

CALIFORNIA CHEESE

2026 COMPETITION GUIDE

It's your moment to shine!
Enter today.

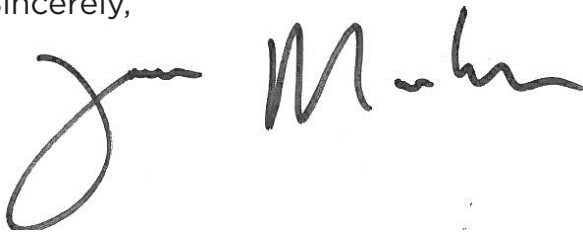
For more than 170 years the California State Fair has been a constant showcase of the talents and achievements of the people of California. Entering into the California State Fair's 2026 Competitive Exhibits Program allows you the opportunity to showcase your abilities, and revel in your accomplishments!

The California State Fair's friendly competitions are designed to acknowledge the best of the Golden State. Our Competitive Programs inspire talented Californians, as well as highlight the latest advances in technology, agriculture, and industry.

More than 750,000 visitors are expected at the State Fair this summer. Your work is an integral part of the State's celebration, and we look forward to seeing your talents on display during the annual State Fair from July 17 to August 2.

We encourage you to enter today and begin making lasting memories for yourself, and for the hundreds of thousands of State Fair patrons!

Sincerely,



Tom Martinez

Chief Executive Officer

GOVERNOR

Gavin Newsom

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February 2026

2026 California Fair Season

Fairs showcase the best of California, highlighting our spirit and creativity, and celebrating our agricultural heritage through competition and community. Through exhibitions and other fair offerings, Californians gain a deeper appreciation for the effort, skill, and care that sustain our food systems and support rural communities.

Although we celebrate the annual fair season, with events that bring Californians together in honor of agriculture, fairgrounds throughout the year serve as gathering places that strengthen our communities in both celebration and times of hardship. They bring people together to share, to learn, and to help one another when it matters most.

Fairgrounds and fairs are the landscape of so many happy memories for generations of Californians. This season, we show our gratitude for the countless people who put in the time and energy needed to keep these traditions alive and meaningful year after year. We all look forward to a safe, successful, and memorable 2026 fair season.

Sincerely,

Gavin Newsom



January 26, 2026

On behalf of the California Department of Food and Agriculture, I am delighted to welcome you and to thank you for your involvement as we look ahead to the 2026 fair season. Each year, our fairs bring people together from every corner of our state to celebrate agriculture, community, and the dedication of those who make it all possible.

The heart of every fair lies in its people: families, volunteers, youth leaders, and countless others who share their talents and passions. Your participation as exhibitors strengthens these connections, turning each fair into a place where learning, collaboration, and pride in California agriculture come to life.

We are especially grateful for the young people who engage through 4-H, FFA, Grange, and other youth programs. Their enthusiasm and commitment represent the future of agriculture, inspiring the next generation to value hard work, stewardship, and innovation. The skills they develop through these programs, such as leadership, responsibility, and community service, extend far beyond the fairgrounds and enrich the entire state. These experiences are supported by the very spaces that make them possible, which continue to serve their communities long after the fair season ends.

Our fairgrounds are more than event spaces; they are year-round centers of community life. They host educational workshops, local markets, and cultural celebrations that bring people together and strengthen our shared sense of belonging. During emergencies, they also serve as critical response and recovery sites, underscoring their role as essential community infrastructure. These roles highlight the enduring partnership between our fairgrounds and the exhibitors, volunteers, and communities that keep them thriving.

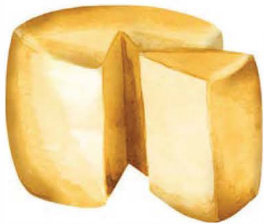
We recognize and deeply appreciate the effort, care, and time you invest in preparing for the fair. Your commitment ensures that these traditions continue to thrive and that agriculture remains at the heart of California's identity.

Thank you for your continued involvement and support. We look forward to another successful fair season and to celebrating the incredible spirit of California's agricultural community together.

Yours truly,

Karen Ross
Secretary





Showcase your award winning Cheese in the Guide to the Best of California Magazine!

The Guide to the Best of California Magazine showcases the Double Gold and Gold winning cheese, wine, craft beer and olive oil from the 2026 California State Fair competitions.

