

# 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:

- 🏠 The first rule to break: White rather than red wine may be a much better partner for many cheeses.
- 🏠 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 – but not goat, unless well-cured.

🏠 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. Again, with the exception of fresh, brined or young goat cheese which calls for a bone-dry white or brut sparkler (see below for specifics).


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; and 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); and 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, New Zealand); Petit Chablis; tangy reds like Barbera d'Asti, Dolcetto, and Jumilla from Spain.
-  **Soft, high fat cow's milk cheeses such as Brillat-Savarin, Explorateur and Vacherin Mont d'Or; Robiola (usually 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 and 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:** generous whites such as Chablis Grand Cru, Meursault; Bandol, Bordeaux (Médoc or Saint-Émilion); young Pinot Noir and Côte de Beaune reds; Argentine Malbec; Aglianico del Vulture, aged Hermitage (red OR white) and Syrah/Shiraz in general; Ribera del Duero, Priorat.

 **Blue cheeses including Roquefort, Gorgonzola *piccante*, Stilton and American counterparts (Crater Lake Blue, Point Reyes, Maytag):**

Amarone and Recioto; late harvest Zinfandel; Semillon-based dessert wines from Sauternes to Aussie “stickies”; fortified wines in both vintage & aged (*rancio*) styles such as Banyuls, Cream Sherry, Bual or Malmsey Madeira, and Late Bottled or youthful 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.

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!

For more advice about pairing wine with cheese and other foods, you may find it helpful to consult my **Wine and Food Guide** which is freely accessible on my website, [www.vintrinsic.com](http://www.vintrinsic.com).

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