

SML-Uncorked



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Cheese and Wine Pairing

by Steve Kershner

The general belief that wine and cheese are great companions certainly holds true, but it does not apply to all wines and all cheeses. Cheese is a very complex, varied, living food product, very much like wine. It ferments like wine, it ages like wine, and it needs a regulated environment in which to survive and show its best flavor profile, like wine. Perhaps most fittingly it also needs to accompany the proper foods, to be consumed at the right age, at the right temperature and in the proper setting. Those who enjoy wine generally also eat a lot of cheese, and often find that the combinations can be quite flattering, and there is a lot of fun to be had in the experimentation. Although there are many wines and cheeses that pair well together, most combinations are more akin to what we might describe as rather neutral, that is, the pairing doesn't have a particularly stunning effect, or lacks that WOW factor. They just simply seem to get along ok. There are also combinations that are very unpleasant and tend to show the worst of the wine, or the cheese, or both.

Commonly both red or white wines will work well with cheese. I tend to be very careful, however, with red wines that are heavy, highly oaked, and very tannic. Texture is another consideration. Very few coarse textured wines work well with any cheese. I most often lean toward white wines as companions with cheese because the odds are better for a good pairing. Sauvignon Blanc is my overall first choice (especially those from the Loire Valley like Sancerre, Pouilly-Fume, Reuilly, etc.) because it tends to have a wider affinity for a variety of cheeses. It has exuberant fruit, crisp acids, usually carries a bit of earthy mineral/herb/grass notes, and usually has very little wood tone, and no tannin- stylistically a pretty safe bet to get along with many cheeses. *continued ...*



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Cheese & Wine Paring

Second choice for most widely applicable wine is Riesling, especially those which are off-dry, rich in fruit character and high in malic acid. This wine has a wide affinity for foods of all types, characteristically enhancing, lifting, expanding the flavors of foods rather than covering or fighting with them. Riesling is reminiscent of biting into fresh fruit, and fruit is nearly always a good companion for cheese. Riesling wines have many faces or personalities and can run a wide range of sweetness level, so careful selection is recommended.



The most FUN of the easily cheese-paired wines is Champagne, especially Blanc de Noirs or Rose Champagne, for the same reasons that Sauvignon Blanc and Riesling work well: crisp acids, low wood, exuberant fruit and no tannin. This style of wine tends to cleanse and refresh the palate, excite the senses and clear the way for the flavor of the cheese, lifting and enhancing flavor rather than competing with the cheese for attention. There is always that festive, celebratory side of Champagne to consider as well, and we should keep in mind that we don't have to drink Champagne because the moment is special, but rather that the moment becomes special because we drink the Champagne. Therefore, we must drink it often!

In general it is much easier to pair white wines with cheeses than reds. It is easier to pair sweet wines than dry. It is far easier to pair crisp, refreshing, high acid, low oak, lower alcohol white wine than robust, tannic, high alcohol dry reds (which rarely find a suitable companion in cheese), especially as far as the textures are concerned. Also be aware that cheese has a tendency to cloud the palate and to slightly mask flavors due to the usually high fat content and milky creamy textures, so if you are attempting to have a critical wine analysis steer clear of cheese and opt instead for neutral breads, crackers and fresh fruits. The other caveat is that cheese tends to keep alcohol in the human system longer so your evening of wine and cheese could become a very difficult day after.

Enough with the overall generalizations; now for a few more specific ideas for wine and cheese pairing.



Cheese & Wine Paring

SOFT CHEESE

Camembert, Triple Creams, Brie, Fontina, Taleggio, Gouda (young), Monterey Jack

The soft texture of these cheeses requires that white wine be used almost exclusively. Red wine will taste thin and will be texturally tough, rough, emphasizing the tannin, and often bringing out a metallic character in the wine.

The usually buttery, milky flavor in these cheeses and their creamy textures, slight palate-coating quality, even though they can be a bit lower in fat content, tend to want companions in the more classic direction- Champagne, Riesling and sweeter, more aromatic, softer textured wines such as Moscato. Some of the dry, crisp, minerally whites will work well with some of these (like Explorateur with Sancerre) but practice before serving to guests.



BLUE CHEESE



Stilton, Gorgonzola, Roquefort, Cabrales, Shropshire, Bingham Hill

These are creamy and soft textured, though usually a little crumbly on the palate. The penicillium molds are fairly strong flavored, some more than others. These characteristics make these cheeses very difficult to pair with red wines, and make pairing with any very dry wine, either red or white, a tough match. Here we will want to use sweet wines of all types, both red and white, such as Sauternes, Port, Muscat/Moscato, late harvested Rieslings and Chenin Blancs, and wines of that desserty, “sticky” style. Amarone will usually work with these cheeses as well if a big, rich red is desired.

