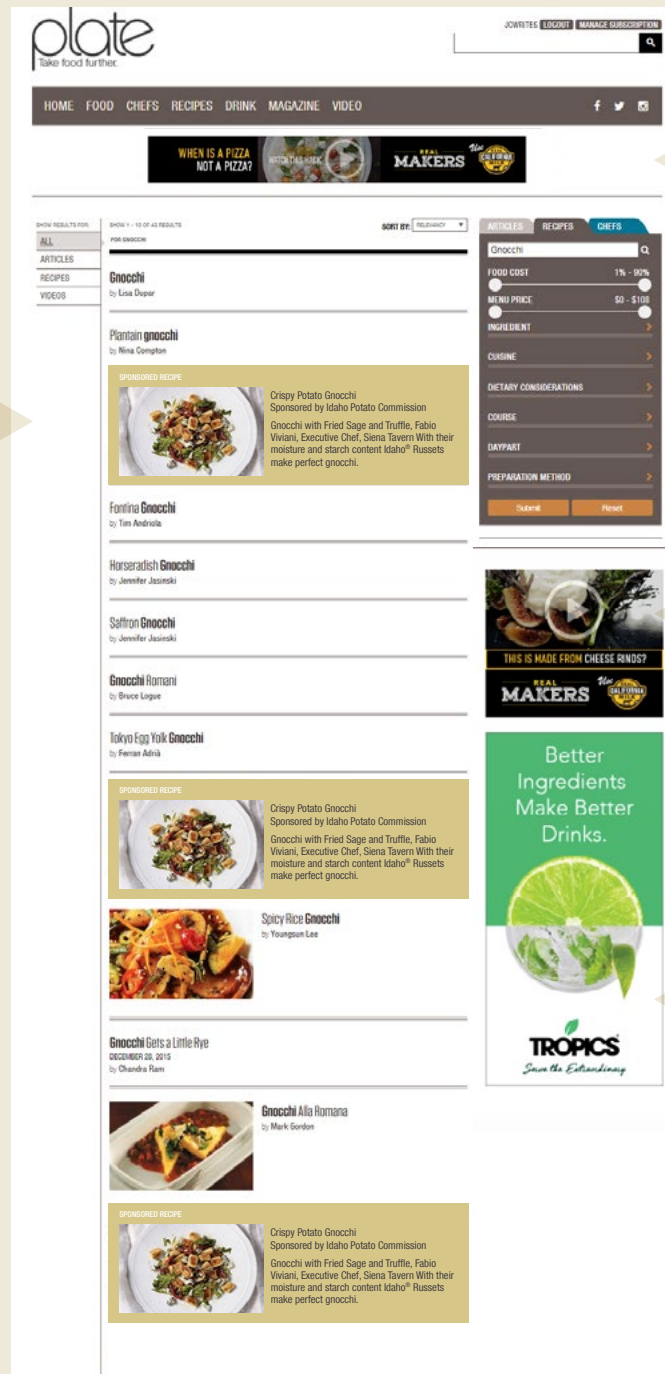
- **Black Goat**, a tiny seasonal ash-rind goat round from Leslie Cooperband's adorable herd at Piraine Fruits Farm in Champagne, Ill.
- **Frey's Wösel**, a unique bloomy goat with a semi soft center and a fruity, earthy taste from Sarah Marcus's Brie-Rosé Creamery in Dundee, Ore.
- **Alex**, a sturdy cow's milk cooked curd cheese from the Allgäu region of Southern Germany that pairs beautifully with summery flavors. Five months old and available year-round, much of its flavor comes from the local hay fed to the Brown Swiss cows the milk comes from, and the herb brine it is bathed in during aging.

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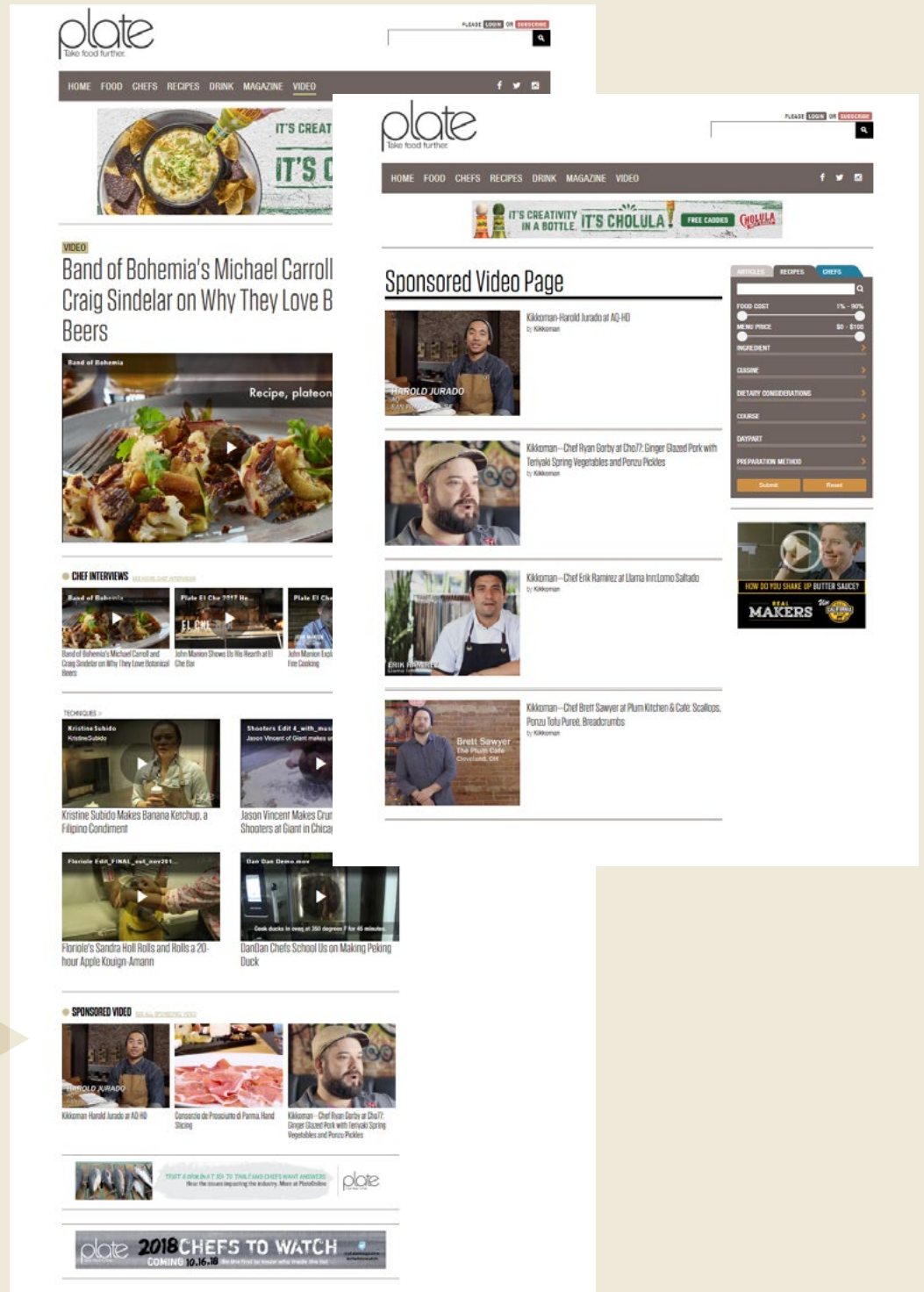
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