Clockwise from 9:00:
Tomme Vaudoise, Flixer, Stanser Röteli,
Vacherin Fribourgeois, Sbrinz, and Blaue Geiss

The Quintessential Cheese Plate

Assembling a nonpareil tasting of cheeses

By Max McCalman

Of the several thousand plates of cheeses I've designed, I'm fairly certain I haven't composed the same grouping of cheeses more than once — except possibly for different customers on the same day. But I do apply some fundamental "rules" when setting them together.

I often see cheese "flights" designed to employ a thematic consideration, perhaps the provenances of the cheeses, such as a local plate, an Italian selection, an Iberian collection, etc. Some are species-specific, such as all goat cheeses. Other plates are based on styles, such as all washed-rind or all blue cheeses. One of my favorites is to represent several styles of cheese: one fresh, one leaf-wrapped, one bloomy rind, one pressed, etc.

A popular trend in restaurants is to design cheese and wine or beer flights. The creative element of pairing cheeses with specific beverages allows the fromager to apply his or her knowledge, experiment with the pairings and then describe the relationships to the guests. One cheese flight design we often employ at the Artisanal Cheese Center in New York City offers representations of the historical developments in the evolution of cheese.

Cheese flights in restaurants can make for interesting conversations between the server and the guests and among the guests themselves. Well-designed flights can elicit flavor subtleties in the cheeses — or in their pairing partners — that might go unnoticed if they were left on their own. Or the combinations can fold together to create new flavors altogether.

Although fun, the flights can ignore some of the fundamental "rules" of cheese progressions, such as they may be.

From the bottom: Chabichou de Poitu, Evora, Constant Bliss, Berkswell, Dorset, Pleasant Ridge Reserve, and Roquefort (Carles)

in the beginning...

The logical order of progression on a cheese plate is to begin with mild cheeses and finish with strong. The rationale is that if you begin with stronger, more persistent flavors, the nuances of milder ones will be harder to distinguish; stronger aromas and flavors dominate milder ones. Granted, what may be a mild cheese to one person is a strong cheese to someone else, but it would be hard to argue that Roquefort is not stronger than fresh, pasteurized Chèvre. The distinctions among all the other cheeses that fall between those bookends may be a little less certain.

The flavor components that lead to the "strength" of the cheeses include the basic four — salt, sweet, sour, and bitter — plus the fifth flavor, umami, which is usually described as savoriness. I also consider astringency, which should probably not be a noticeable flavor component in a cheese. The composition and balance of these flavors within a cheese add up to its strength. Texture comes into play as well.

Generally, the order one would apply to a tasting of cheese would be younger to older (aged) varieties; if there is a blue cheese, it should be the last cheese in a group. If multiple blues are in a selection, the relative heft of each should be considered. For example, a pasteurized Fourme d'Ambert would be presented before raw-milk Roquefort. Even though some aged cheeses may actually seem to be mild compared to some of the younger ones, the flavors of the aged cheeses tend to be more persistent, lingering longer on the palate.

Along with younger to older, the progression usually places softer cheeses before harder ones. This makes good sense since harder cheeses are generally expected to keep longer than softer ones. Placing softer before harder cheeses is not a hard-and-fast rule. Alternating the textures of the cheeses in a selection helps to distinguish one cheese from the other.

