

Wine and cheese, please



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Cheese is part of numerous cultures, but in each one it has a different place. In the West, it is normally part of a meal, and there is usually a whole course devoted to it. As a Brit, I was brought up with the idea that cheese is eaten at the end of the meal, after the pudding or dessert. However, the French have a different custom. Their cheeses are served after the main course but before the desserts.

Each gives a place of honor to cheese. The British way enables diners to enjoy a glass of port with their cheese, while the French practice allows them to continue to drink the main course's red wine with the cheese.

Whatever the custom, cheese has an important place in gastronomic circles. Posh restaurants will have a cheese trolley, and very, very posh restaurants may even have a cheese sommelier.

In countries like Switzerland and the Netherlands, cheese is often served at breakfast. This is also true in Israel. The famed Israeli breakfast covers a large range of dairy products, where there are no problems with *kashrut*. In countries like Greece and Spain, cheese will often be served as part of the appetizers, at the beginning of the meal. I have also been at dinners here where cheese is served as a kind of first-course aperitif.

The Jewish calendar also takes cheese lovers into account. On Shavuot, it is traditional to serve dairy products, and it is the perfect opportunity to have a wine and cheese party. The phrase "wine and cheese" rolls off the tongue. They are natural partners, like bread and butter, or salt and pepper.

This does not mean that every wine goes with every cheese. For instance, there is a common misconception that red wine is the most natural partner to go with cheese, but there can be some awful clashes. In fact, white wines can often go better and are more versatile.

There is a famous saying in the English wine trade: "Buy on an apple, sell on cheese." This means that an apple will show up the quality of wine as it is, faults and all, whereas cheese will make a wine more palatable. So when you are buying the wine, taste it with a slice of apple; but when you are selling it, provide cheese, which will enhance the wine. Most tastings at wineries are served alongside cheese.

Wine is a world in itself, but the cheese world is even more complicated. There is such variety. Cheese may be strong flavored, high in fat, acidic, or salty. It can be hard, soft, creamy, or crumbly. It can be matured, pasteurized, or unpasteurized; made from the milk of a goat, cow, or sheep. French president Charles de Gaulle once complained in exasperation: "How can anyone govern a nation that has 246 different kinds of cheese?" And he was only talking about France!

HOWEVER, TO prepare a wine and cheese party is relatively easy to do. You need to decide if you want to go international or Israeli. There are plenty of good quality options here, too. I suggest choosing at least four different types of cheese as a minimum. These could be hard cheese, soft cheese, goats cheese, and blue cheese. This is enough to give the necessary variety.

The hard cheese may be something like Emmental, Gruyère, cheddar, or Parmesan. The best wines to match with this will be a full-bodied dry white wine, like an oaked-aged Chardonnay or quality red, possibly made



YARDEN SAUVIGNON BLANC is perfect with goat cheese. Cheese and wine are natural partners. (Tal Zipporin)



WEIHENSTEPHAN IS a wheat beer, appropriate for a festival celebrating the wheat harvest. (CBC Israel)



ROSE WINES instead of white wines may be enjoyed with cheeses. (Barkan)

from Bordeaux varieties. For Chardonnays, I recommend Teperberg Essence, Recanati Tel Fares Vineyard, or Carmel Mevo Betar. For reds, Shiloh Cabernet Sauvignon or Feldstein Cabernet Sauvignon would be classic.

Darom by Yatir Cabernet Sauvignon and Barkan Platinum Cabernet Sauvignon are good value alternatives. The Kishor Tefen Metzuda and Galil Mountain Yiron

would be perfect blends; but if you want something more original, the Vitkin Carignan and Jezreel Valley Argaman will also do the job.

In the same way the English add milk to lessen the tannin of the strong tea they drink, the cheese will soften the tannin of the red wine. Remember that an older, matured cheese will be tangier with a more pro-

nounced acidity. 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. Cheeses start bland and become stronger as they age. It is the opposite with wine. Older wines are less tannic and astringent.

The goats cheese could be a Chèvre. The options are endless because Israel excels in this category. Try to match the region of wine and cheese. There are some wonderful Israeli goats cheeses from artisan dairies. They tend to have a strong goaty character, but can go with either white or red wines.

However, the classic combination for a young goats cheese is a varietal Sauvignon Blanc, which is very aromatic, totally dry, with a sharp, refreshing acidity. Yarden Sauvignon Blanc, Tulip Net Sauvignon Blanc, or Jerusalem SBL would be a great match.

The Dalton Winery offers an intriguing choice of three expressions: one regular varietal (Family Collection); a Sauvignon Semillon spontaneously fermented in an amphora (White of Earth); and an oak-aged (Estate Fume). Interesting to compare. I am tempted to taste each to see which shows better with goats cheese!

If you want something else, the Teperberg Inspire Colombard and the Tzuba Semillon Sauvignon would also do the job. An aged goats cheese will go better with a well-rounded, soft-style Merlot. Favorites of mine are the Yarden Merlot and Tura Mountain Heights Merlot. Zion Winery's Capital Lions Gate blend (Marselan, Grenache, Caladoc) would also be perfect.

