FOOD & WINE

HOW TO PAIR WINE AND CHEESE LIKE AN EXPERT

by Jonathan Cristaldi | February 24, 2020

There's never been a better time to explore wine and cheese in America.

Have we entered a golden age of wine and cheese pairings? Cheese is on the same journey as wine, with more cheesemongers ushering an array of classic and trendy new cheeses to American dinner tables. Some of the finest, award-winning cheeses are available in most local supermarkets, so divining a good wine and cheese pairing today is easier than ever.

Laura Werlin, a James Beard Award-winning author with six books on cheese including Cheese Essentials and Grilled Cheese Please, suggests the reason is simple. "Wine and cheese are two very humble products that are both fermented and both taste like the place where they came from," she says. Pairing them together is really about having fun, she says. "Don't let your head get in the way."

Werlin says that one simple rule is to be aware is acidity. "The least successful pairings are most likely to happen with super oaky, low-acid wines," she says. "Cheese tends to bring out the tannins in oak. What you're looking for in the wine is some degree of acidity to cut through the richness of the cheese." If you're uncertain about the level of acidity in wine, ask a knowledgeable friend or wine retail expert to guide you.

I asked Master Sommelier Matt Stamp, co-owner of the restaurant and wine shop Compline in Napa, California, for more tips. Stamp says to "save the big reds for aged cheeses with grainier, crumbly textures. Light crisp white wines often call for fresher cheeses; you can easily pair zesty, citrusy Sauvignon Blanc with tangy goat's milk cheeses like chevre or feta." His favorite pairing is Madeira and a good aged Cheddar because "the nutty tones in the cheese and wine are genius together."

Beyond classics like brie and chunks of Parmigiano, some of the trends are leaning toward more Alpine-style cheeses, which are "similar to Comté in France, Gruyère, and Appenzeller," Werlin says. "I'm also seeing more spruce-wrapped cheeses along with mixed-milk cheeses. And we're beginning to see more booze in cheese, like Ubriaco, a 'drunken' unpasteurized cow's milk cheese infused with wine, which you so don't want to like, but I'm sorry—it's really good."

With some guidance from Werlin, here are 13 delicious wine and cheese pairings, painstakingly tested over a couple of weeks. Let this list serve as a basic guide. There are no hard and fast rules, and by all means, experiment!

Washed-Rind Cheese: Berthaut Époisses
Wine Pairing: NV Bollinger Special Cuvee Brut, Champagne, France ($79)

Champagne is cheese's best friend—capable of eliciting a mouthful of magic with just about any cheese in the world. The bubbles dance on the tongue, and as Werlin says, "scrub away" the cheese on your palate in cleansing fashion, making way for another bite of cheese. So, even if Époisses, a soft, pungent, sweet and salty cow's milk cheese primarily made in Burgundy's Côte-d'Or region in France, isn't your favorite, go for gold and try it all: cow, sheep, goat, soft, semi-soft, hard, surface-ripened, blue. This Bollinger delivers lip-smacking granny smith apple, poached pears, stony minerality, and a subtle earthy, mushroom note, all with bracing acidity. Paired with Époisses, it's like who's who? Am I tasting the cheese or the Champagne? So good.

Semi-Hard Cheese: Piave-Vecchio
Wine Pairing: 2017 Tenuta Sant'Antonio Valpolicella Superiore Ripasso Monti Garbi ($22)

Piave is a well known Italian cow's milk cheese, and Piave-Vecchio, an unpasteurized, slightly aged version, is especially good with Italian reds. The cheese is firm, mild, and slightly salty, layered with grassy and nutty notes. Paired with this Monti Garbi, a blend of mostly Corvina and Rondinella grapes, the salty notes in the cheese almost elevate the fruit component in the wine, which is packed with red currants, brown spices, and a deep roasted coffee note atop baked cherry compote, with grippy acidity. Tenuta Sant'Antonio also makes "Campo Dei Gigli" an Amarone della Valpolicella, which offers deep Kirsch, sultana, and brown sugar flavors, revealing distinct nutty notes when paired with the Piave-Vecchio.