Showcase your award winning cheese to enthusiasts eager to learn about the Best of California in one publication.

The guide is marketed as a resource all year long and is available on the official California State Fair website, shared on Facebook and X to over 220,000 followers, emailed to 60,000+ people, and 10,000 print magazines are distributed at high profile locations, and Farm-to-Fork events:

- ✿ Governor's Office and State Capitol
- ✿ California State Fair Wine Garden & Wine Experience Classes
- ✿ California State Fair Hot Spots
- ✿ Industry & Community Events

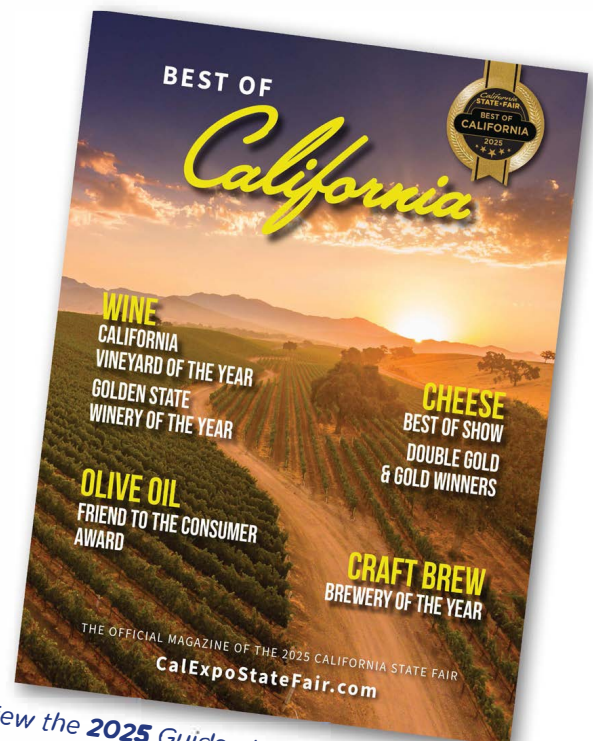
Ad spaces are available in the Guide to the Best of California Magazine starting at \$2,250.

Contact:

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View the **2025** Guide at CalExpoStateFair.com

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Please visit the following link for rules online:

<https://castatefair.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/2026-General-Rules.pdf>

IMPORTANT INFORMATION TO KNOW

Contact: **Tyler Albert**

Cheese Competition Coordinator

Phone: (916) 407-6572

Email: cheese@calexpo.com

Entry Dates:

February 9	Entries Open
March 20	Entries Close
March 30-April 3	Ship or Hand Deliver according to Times & Location (p.7)
April 8	Judging Day
April 20	Results Available Online

The California State Fair July 17-Aug 2, 2026

The California State Fair has long been a showcase of the state’s finest, upholding this tradition since the first fair in 1854. Visitors come from across the country to experience the innovation and excellence of our exhibitors. We continually introduce new and exciting competitions to highlight California’s very best!

Why enter the Competition?

Our competition honors the hard work, craftsmanship, and talent of California cheesemakers. Judges are chosen from a distinguished group of cheesemakers, merchants, writers, promoters, and educators. The California State Fair will celebrate the winners through press releases and by featuring them across all of our social media platforms.



COMPETITION OVERVIEW



Entry in the California State Fair Cheese Competition is open to California-made cheese only.

The California State Fair will award Best of California and Best of Show for cow's milk and other milk types to include goat, sheep, buffalo, etc. This competition guide is provided in advance and may be revised or modified if circumstances require changes to any sections or regulations.

How to Enter

Visit CaStateFair.com/competitions, scroll down to the California Commercial Cheese icon on the competitions page and follow the instructions. Entry fees can be paid using only Visa or Mastercard.



LOOK FOR THE SEAL.

California Milk Advisory Board
RealCaliforniaMilk.com

Thank you to California's dairy farm families for their support of the California State Fair Commercial Cheese Competition.

The California State Fair is proud to join the California Milk Advisory Board in spreading the word about extraordinary cheese and dairy products made with Real California Milk.

RULES & REQUIREMENTS

- 1. Entry Deadline:** All entry information and fees must be submitted online by March 20, 2026.
- 2. Entry fee:** \$40 per entry.
- 3. Entry Size:** Submit two samples per entry, each weighing at least 16 ounces (1 pound). **If the cheese is produced in sizes smaller than 1 pound, provide a minimum total of 2 pounds.**
- 4. Eligibility:** Entry is open to **California-made cheese** only.

