

“Old Rules, New Pleasures: Wines for Cheese, Restyled”

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Are you a believer in the innate affinity of wine for cheese? For some, there is nothing more satisfying than a glass of red wine, a piece of cheese and a few slices of crusty bread. Cheese has been a dietary staple for centuries in traditional wine cultures such as France, Italy, and Spain as well as in other Mediterranean countries. The classic French meal always includes a *plateau de fromage* (a cheese plate), and usually a fine old red wine is reserved for that course.

Such an experience can indeed be wonderful. But is it due to a sense of well-being and relaxation that most people feel by that point in the meal – rather than to a vintage at its apogee, whose subtleties are frequently overshadowed by the cheese? Some wines can be co-equal partners with cheeses, but very seldom do they include delicate, nuanced old reds!

Experience has taught that our tasting faculties are altered and easily deceived by the strong aromas and tastes of cheese, and by the milky, fatty coating on our tongues. The power of cheese to take over our palates – and seduce our judgment – has been known for eons. An old maxim in the wine trade is: “Buy on bread; sell on cheese.” A graduate thesis from the Viticulture and Enology Department of the University of California – Davis tested the affinity of red wines for cheese. Using common wines like Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot and a variety of cheeses, including Gruyère, Cheddar, soft

cow and blues, a trained team of tasters spent months tasting each wine with each cheese. The results were not exactly reassuring to those convinced of the sanctity of wine with cheese. In almost every instance, the cheese blocked the wine's taste characteristics. Would the outcome have been the same had they used, say, white wines instead of dry reds for the study? Contrary to conventional wisdom, sparkling wines, white wines, and fortified wines such as Port, Sherry and Madeira may be much more compatible with cheese, if carefully partnered. Surprising as it may seem, Champagne is a delightful counterpoint to chunks of young Parmigiano Reggiano, and a rich, full-bodied Meursault is sublime with Morbier. So much for the old rules!

To identify wines to pair more successfully with cheese, you may first need to throw out common preconceptions and recognize the amazing diversity of the world of cheese. The hope of choosing one wine – or even a single category or type of wine – to pair with all cheese is unrealistic: there are too many varieties of cheese with very distinct taste differences. Moreover, it is common practice to serve a selection of goat, cow and sheep cheese together, making the challenge of finding one wine that will be successful with all of them quite daunting. Indeed, how do you select a single wine to match a sharp goat cheese, an unctuous triple crème, and a pungent blue?

So how should you go about the selection process? The guiding principle should be to choose a wine that is either *in balance* with the intensity and texture of the cheese, or one that provides a *strong contrast*. Here are a few

liberating concepts that can help you navigate the complexities of wine and cheese and discover new pleasures:

- 🏠 White wine may be a much better partner for many cheeses than red wine.
- 🏠 Young, powerful, even tannic red wines have a better chance of standing up to strongly flavored cheeses than do subtle, complex, mature old reds.
- 🏠 Sweet, generously flavored wines, especially fortified wines, can be more successful with many cheeses than either dry white or dry red wine.
- 🏠 Young, dry whites and sparkling wines are compatible with fresh, brined cheeses, goat cheese and hard, salty-sweet cow milk cheeses (Champagne brut with Parmigiano-Reggiano).
- 🏠 Full-bodied whites such as Burgundian Chardonnay are good matches for creamy, flavorful cow milk cheeses as well as semi-firm cow milk cheeses that have a nutty, sweet taste.
- 🏠 Sweet condiments accompanying cheese such as sliced apples, dried figs or a fruit conserve (*membrillo*, for example) change the rules of the game: wines with some degree of sweetness may now be the best partners.

🏠 If you had to pick *one* wine for cheese, opt for a modern, fleshy Amarone which can remarkably compatible with diverse cow and sheep milk cheeses.

🏠 Many people find Vintage, Single Quinta and Late Bottled Vintage Port as universally successful with cheeses, blues included, as any one type of wine can be – with the exception of fresh, brined or young goat cheese!


