

GOOD FOOD

**DINING**  
**VALENTINO**  
**HOUSTON & VIN BAR**

2525A West Loop South in Hotel Derek, 713-850-9200, www.ValentinoRestaurantGroup.com.



**DRINK UP:** This Oyster Tree is on the menu at Valentino.



**SCRUMPTIOUS:** A cheese and salumi platter at Valentino.

MICHAEL PAULSEN PHOTOS: STAFF

TASTE THE ARTISAN CHEESES

By **GREG MORAGO**  
FOOD EDITOR

**W**HAT do Robiola Bosina, Humboldt Fog, Pecorino Fresco and Chimay Grand Cru all have in common? Duh, yes, they're all cheeses. But what they have in common is that they're among the 10 or so artisan cheese choices available daily for sampling at Valentino Houston & Vin Bar.

The cheeses also happen to be the most popular nibbles at the restaurant, where the four-selection cheese plate is the top seller.

That tells chef Cunninghame West that Houston's part of the growing trend of diners fashioning their meals from cheeses and salumi offerings. A bit of Parmigiano-Reggiano with some speck and soppressata? Sounds perfect for us — even better when paired with one of Valentino's many wines by the glass.

"I think a lot of cooking is going through a revolution in the mainstream, and bit by bit the old school stuff is coming back. Cheese and cold cuts are really starting to explode," he said. "Most people in this country aren't exposed to this stuff. In the Old World, they've been doing it for a thousand years. In a certain way, it's like going back to basics. It's coming back to the Old World."

West said as food lovers get more into artisanal cheeses, they

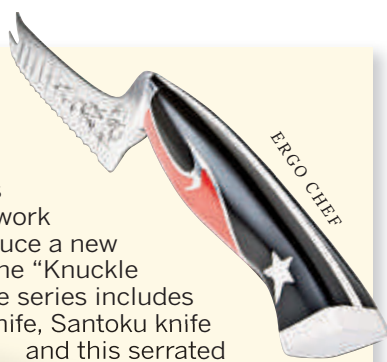
use restaurants with good cheese programs (such as Valentino) as a way to experiment with flavors before investing in pricey hunks at their favorite gourmet grocery stores. And they're using their cheese love to entertain at home. Here are some of West's suggestions on how to make a nice presentation at home:

- 1 ORGANIZE TASTINGS** in a progression from the mild to the salty to the stinky.
- 2 OFFER BREAD,** crostini or crackers to accompany cheese.
- 3 FRUITS,** both dried and fresh, work well with artisanal cheeses.
- 4 SLATHERS SUCH AS JAMS,** chutneys and honey love cheese and make sweet accompaniments.
- 5 OTHER WAYS** to augment cheese plates? Nuts, olives, spicy peppers and pickled vegetables.

— G.M.

**CUT UP**  
**A REAL GUY'S KNIFE**

Ergo Chef cutlery has paired with Food Network star Guy Fieri to produce a new line of knives called the "Knuckle Sandwich" series. The series includes a chef knife, paring knife, Santoku knife and this serrated utility knife called



the "Dragon Dagger." The line combines Fieri's rock 'n' roll personality with German high-carbon stainless-steel precision blades; \$47 at ErgoChef.com.



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