5. How to Enter: Submit entries online at CaStateFair.com/competitions.
6. Producer Requirements: Entries must be submitted under the **name and brand of the original producer**. Products purchased from other producers and rebranded (“white label”) are **not accepted**. Retailers or other organizations may enter products on behalf of the original producer only with permission and under the original producer’s brand name. Anyone entering on behalf of a producer must complete and email an Entry Authorization Form to cheese@calexpo.com. The form can be found at castatefair.com/california-commercial-cheese/.
7. Class Restrictions: Each entry may be entered into only one class. **DO NOT SUBMIT** the same cheese into multiple divisions or classes.
8. Compliance: All samples must comply with the California State Food and Agriculture code and may be tested at the discretion of Fair Management or the Judges.
9. Recognition: Award-winning producers will be invited to participate in the Cheese Shoppe sampling and sales center in California’s Kitchen exhibit at the California State Fair.
10. Results: Copies of official scores, awards and ribbons will be sent to exhibitors. **Results are not given by telephone.**

DELIVERY & SHIPPING

Deliveries must be received between Monday, March 30, 2026 and Friday, April 3, 2026, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Shipping & Hand Delivery

**California State Fair
Attn: Cheese Competition
Administration Building
1600 Exposition Blvd.
Sacramento, CA 95815**



JUDGING

1. **Blind Judging:** All cheese will be evaluated with branded packaging removed or concealed.
2. **Awards and Scoring:** Double Gold, Gold, Silver, & Bronze Awards are given based on individual merit. The California Commercial Cheese Score Card is as follows:
 - Aroma: 10%
 - Texture/Body: 20%
 - Appearance – Color/Rind/Paste: 20%
 - Flavor (includes Finish): 50%
3. **Best of Show Awards:** Determined by blind comparison among eligible Best of California entries.
4. **Best of California Awards:** Determined by blind comparison among eligible Gold and Double Gold entries.
5. **Finality of Judging:** Decisions by the Judges are final. No changes will be made after judging is complete.
6. **Divisions and Classes:** The California State Fair reserves the right to create or combine divisions or classes based on entry numbers.
7. **Entry Reclassification:** Judges may transfer entries to a different division or class if deemed appropriate.

AWARDS

Medal Qualifications

Double Gold: 98 points and over

Gold Medal: 95 - 97 points

Silver Medal: 90 - 94 points

Bronze Medal: 84 - 89 points

Best of Show

Two winners will be selected from the twelve Best of California Winners, one for cow milk and one for other milk type.

Best of California

One Best of California Award for cow milk and other milk type will be given in each Division, selected from only Best of Division winners, for a total of twelve awards

Producers of the Year

Two awards available:

Large Producer of the Year – Large scale produced cheese is defined as highly mechanized and automated production, often with large vats (e.g. at least 40,000 lbs of milk per vat)

Artisan Producer of the Year – Artisan produced cheese is defined as primarily hand-crafted with minimal automation

Eligibility: All participating producers are automatically considered for these awards. Awarded to the highest scoring producers, based on awards won, using the following points system:

- +3 points for Best of Show
- +3 points for Best of California
- 4 points for Double Gold
- 3 points for Gold
- 2 points for Silver
- 1 point for Bronze

Ties shall be broken according to the highest total score of all producer entries.

Results will be posted at [CaStateFair.com/competitions](https://www.ca.gov/fair/competitions) by April 20, 2026.

After the competition, you will receive an **award letter via email** which will include judges' notes and an **Award Order Form**. This form must be submitted to receive your awards.

Requests must include the **recipient's full name and mailing address** and should be sent to cheese@calexpo.com.

At this time, you can also purchase additional rosettes, award stickers or receive a digital version of any awards you earned.

Additional Benefits For Award Winners

The California State Fair is proud to showcase award-winning California Cheese in a variety of ways:

The Best of California Magazine

The official magazine of the California State Fair's commercial competitions highlights award-winning wine, cheese, extra virgin olive oil and beer with full page articles and photos. It serves as an excellent buyer's guide to California's finest products. Visit our website to view past editions.

