

An Immersion Course on Cheese
By Diane Morgan
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Oregonians love cheese. In fact, we eat 60% more cheese than the average U.S. consumer—a whopping 166 million pounds of cheese annually. The state only produces around 71 million pounds—less than half of the state’s demand. Perhaps this explains why, for the second year in a row, the California Milk Advisory Board has sent cheese experts to Portland to educate cheese buyers, cheese distributors, restaurateurs, and culinary professionals about the wonderful farmstead and artisanal cheeses being produced in California. These experts aren’t trying to quash Oregon’s fabulous cheese producers; they are simply trying to help meet the demand.

The well-stocked cheese cases at supermarkets and specialty food stores around the state are a good indication that cheese isn’t just getting plopped on top of a burger, shredded for an oozing gratin dish, or served along with a piece of apple pie. Cheese has become its own stand-alone course at dinner parties and in restaurants. The elegant cheese tray or cart rolled to the table after the entrée and before dessert—common practice in European restaurants—is slowly making its way onto the American food scene. If we want to eat cheese, talk about it, and thoroughly enjoy it, then a crash course in cheese is in order.

First, how do we talk about cheese? We’ve slowly been educated on the vocabulary of wine, using words like finesse, terroir, tannic, buttery, and oaky to describe wine. Now it’s time for cheese. To build a vocabulary of cheese, I spoke with Laura Werlin, author of *The New American Cheese*; Daniel Strongin, a chef and past president of the American Cheese Society; and Lynne Devereux, a cheese educator coordinating cheese tastings across the country. Here are some of their favorite words for describing cheese: pungent, acidic, earthy, mushroom-y, salty, barnyard-y, buttery, crumbly, milky, sweet, yeasty, nutty, creamy, and smooth.

As with wine, each cheese has several distinctive traits. Fresh mozzarella, for instance, is (or should be) milky, soft, creamy, and smooth. Crescenza, a soft-ripened cheese with no rind, from Bellwether Farms in Petaluma, California, is described as rich and buttery with a mild yeasty flavor. La Petite Bleu from Marin French Cheese Company, also in Petaluma, is a flavorful, slightly tangy blue cheese with a silky edible rind and creamy interior infused with blue veins. The more we taste, identify, and characterize the cheeses, the more we learn. As with wine, this can become a fun and interesting pastime.

Speaking of wine, what about cheese and wine pairing? As part of the half-day professional conference, Laura Werlin led the attendees through a wine and cheese tasting. (Tough work, but somebody has to do it! Spittoons were provided.) Based on thorough research for her forthcoming book, *The All American Cheese and Wine Book: Pairings, Profiles & Recipes*, Laura has developed some tips and truisms that she shared with the group. “In order to truly taste whether a wine pairs nicely with a cheese, taste the wine first, then the cheese, then the wine. Try to pair the style of the cheese with the style of the wine (light with light; full with full).”

Here are Laura's general Truisms:

- White wine is more cheese-friendly.
- Sweet wine is more cheese friendly.
- Sharp, strong and/or bitter cheeses bring out fruit in wine BUT will quash light wines, fruity or otherwise.
- Sharp, strong or bitter cheeses make tannic wines stronger and more bitter.
- Super sharp or bitter cheeses almost always go best with semi-dry and/or dessert (sweet) wines.
- Very salty cheeses will exacerbate tannins in wine.
- Creamy cheeses do NOT soften tannins in wine (contrary to popular belief).
- Tannic wines never taste better with cheese.

Pairing four Oregon wines—a Westry 2001 Willamette Valley Pinot Gris, a Chehalem 2001 Dry Riesling, a Ken Wright Cellars 2000 Shea Valley Pinot Noir, and an Andrew Rich Late Harvest 2001 Gewurztraminer Ice Wine—with seven California artisanal cheeses truly highlighted and clarified these truisms. To give one example, when tasting La Petite Bleu with the Pinot Gris, the cheese seemed to strip the wine of its fruit, making the wine seem more alcoholic. Against the Riesling, the blue seemed saltier and the wine seemed flatter. With the Gewurztraminer, the taste of both the wine and the cheese stayed neutral and quite pleasant. However, with the Pinot Noir, the pairing ruined both the flavor of the cheese and the wine. Laura suggested a sparkling wine as perhaps the best compliment to this cheese. In fact, as a general rule, she noted, “Sparkling wine is a great cheese wine.” For the inexperienced, this seemed like the best tip of all.

The least sexy, but perhaps most consumer-friendly information presented at the seminar had to do with the storage and handling the cheese. Who knew that plastic wrap was the demon of cheese storage? It creates the perfect environment for nasty mold growth. Wedges sold this way in the market are meant for temporary storage.

Once home from the market, all those lovely wedges of expensive, and not-so-expensive, cheeses should be unwrapped, placed on a crumpled up piece of paper towel and placed in a covered storage container in the refrigerator. Instead of crumpled paper towels you can use Vexar, the mesh bar cloth used to line cabinet shelves to protect glassware.

Try not to touch the cheese directly—use disposable plastic gloves or handle the cheese with a paper towel. It is OK to store like cheeses together, say, two different styles of Gouda, but don't store a delicate goat cheese with a Camembert. Once a week, open the container of cheese and refresh the air inside. If mold develops, cut it away from the cheese. How do you know if cheese is bad? Taste it. If it tastes bad, it is bad. Now that's an easy-to-remember truism!