HARD CHEESE

Cheddar, Chesire, Asiago, Parmigiano Reggiano, Gouda (aged), Emmental, Gruyere, Locatelli, Tomme de Savoie, Comte

These cheeses are all aged to some degree, and the mature, rich, ripe flavors are deep and complex. There is generally less butterfat content and the textures are hard, crumbly and often a bit dry. The companion wines are of a wider range here than with most cheeses, and this is the general arena where the more complex, stonger flavored, powerful, dry, rich reds can be used, with caution. Red Bordeaux will work with many, as well as the Italian reds like Barbera, Chianti, Valpolicella, Vino Nobile and Montepulciano. Chardonnay can work, but the more richer, more expressive styles like White Burgundy are recommended. Most of the standard dry reds will be at least safe with these.



Cheese & Wine Paring

GOAT/SHEEP CHEESE

Chevre, Pico, Pecorino, Manchego, Brin d'Amour

These cheeses generally show a young, bright milky tang and have fairly high acidity. They are zingy, zesty cheeses with sometimes slightly chalky quality. Acidity is the key component here as these work best with young, crisp, high acid whites such as Loire Sauvignon Blanc and bright, light, low wood wines like Macon Blanc and Chablis. Riesling compliments well here as long as it is not too full blown, like a late harvest sweet sticky style. A crisp, stoney, bright, mineral-laden Mosel Riesling Kabinett goes very well here. Bright, fresh, youthful reds with plenty of fruit character and fresh acidity, like young Sangiovese, Zinfandel, Dolcetto and Beaujolais, and even fresh, young, lighter styled Pinot Noir can make good companions, but I find as many misses here as hits, and trial and error experience is the only sure guide. Tannin in the wine must be kept in check with goat cheese.



CHEESE ANOMOLIES AND EXTREME CHEESES

Muenster, Limburger, Livarot, Epoisses, Leiden, flavored cheeses
(smoked / herbed / spiced)

The sometimes bizarre, sometimes over-the-top, sometimes aggressive flavors are loud and expressive in these cheeses. There is often a mushroomy, earthy flavor, and sometimes an ammonia hint which does not pair at all with any red wine, often making them taste metallic and odd, thin and diffuse. Spiced, peppered and smoked cheeses are very difficult wine matches and one should stay well within the safety zones when selecting a wine (white, and at least a hint sweet, unless trials and experience have given you more areas of success). Here we usually need specialized wines, dessert types, both sweet and the sweet fortifieds: Sauterenes, Tokaiji, Oloroso or Pedro Ximenez Sherry, sweet Gewurztraminer, Riesling BA and TBA, Port.



Cheese & Wine Companion Chart

ASIAGO	WHITE: unoaked chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, riesling, Champagne, moscato; crisp, fresh whites and/or those with tender sweetness RED: slightly chilled fruit-filled reds like Beaujolais, young dolcetto, or Chinon, lighter red Bordeaux, Chianti/sangiovese, barbera
BOURSIN	WHITE: Loire Valley white- Sancerre, Pouilly-Fume, Vouvray, Touraine chenin blanc, off-dry riesling, New Zealand sauvignon blanc RED: CAUTION—fresh, bright, fruity red, but beware of wood flavors, high tannin or high alcohol; use Beaujolais, dolcetto, Chinon, Cote Roannaise, brachetto and similar lighter reds
BRIE	WHITE: Champagne, riesling, moscato, but be careful that the cheese is in very good condition RED: EXTREME CAUTION
CABRALES	WHITE: Moscato, sweet riesling, Sauternes, late harvest chenin blanc, off-dry or sweet Sherry RED: black muscat, Port, brachetto, Banyuls
CAMEMBERT	WHITE: Champagne, riesling, chenin blanc, Vouvray RED: EXTREME CAUTION
CHEDDAR	WHITE: sauvignon blanc, chardonnay if low wood tone, white Burgundy RED: Bordeaux/cabernet, Rhone/syrah/shiraz, most aged, flavorful, complex reds
CHEVRE	WHITE: Loire whites from sauvignon blanc, as well as riesling, albarino, Champagne, Chablis and other crisp whites, pinot grigio, gruner veltliner RED: fruity, low wood, low tannin, bright, fresh reds like Beaujolais, Chinon, Cote Roannaise, some zinfandel, dolcetto, and some pinot noir
CHESIRE	WHITE: Crisp, bright sauvignon blanc, especially Sancerre, Pouilly-Fume, Reully, Touraine white, riesling, rose or noirs Champagnes RED: Fruit-forward, low tannin, lighter reds
COMTE	WHITE: Crisp chardonnay, riesling, Champagne RED: Cru Beaujolais, young Bordeaux or cabernet, fresh, bright merlot, fruity syrah/shiraz
EDAM	WHITE: Champagne, chardonnay, riesling RED: Young, fresh, zesty reds like zinfandel and young, fresh cab/merlot blends
EMMENTAL	WHITE: Crisp, bright whites, sauvignon blanc, Loire whites, such as Sancerre, Pouilly-Fume; Champagne RED: Zinfandel, Chianti, barbera, montepulciano; fresh and zesty reds; some serious reds such as Bordeaux and California cabernet