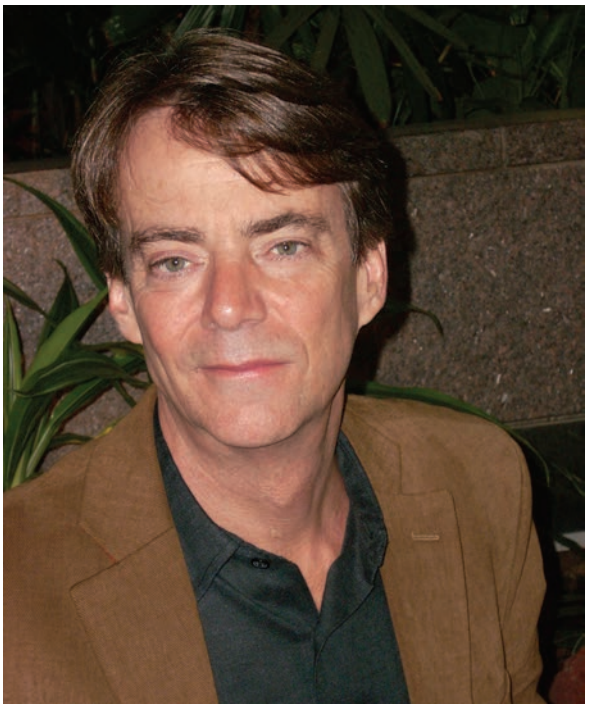
One aesthetic I liberally apply to cheese groupings is to alternate textures: one soft cheese followed by one firmer textured, followed by another soft cheese, etc. Though this may be a departure from the softer to harder rule for assembling a plate of cheeses, it can help to distinguish the cheeses one from the next and can make for a more interesting lineup overall.

Another fairly clear marker is raw versus pasteurized cheeses. Because heat treatment diminishes the aroma and flavor of a cheese — along with altering the texture and, some would say, diminishing the nutritive value and the keeping quality — cheese made with pasteurized (read: compromised) milk should be placed ahead of cheese made from unpasteurized milk. Though some cheeses produced with pasteurized milk may exude a rather full aroma, it will be a diminished aroma compared to the same cheese produced with raw milk.

We may have our own biases for or against certain cheese types, but a grouping of various cheeses affords the opportunity to enjoy cheeses we might not normally choose. Not to take the fun out of the experience and over-analyze it, but I've found sharing a variety of styles more interesting than having only one. For example, some people who drink only red wine may be surprised to find what can happen with their favorite cheeses if they try it with a white wine, or vice versa.

Wine, of course, can influence the selection of cheeses at the outset. The more I taste cheese and wine combinations, the less beholden I am to the rules of cheese and wine pairings. It's a little more exciting to experiment with the combinations than to follow recommended pairings. The probability of finding a wine/cheese mismatch is less than you might think. After all, a good wine will have its inherent fruit qualities, while a cheese will have its balancing savory qualities. And at the end of the day, there is no safer or more delicious food than cheese, and wine can make a similar case from within the world of beverages. And there are beers and other beverages, too.

From the bottom: Piper's Pyramid, Evora, Manchester, Abbaye de Tamié, Pecorino Stagionato, Barely Buzzed, Kuntener, Gruyère, and Smokey Oregon Blue



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cows, goats and sheep

Along with alternating textures you can alternate animal types, rind types, and provenances — all can help make each cheese more distinctive. An analogy can be found in a concert. If the orchestra plays the first movements of Mozart symphonies and they're all in the key of C, the sameness might wear a little thin. Not sure how many such Mozart examples exist — but you get my point.

With regard to the animals themselves, all else being equal — if the cheeses are all similarly crafted — I'll place the goat cheese first, then the sheep, then cow. Usually this works well in the relative heft of these three major dairy animals. The fat globules in goat milk are relatively small compared to the sheep-milk fat globules, and those are relatively small compared to the cow milk. The smaller fat globules are a little easier to digest, rather than this being a comparison of which is less fattening than the others. The placement of cheeses made with mixed milks depends on the mix of the milks. For example, a cheese made with goat and sheep milk might very well fit best between the all-goat cheese and the all-sheep cheese, assuming the cheeses are otherwise similarly crafted.

One good gauge of a cheese's strength is its relative salt content; saltier cheeses follow less salty ones. This could be one of the considerations for placing the blues at the end of a group since, generally speaking, blues are relatively salty cheeses. One reason the blues tend to be saltier than other cheeses is because salt thwarts the growth of competing enzymes, thus allowing the blue molds to develop successfully. Beyond their greater salt levels, most blues also have relatively dominant, somewhat "piercing" acids that cause them to linger on the palate longer than most other cheeses.