Putting these concepts into practice, first identify the family or category of cheese, and then find the wine *style* – not the specific wine – that could be a successful partner. There are in fact many styles, not just one, that will be enjoyable with a given cheese, as you will see from the examples below:


🏠 **Fresh, mild, unaged cheeses such as *queso fresco*, mozzarella, and young, delicate goat cheese:** sparkling wines such as Spanish cava and Prosecco; Grüner Veltliner and young Austrian Riesling; Sancerre and other light to medium bodied dry whites; dry rosés


🏠 **Brined or pickled cheeses such as feta:** very dry white wines such as Greek Assyrtiko; Muscadet; light Loire Valley Sauvignon Blancs (Touraine, Quincy); Verdicchio


🏠 **Soft and firm goat cheeses such as Bucheron, Montrachet, Selles-sur-Cher from France, Spanish Garrotxa, and US equivalents such as Hoja Santa, Wabash Cannonball:**

Champagne non-vintage & other brut sparklers; with very young cheeses, Sauvignon Blanc (from the Loire Valley, South Africa), Petit Chablis; tangy reds like Barbera d'Asti, Dolcetto, and Jumilla

 **Soft, high fat cow's milk cheeses such as Brillat-Savarin, Explorateur & Vacherin Mont d'Or; Robiola (often a blend of milks); and American versions like Constant Bliss:** if the cheese is young, Orvieto, Chablis or Vouvray and Beaujolais *crus* (Morgon, Côte de Brouilly); for more mature, runny cheese, Bandol, Bordeaux *crus bourgeois*, Australian Cabernets, Chianti Classico, Rioja reserva & other medium-bodied, barrel-aged reds

 **Soft, intensely flavored cow's milk cheeses such as Epoisses, Pont l'Evêque, Taleggio and Red Hawk:** a full-bodied Chardonnay or white Burgundy (Meursault, Pouilly-Fuissé); weighty, higher alcohol reds such as Amarone & South Australian Shiraz; vintage style Banyuls, Port & other sweet fortifieds

 **Semi-firm to firm cow's & sheep's milk cheeses such as Cantal, Morbier, Mahón, Manchego, English Cheddar styles, Gouda and aged Jack:** Chablis Grand Cru, Meursault; Bandol, Bordeaux *crus bourgeois*; young Pinot Noir and Côte de Beaune reds; Argentine Malbec; Aglianico del Vulture, aged Hermitage (red) & Syrah/Shiraz in general; Ribera del Duero, Priorat.

 **Blue cheeses including Roquefort, Gorgonzola *piccante*, Stilton & American counterparts (Crater Lake Blue, Point Reyes, Maytag):** Amarone & Recioto; late harvest Zinfandel; Semillon-based dessert wines; fortified wines in both vintage & aged (*rancio*) styles – Banyuls, Cream Sherry, Bual or Malmsey Madeira, Single Quinta Port

The “Two-Wine Solution”

Do you still find making a wine choice far too difficult? Afraid that your dinner guests will not think the wine you picked is to their liking? If so, I have a strategy based on personal experience that will not only double the odds of success, but will also insure lively and entertaining dinner table conversation. If choosing one wine is just too challenging, then why not serve two?

This idea may be unconventional, but that should not stop you from trying a fun and delicious alternative. Convention aside, serving two types of wines simultaneously relieves you of the burden of determining that elusive “perfect” match – and is particularly suitable to the diversity of a cheese plate. Having tested the Two-Wine Solution at various gatherings – with wine and food professionals and journalists as well as friends at home – I know that it is effective and a safe bet. Most people are intrigued, going back and forth between the two glasses to decide which wine is the better partner.

At a recent dinner party, for instance, I violated my own advice by serving older wines in a pair, a 1983 Côte-Rôtie and a 1983 Chablis Grand Cru Les Clos, with four young, creamy cow milk cheeses (probably among the least assertive of non-processed cheeses). The combination was sublime, and both wines were thoroughly enjoyed by everyone, certainly a “win-win” in wine terms. But my guests decided the Chablis was the best match – this despite the initial skepticism when a white wine (a beautiful deep golden one at that) was poured. The mature Côte-Rôtie was simply too delicate and its nuances were lost. Lesson learned, once more!

There are many, many variations of the two-wine theme, so feel free to be imaginative and you will be rewarded with happy dinner guests. The task of choosing a single wine can be problematic or bewildering, especially given the complex interplay of wine and cheese. Whether you pick one wine or two, take a chance and break a few “rules” when you pair wine with food – the results may be delicious!