Cheese & Wine Companion Chart

FETA	<p>WHITE: White Burgundy, Loire whites, dry riesling, such as Alsace; crisp, stoney, mineral-laden whites such as Mosel riesling</p> <p>RED: dolcetto, zinfandel, Beaujolais, sangiovese, tempranillo; bright, fresh, fruity reds</p>
FONTINA	<p>WHITE: Champagne, riesling, moscato, and the sweeter, more tender whites; some dry whites like Sancerre will work</p> <p>RED: CAUTION</p>
GOUDA	<p>WHITE: Rich, expressive whites, low in wood tone, with rich fruit; white Burgundy, Champagne, Alsace whites; Austrian pinot blanc, gruner veltliner</p> <p>RED: Bordeaux and new world merlot, barbera, zinfandel and most modern reds; rich, powerful reds with caution</p>
GORGONZOLA	<p>WHITE: Sauternes, moscato (all sweet variants), sweet riesling (Auslese, BA, TBA); dessert whites</p> <p>RED: Port, Amarone, black muscat, brachetto, Banyuls</p>
GRUYERE	<p>WHITE: Rich, expressive whites, low in wood tone, deep fruited and low in alcohol; white Burgundy, Champagne, Alsace whites</p> <p>RED: Rich and wide ranging reds; shiraz, merlot, cabernet, Italian reds of many types; this is a fairly red friendly cheese</p>
JARLSBERG	<p>WHITE: Sauvignon blanc, Champagne, riesling, Austrian pinot blanc/ weissburgunder</p> <p>RED: Fruity reds; merlot, zinfandel, Beaujolais, dolcetto</p>
LANCASHIRE	<p>WHITE: Sweet whites; Sauternes, BA, TBA, moscato; sauvignon blanc, riesling</p> <p>RED: Aged Port; Amarone; sweet reds</p>
LE CHEVROT	<p>WHITE: Loire whites from sauvignon blanc; riesling; albarino; Champagne; Chablis; Austrian and fresh Italian whites; generally crisp whites</p> <p>RED: Fruity, bright fresh reds with low wood, low tannin like Beaujolais, Chinon, dolcetto, some zinfandel; careful selection a must</p>
LOCATELLI	<p>WHITE: Champagne; rich, fresh whites like riesling, Loire sauvignon blanc, unoaked or lightly oaked chardonnay</p> <p>RED: Chianti, barbera, dolcetto, zinfandel, Valpolicella, cabernet</p>
LIMBURGER LEIDEN LIVROT	<p>WHITE: Specialized sweet wines; Sauternes; late harvest dessert styles; Champagne; Oloroso and Pedro Ximinez Sherry; BA, TBA riesling; Banyuls</p> <p>RED: Port; brachetto, Banyuls; black muscat</p>

Cheese & Wine Companion Chart

MANCHEGO	WHITE: Champagne; prosecco; crisp, bright whites like Loire white, Mosel riesling, pinot gris RED: Fruit-filled reds like Beaujolais, young zinfandel, dolcetto, tempranillo
MONTEREY JACK	WHITE: Champagne; Asti; moscato; riesling; softer, tender and sweeter whites; Loire sauvignon blanc RED: CAUTION HERE- use fruity reds with low tannin and low alcohol; Beaujolais, brachetto, red muscat variants; most reds overwhelm Jack
MEUNSTER	WHITE: Champagne; gewurztraminer from Alsace; sweet whites; Oloroso Sherry; moscato RED: Caution
PARMIGIANO REGGIANO	WHITE: Champagne; rich, fresh whites like riesling, Loire sauvignon blanc, unoaked chardonnay, Prosecco RED: Chianti, barbera, dolcetto, zinfandel, Valpolicella
PECORINO	WHITE: Crisp dry whites like Sancerre, Mosel Kabinett, Chablis and Macon; Champagne RED: dolcetto, Beaujolais, sangiovese; reds with fresh, bright character and relatively low tannin
PORT SALUT	WHITE: Champagne; Loire sauvignon blanc; fresh, bright riesling RED: Valpolicella, sangiovese, dolcetto, Beaujolais, zinfandel; lighter, fresher reds; some Cotes-du-Rhone if lower weight and low tannin
ROQUEFORT	WHITE: Sauternes; moscato; sweet riesling; late harvest dessert styles RED: Port; Amarone; brachetto; Banyuls; black muscat and other sweet reds
SHROPSHIRE	WHITE: Sauternes; moscato; sweet riesling; late harvest, dessert types RED: Port; Amarone; brachetto; Banyuls; black muscats and other sweet reds
STILTON	WHITE: Sauternes; moscato; sweet riesling; late harvest and dessert styles RED: Port; Amarone; sweet, rich dessert style reds
TALEGGIO	WHITE: Sauternes and Barsac; sweet moscato; Champagne; medium to sweet Sherries RED: CAUTION
TOMME DE SAVOIE	WHITE: Champagne and other bubbly like prosecco, Asti, sekt, cava; White Burgundy; crisp, dry whites- Pouilly-Fume, Sancerre, Reuilly, Mosel Kabinett, albarino RED: Chianti, barbera, zinfandel, dolcetto—this cheese seems to tolerate a fairly wide range of reds