Soft-Ripened Triple-Cream Cheese: Cowgirl Creamery Mt Tam
Wine Pairing: 2017 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay Napa Valley ($58)

Montelena winemaker Matt Crafton suggested a triple cream or an aged comté with his Chardonnay—a taste-test that didn't require much arm-twisting of my wife to help me decide. We landed on Cowgirl Creamery's Mt Tam, a three-week aged, pasteurized cow's milk triple cream. Though the style of Chardonnay, which is really fresh, with integrated oak spices and zesty acidity, really lends itself to both the triple cream and comté. The creamy, buttery quality of the Mt Tam seems to imbue the Chardonnay with richer floral, fruit, and mineral qualities, while the comté, rich with nutty, earthy notes, is something to enjoy with an aged Chardonnay, like Montelena's, which after five to seven years in the bottle develops buttery, caramelly, and earthy notes.

Hard Cheese: Emmi Gruyère
Wine Pairing: 2018 Domaine Marcel Lapierre Julienas, Beaujolais, France ($42)

The late Marcel Lapierre (the winery is helmed by his son, Mathieu) was a leading voice on natural wine, a category hard to define because of so many varying opinions. In general, the wines tend to be lighter-bodied, more delicate, often lower in alcohol, and typically unrefined or unfiltered—but there are plenty of exceptions to even that generality. With these, go with a mellow cheese, not super salty or acidity, but more

savory, grassy, and a little buttery, like Gruyère. You could, depending on the wine, go with a cheese a bit higher in acid like a creamy goat cheese such as Humboldt Fog, or an aged goat cheese like Spanish Garrotxa, which has some earthiness. This Lapierre Julienas is remarkably bright, with vivid red berry fruit, earth, spice, and loads of natural acidity with young, ripe tannins. It's a baby, but paired with Gruyère, and maybe a little speck or prosciutto—that's happiness bite after bite, sip after sip.

Semi-Hard Cheese: Herve Mons Gabietou
Wine Pairing: 2017 Domaine du Pelican Arbois Chardonnay, Jura, France ($45)

This sheep and cow's milk cheese comes all the way from France's rugged and stunning Basque country, along the western Pyrenees Mountains that border Spain. The zippy acidity of this French Chardonnay from the lush Jura region (close to Switzerland) has a candied-ginger-like spice, wet stone minerality, crushed almonds, and the kicker, a kind of cheese-rind quality, which combined with the firm, but sweet-cream notes of this Gabietou, delivers an astounding pas de deux bursting with wildflowers, deep earthy minerality and a disappearing act—the bottle and the cheese will be gone well before dinner is even close to being ready.

Hard Cheese: British-Style English Cheddar or Pecorino Toscano
Wine Pairing: 2016 Domaine Barons de Rothschild Légende Medoc ($26)

Most of the world's Cabernet Sauvignon wines tend to have big, powerful tannins, which with cheese, means fewer choices. Aim for an aged Cabernet where the tannins have mellowed and the fruit has taken a backseat. The earthy quality of a Bordeaux, like this "Légende" red, marries nicely with British-style cow's milk cheddars from makers like Neil's Yard or William Cofield Cheesemakers' cloth-bound and grainy McKinley Cheddar. You could also try sheep's milk Tuscan Pecorino (not Pecorino Romano, which is too salty). Whatever you do, no blue cheese and Cabernet! It tends to produce a metallic taste that's really unappealing, unless the Cabernet in question is a total fruit-bomb, in which case you'll survive.

Blue Cheese: Castel Regio Gorgonzola Dolce
Wine Pairing: 2013 Arvay Janos Tokaji Aszu 6 Puttonyos, Hungary (375ml $66)

Gorgonzola Dolce is a sweet and creamy cow's milk style of blue, made from milk from Piedmont or Lombardy, which hasn't been aged that long. It's pungent for sure, but paired with the luscious, golden sweet Tokaji Aszu wines from Hungary, it has the power to turn blue cheese skeptics into die-hard fans. Never that easy to come by, this Arvay is "6 Puttonyos" deep, which means its made in the sweetest style: candied apricots, candied orange peel, honey, honeycomb, super fresh and inviting palate-coating sweetness but with such beautiful crystalline acidity it has a seemingly off-dry finish. With the Gorgonzola Dolce, all these sumptuous nutty notes emerge while the palate is cleansed with a lusciously sweet flavor leaving a lingering desire to just have more cheese and more wine.