The soft cheese may be a Brie or Camembert, or something similar. If this style of cheese is too young, it will be virtually tasteless and bland. However, if it is older and runny, it can be so pungent as to be too strong for any wine. A fine balance between the creaminess and the flavor is what is desired.

This is the hardest category to find a match. A creamy, fatty cheese will make most reds seem like water. The fat in the cheese will neutralize the tannin, but an oaky and tannic red wine will taste slightly metallic when these cheeses are ripe and runny. A Brie or Camembert would best be served alongside a lightly oaked Chardonnay with good acidity.

Jerusalem Vintage Chardonnay, Kishor Viognier, 1848 Winery 2nd Generation Orient White (Colombard, Chardonnay, Roussanne) or Artisanal by Tabor Creation White Blend (Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc Roussanne) also fit the bill. Alternatively, a light, unoaked red wine with lots of fruit, good acidity, and no tannin is the best choice. A Beaujolais-style red or young fruity red would really be ideal. The Selected Cabernet Sauvignon, Zion Estate Shiraz, Barkan Gold Merlot, or Dalton Kna'an Red are options.

The most famous blue cheeses are Stilton and Roquefort. The classic match is to drink them with sweet wine because the saltiness of the cheese and the sweetness fit together like a hand in a glove. Opposites attract. A quality dessert wine would be the perfect partner. Yarden Heights Wine is the best dessert wine we have. Alternatively, a sweet, fortified dessert wine will also do the trick.

The Netofa port style wines are very good. The salt and sweetness contrast to enhance both cheese and wine. Tasting these together should be part of any course pairing food and wine, to illustrate the theory that "one plus one can equal three." Salt accentuates tannin, so the myth that red wine goes with all cheeses is shown to be most false when a red wine is paired with a blue cheese. Note that authentic Danish Blue and the strongest Gorgonzola may just be too strong to be wine-friendly.

THAT LEAVES us with the dessert to eat after the cheeses. Obviously, this is likely to be... a cheesecake! No surprises there. The best wine to enjoy with the classic



BARKAN PLATINUM Cabernet Sauvignon would be excellent with aged hard cheeses. (Barkan)

New York-style cheesecake is a fortified Muscat. Always ensure that the wine is sweeter than the dessert. A Moscato would be also good with this, for instance Private Collection Moscato, Teperberg Moscato, or the less expensive Buzz Moscato.

Serve the cheeses at room temperature, so take them out of the fridge in advance. Decorate the cheese platter with grapes, served cold from the fridge, chutney, some walnuts, and a few cut vegetables, like carrots and peppers of different colors. Celery also provides a crisp, refreshing partner to cheeses. Buy some crusty baguettes and cut them just before people arrive. Have some healthy crackers available, too.

As for wines, be practical. Obviously, you won't be purchasing a wine to match every type of cheese. However, for the absolute minimum, you need a dry white wine, a medium-bodied red wine, and a dessert wine. But if you prefer semi-dry, buy it without a second thought. The Carmel Appellation Gewurztraminer or Jerusalem Vintage Gewurztraminer are pretty good.

Also for lovers of pink, rosé wines could be chosen instead of white wines. It's a matter of personal choice. Barkan Blush, Messody Rosé, and Recanati's Gris de Marselan are good-quality rosés, each with its own attractive packaging.

Provide one glass for everyone, and you will have prepared the easiest party you have ever hosted. You can just eat, drink, and schmooze if you want to be informal. However, if your guests are wine geeks, you can taste each wine with each cheese and decide which goes with what, and then discuss why. Of course, you can ask your guests to contribute, by bringing cheese or wine to share the load.

There is something satisfyingly rustic about having a meal of freshly baked, crusty bread, drizzled with olive



ZION WINERY'S Capital Lions Gate, a fresh, fruity, flavorful red wine, is a good match with some cheeses. (Zion Winery)

oil, alongside a variety of cheeses and a carafe of wine. Those who have enjoyed the experience of ordering a "Ploughman's Lunch" in an English pub will know what I mean. In my English days, I would have enjoyed this with a Draught Bass or Charrington IPA.

I am a wine guy, but I started my career in beer. Shavuot also celebrates the wheat festival. What could be more appropriate than to also offer a wheat beer (Weissbier), which would be a mouth-watering match with the cheeses. The most famous brand is Weihenstephan, readily available here. It is the world's oldest brewery, operating since 1060! Certainly, this would be a most refreshing alternative, especially as Weihenstephan is offering a beer-based sourdough bread, specially developed by baker Uri Sheft, in a joint holiday offering for Shavuot.

As the great Persian poet Omar Khayyam wrote: "A loaf of bread, a flask of wine, and thou..." Why not offer the option of a wheat beer, as well as the flask of wine, to go with your beer bread and cheese? A wheat beer and a wheat beer bread to celebrate the Wheat Festival sounds innovative and appropriate. I recommend adding this to the wine offering. Providing variety caters to more tastes.

I love a wide variety of cheeses, but there are few I don't like. We are often made to feel guilty enjoying them too much or too often because of health reasons. How grand it is that we have our very own festival where it is a *mitzvah* to eat cheese, drink wine, and party with friends. Let's make the most of the opportunity! ■

The writer is a wine trade veteran and winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines over four decades. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com