Whatever selections are included, I almost always prefer the cheeses be somewhat different from one another. It's more than "variety is the spice of life" — I also think of the somewhat different nutritive values of different cheeses. The relative values from the primary dairy animals' milk, the styles, the ages of cheeses, whether the cheese is made with raw or heat-treated milk, where the cheese is produced, the nutrients the animals draw from the vegetation and feeds that go into their milk and the resulting cheeses — all these components add up to the relative nutritional values of cheeses — as well as their aesthetic differences.

size matters

One important consideration in the assembly of cheese selections is the amount of cheese to include, both the number of cheeses and the sizes of each piece. I recall a guest at Picholine restaurant in New York City who came in for the cheese course only (many guests do this) and began with a plate of nine cheeses. After she had taken her time enjoying that selection, she asked for a second selection of nine! The average number of cheeses on our plates was about five. Go figure. Behold the power of cheese!

In our classes at the Artisanal Cheese Center we generally settle for seven cheeses, a number that can usually provide a fairly broad range. Since more cheeses are made with cow milk than other milks, those cheeses usually outnumber the others. Not all of the portion sizes are exactly the same weight. The weight of the portion sizes of the softer, wetter cheeses is usually a bit higher. With the higher water content of the softer cheeses, people seem to be able to devour them quickly. The harder cheeses, on the other hand, may take a few more minutes to consume.

The total weight of cheese served depends largely upon the individual's appetite. There is something to be said for having

the one "perfect" cheese — whatever that may be — and one of the marvelous things about cheese is that a little can go a long way. How much cheese ends up on a plate and then in the tummy can also depend upon tolerance for all the various types. Fortunately, these rare low tolerances are not necessarily life-long problems. One of the many wonderful things about cheese — preserved milk that it is — is its satiety factor, offering near-complete and near-perfect nutrition, along with its stellar track record for food safety.

Even worse than imprecise portion sizes is the too-cold temperature at which many cheeses are presented. This is an issue that must be addressed with "health" officials — cheese must be kept in a cold refrigerator until right before it's served. You'd think we were talking about some other food with a far less admirable track record for foodborne illnesses!

We Americans are gradually coming to realize it isn't necessarily the fat in cheese that might make us fat — it's any calories we don't expend. In my opinion, it's difficult to have too much cheese. We may reach a point where we say "I'm good" with our cheese selection, but it's usually long before we actually eat too much. We forget cheese is made from our first food — milk — and is chock full of proteins and amino acids, good fat and fatty acids, vitamins and minerals.

appearance counts

Some spacing between cheeses — on a plate, a tray, or a board — is ideal. The problem with crowding cheese slices is more one of appearance than of cross-contamination. Cheeses snuggled up against each other don't usually mind, as long as they aren't soft cheeses that can run together. Firm cheeses are okay adjoining one other as long as they're not pressed together for extended amounts of time. Having a little bit of separation between cheeses is more visually appealing — it simply looks more appropriate.

Leaving the rinds on the cheeses helps to distinguish them, especially when multiple cheeses have similar looking pastes. In case you forget which cheese is which, the rind can help identify it. The rind can also provide a little "handle" to hold the cheese. Even if you don't intend to eat the rind, leave it on the slice — many cheese lovers devour it along with the paste. When the rinds are cut off, the cheese can look as if it's been violated.

Cheese plates often have lovely accompaniments that complement cheeses. These can take on artful forms, offering balance to the flavors and textures of cheeses as well as providing color highlights. I'm okay with these added touches as long as I can still savor the cheese by itself. The "composed" cheese plate has its place, but I'd prefer the cheese be able to speak for itself first. Some chefs just can't seem to leave the cheeses alone; they have to muck them up.

The presentation plate, tray, or board is an important consideration. The dark green marble on the original cheese trolleys at Picholine is my preferred surface for presentation because of the contrast it provides. The cheeses stand out on the marble, the marble keeps cool throughout service, and it's easy to clean afterwards. On that note, having an attractive and full selection of cheeses presented from a cheese trolley is one of the most thrilling experiences restaurant customers can behold. **CC**

From top to bottom: Amarelo da Beira Baixa, Languiole, Idiazábal, Sbrinz, Brie de Nagis and Munster