Alpine-Style Washed-Rind Cheese: Roth's Private Reserve
Wine Pairing: 2019 Mettler Family Vineyards Albariño ($20)

This raw cow's milk cheese is cellar-aged for at least 6 months in Monroe, Wisconsin, and reveals a crumbly texture that offers subtle nutty and tangy grassy notes tinged with honeysuckle. The cheesemongers at Roth's suggest pairing this with a Riesling or even a hard cider, but this Mettler Albariño from Lodi offers the kind of rich mouthfeel and tropical fruit and honeysuckle notes supported by lifted acidity that make it a great match. If you can't find Mettler, look for Uruguay producer Bodega Garzon's Reserve Albarino ($19) or any dry German, Austrian, or Alsatian Riesling.

Alpine-Style Washed-Rind Cheese: Pleasant Ridge Reserve
Wine Pairing: 2018 Altano Douro White ($13)



Stylistically, these Alpine-style cheeses hint at Gruyère, but vary in their pungent aromas and flavors from mild to intense. Uplands Cheese, the Wisconsin makers of Pleasant Ridge, produce an "alpage" style, which means that the cheese is made strictly from milk that comes from cows grazing on grass during the summer months. The result is a rich and flavorful cheese, both sweet and salty with a distinctly fruity finish. This white wine from Portugal's Douro Valley is a blend of Malvasia Fina, Viosinho, Rabigato and Moscatel Galego—all grape names you'll forget once you taste this light, bright, crisp and aromatic dazzler. Lime blossoms and orange blossoms with a touch of honeysuckle and salty minerality backed by white peaches, pear, and nice florals make this an Alpine-style cheese partner in crime.

Soft-Ripened Cheese: Harbison (from The Cellars at Jasper Hill Farm)
Wine Pairing: 2017 Dutton-Goldfield Fox Den Vineyard Pinot Noir, Green Valley, Russian River ($62)

This spoonable, sweet creamy pasteurized cow's milk cheese is wrapped in strips of spruce cambium bark (the inner-bark layers of spruce trees growing in the woodlands around Jasper Hill farm), lending a distinct cedar-like flavor to the cheese, along with pretty wildflower notes. Most Pinot Noir is aged in oak, and many from Sonoma's Russian River examples, such as this Fox Den Pinot, tend to develop distinct cedar-like spices when aged in oak. Red cherry, pine forest, savory spices, and elegant wildflower notes tend to show up in the glass and make for a perfectly complementary pairing.

Blue Cheese: Rogue Cellars' Smokey Blue
Wine Pairing: Dow's 20 Year Aged Tawny Port ($65)

The sweeter the wine, the saltier the cheese needs to be. A generous sip after a bite of this Smokey Blue and the port brings a freshness and zip, cutting through the creaminess of the cheese, while a subtle smokey note delivers an unexpected pop of warm, turned earth and muddled blueberry fruit. Also, note that the younger Dow tawny's are full and generous with apple brandy, spiced pear, and toasty walnut notes, so try to avoid blues that are too pungent, because they'll overpower and not compliment the port. The older ports (30- and 40-year Tawnies) show more delicate almond croissant, baked honeycomb, burnt orange and creamy caramel flavors, but all offer a firm spine of acidity, which also makes them a good counterpoint to an array of blue cheeses.

Surface-Ripened Soft Cheese: Vermont Creamery Cremont
Wine Pairing: 2018 Ladera Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley ($30)

This Cremon is a double-cream mixed milk cheese made from pasteurized cultured cow and goat milk that is decadent and silken in texture revealing notes of fresh cream and light-skinned nuts, like Marcona almonds. This Ladera Sauvignon Blanc brings a richness of flavors with Granny Smith apple, Bosc pear, and flinty minerality with sea-shell salinity balanced by zippy acidity, which washes away every delicious taste of the cheese.

Hard Cheese: Comté
Wine Pairing: 2011 Lenkey Pinceszet 'Human' Furmint, Tokaj-Hegyalja, Hungary ($24)

Of all the cheese pairings I tried for this article, my favorite was a series of Hungarian Furmint wines paired with Comté, a raw cow's milk cheese made in France's Jura Mountain region. If you have trouble finding wines from Lenkey Pinceszet, ask your local wine retailer to recommend any Furmint options, which is the Hungarian grape that produces a dry style of profoundly mineral-rich white, with mouthwatering acidity, citrus-kissed fruit, and long earthy and beeswax or honeycomb notes. The earthy element of the Furmint cuts the comté, which is a dense cheese, and brightens the palate. Conversely, the cheese elevates sweet, riper fruit notes in the wine and everything lands in spectacular harmony.

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