

WINE TALK

A flask of wine and loaf of bread



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

There are four products that symbolize the culinary revolution in Israel more than any others: bread, wine, cheese and olive oil.

The festival of Shavuot gives us the opportunity to enjoy all four together. It is, among other things, a harvest festival celebrating the first fruits and the grain harvest. As it is a tradition to eat dairy products, what could be more appropriate than to enjoy a selection of Israeli cheeses, a hunk of bread – with olive oil drizzled on it, of course – and washed down with some Israeli wines?

Once our choice in Israeli supermarkets was limited to white cheese, yellow cheese or salty cheese. Quality wines were rare. Olive oil was something one bought in a soft drink bottle in local Arab villages. Bread was called *ahid*, a rather basic version of black bread.

In the early 1980s a few small dairies were founded specializing in producing handmade goat cheese. Barkanit in the Jezreel Valley, Ein Kammonim in the Lower Galilee and Shay Seltser in the Jerusalem Hills were the pioneers that started the gourmet boutique cheese revolution.

The wine revolution began with the Golan Heights Winery, also in the '80s, and the whole industry responded by

moving to quality. The gourmet bread revolution started with Lechem Erez (Erez Bread), at the initiative of the famous chef Erez Komarovsky in the '90s. Then, Zeta from the Lower Galilee, Halutza from the Negev, both now large producers, and Eger from the Mount Carmel area, heralded a revival of quality Israeli olive oil.

Today, specialist dairies, boutique wineries, regional olive presses and artisan bakeries have sprung up all over Israel. The large producers and major brands have also responded, so production of cheese, wine, bread and olive oil in Israel today is unrecognizable from even 15 years ago.

There is a connection between these products that runs like a thread from ancient Israel to modern times. The famous Persian poet Omar Khayyam summed it up correctly, writing romantically about: "A flask of wine, a loaf of bread – and thou." Go to Tuscany today and they will say that the holy trinity of wine, bread and olive oil is the basis of the Mediterranean diet.

However, this all began in the Bible, when wine, bread and olive oil were the three mainstays of the economy. Wheat, vines and olive oil were amongst the Seven Species blessed in Ancient Israel. When the spies sent by Moses returned after scouting out the Promised Land, they returned with a

large bunch of grapes to illustrate that this was a land "flowing with milk and honey." This image of two men carrying a large bunch of grapes on a pole between them is preserved appropriately in the logos of both the Carmel Winery and the Israel Tourist Board.

So I recommend taking an opportunity this Shavuot to celebrate the flowering of gourmet Israel with these four fundamental regional and historical products.

The world of cheese is possibly even



SAUVIGNON BLANC'S high acidity makes it especially food friendly.
(Bonnie Trafelet/TNS)

SORRY RED drinkers, the holiday of cheese calls for white. (Marc Israel Sellem)

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CHEESE, BREAD, olive oil and wine are the perfect Shavuot pairings.
(Marc Israel Sellem/Doug Oster/ Pittsburgh Post-Gazette/TNS)



more varied than the world of wine. President Charles de Gaulle said about France, "How can I manage a country with so many cheeses?"

It is a complex field to master, but there are basic guidelines for matching cheese and wines that can be followed:

- Red wines do not go with soft, fatty, creamy, salty or smelly cheeses
- Often dry white or even sweet wines will make for better combinations.
- Try to match the acidity of the wine and cheese.



- Try to contrast the saltiness of the cheese.

Most cheeses can be placed in the following categories:

Hard cheeses

A hard cheese that is firm and not aged too much will go well with a medium- to full-bodied red wine. Cheddar and Parmesan are classic examples of fine red wine cheeses. However if the cheese is older and more pungent, the wine needs to be more mature and less tannic to avoid a clash. For this you will need older vintages.

Soft cheeses

This is the hardest category to find a match for. A creamy, fatty cheese will make most reds seem like water. The fat in the cheese will neutralize the tannin. Alternatively, an oaky and tannic red wine will taste slightly metallic when these cheeses are ripe and runny. A pasteurized Brie or Camembert would best be served by a lightly oaked Chardonnay with good acidity. If you prefer a red wine, then one that is soft, full of fruit and with no astringency will be adequate.

Blue cheese

Salt accentuates tannin, so the myth that red wine goes with all cheeses is shown to be most false when a red wine is

matched with a blue cheese. A sweet dessert wine or fortified wine make far better matches. The salt and sweetness contrast to enhance both cheese and wine.

Goat cheese

This category produces Israel's finest cheeses. They have a strong character, but can go with either white or red wines. The classic combination for a young goat cheese is a varietal Sauvignon Blanc. An aged goat cheese can be matched successfully with a mature well-structured but not tannic red.

Cooked cheese

Cooked cheese goes better with white wine. A cheese sauce, like Mornay, will usually be matched well with an oaky Chardonnay, the weight of the sauce being matched by the intensity of oak. For a fondue, a Sauvignon Blanc is recommended.

For a quiche, I recommend an unoaked chardonnay. Pizza is best served with a fruity rosé.

Cheesecake

Finally, with a rich New York cheesecake, there is nothing better than a fortified Muscat.

Sorry to disappoint red wine lovers, but as you can see, white wines are generally far better accompaniment for

cheeses and dairy products than red wines. The reality does not synch with the popular image of blocks of cheese and carafes of red wine.

There are trends that indicate a return of interest in white wines. Certainly the quality and variety has improved significantly. Many wineries are now making some really fine whites with typicity and authenticity, which were lacking not so many years ago.

Don't forget that white wines are far more versatile to match with food than reds. They are also far more suitable for our hot climate than red wines. Who wants to sit on the balcony at home drinking a 15% alcohol, oak-aged red wine on a hot summer evening, when a crisp dry white is also an option?

This Shavuot can be a time to appreciate Israel's quality white wines. It is a festival that provides not only an excuse for an annual cheese and wine tasting, but can also be a celebration of the four products that connect modern gourmet Israel with our biblical roots.

A glass of wine, a slice of cheese, a hunk of bread, a drizzle of oil... and thou.

The author has worked for many years in the wine trade. Known as the "Israel wine ambassador" and the "English voice of Israeli wines," he regularly writes about wine for both international and Israeli publications.