Competition Results Press Release

This annual press release features competition results and highlights the Best of Show winners. Add your own list of awards, business info and a personalized statement, and forward to all of your favorite local news outlets to spread your good news!

Best of Show Award Ceremony & Press Event

Best of Show winners from the California State Fair's esteemed commercial competitions for wine, cheese, olive oil, beer and cannabis are presented with their engraved Golden Bear awards at this annual event, held in the Best of California Pavilion, Building B, with a reception immediately following the ceremony. It's a wonderful opportunity for winners and their families to enjoy the day exploring the California State Fair.

Sales & Sampling at the California State Fair

Your cheese can be sampled and sold at the Fair! Each tasting booth includes merchandising space, large counters, and food prep and storage facilities. Space can be reserved by the day, with priority registration offered to 2026 competition winners, starting with Best of Show winners. Fees apply.

Tasting Classes at the California State Fair

Consumers want to learn more! Lead one or more 20-minute tasting classes in the Taste of California Classroom, where facilities, sampling supplies, a classroom aide, and seating for 24 students are provided. Teach attendees how to taste, purchase and best enjoy California cheese.

DIVISIONS & CLASSES

No restriction on the number of entries for Classes. However, entries shall not be duplicated varieties.

Division 1300: Cottage Cheese

- Class 1 Small Curd Cottage Cheese
- Class 2 Large Curd Cottage Cheese
- Class 3 Nonfat Cottage Cheese
- Class 4 Flavored Cottage Cheese (*fruit, herb, vegetable*)

Division 1305: Cultured Cheese

- Class 1 Crème Fraîche
- Class 2 Fromage Blanc
- Class 3 Quark
- Class 4 Kefir
- Class 5 Mascarpone
- Class 6 Fresh Cultured Cheese with Flavor Added
- Class 7 Other - Not described above

Division 1310: Soft Cheese

- Class 1 Cream Cheese
- Class 2 Pasta Filata - fresh mozzarella
- Class 3 Feta - all milk
- Class 4 Feta - all milk, flavor added
- Class 5 Ricotta
- Class 6 Teleme (cryovac or flour)
- Class 7 Soft Fresh Cheese - open category, goat
- Class 8 Soft Fresh Cheese - open category, sheep, water buffalo or mixed
- Class 9 Soft Fresh Cheese - open category, cow
- Class 10 Soft Fresh Cheese Flavored
- Class 11 Middle Eastern, Eastern European, Indian
- Class 12 Other - Not described above

Divisions Continued on Next Page

Division 1315: Semi-Soft Cheese

- Class 1 Blue Veined Cheese
- Class 2 Open Category Goat
- Class 3 Open Category Sheep, Water Buffalo or mixed
- Class 4 Open Category Cow
- Class 5 White Surface Mold - Brie
- Class 6 White Surface Mold - Camembert
- Class 7 White Surface Mold - Flavor added
- Class 8 White Surface Mold - Open
- Class 9 Washed Rind - Schloss type
- Class 10 Washed Rind - Raclette type (*aged over 45 days*)
- Class 11 Washed Rind (*aged over 60 days*)
- Class 12 Hispanic Style (*state type*)
- Class 13 Pasta Filata (*Mozzarella, Provolone, String*)
- Class 14 Middle Eastern, Eastern European, Indian
- Class 15 Other - Not described above

Division 1320: Semi-Hard Cheese

- Class 1 Monterey Jack
- Class 2 Goat, Sheep, Water Buffalo, or Mixed Milk
- Class 3 Hispanic (*state type*)
- Class 4 Cheddar (*aged over 30 days*)
- Class 5 Medium Cheddar (*aged 3-6 months*)
- Class 6 Aged Cheddar (*aged over 6 months*)
- Class 7 Flavored Cheddar
- Class 8 Colby
- Class 9 Swiss
- Class 10 Italian Style
- Class 11 Open Category - Goat, Sheep, Water Buffalo, Cow or Mixed Milk
- Class 12 Other - Not described above

Division 1325: Hard Cheese

- Class 1 Hispanic, Portuguese Style
- Class 2 Aged Jack
- Class 3 Flavor Added
- Class 4 Grating or Grana Style
- Class 5 Other - Not described above

2026 GENERAL RULES

CLICK LINK OR SCAN QR CODE TO VIEW GENERAL RULES ONLINE:

<https://castatefair.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/2026-General-Rules.pdf>

