

Cooking Corner: The milky way: a galaxy of great cheeses

by Mary James Captions

"What got me into cheese? I guess you'd say, cheese got into me," says author Laura Werlin, with a chuckle.

THE MILKY WAY - There is a galaxy of delicious cheeses out there for entertaining. CNS Photo courtesy of Maren Caruso, from 'Laura Werlin's Cheese Essentials.' SAY CHEESE - Laura Werlin, who won a James Beard Award for Best Cookbook in 2004 for 'The All-American Cheese and Wine Book,' visited San Diego recently for a class on pairing cheese with wine. CNS Photo by Nadia Borowski Scott. Werlin remembers mining her grandmother's eggplant parmigiana for nuggets of melted cheese. Gooey grilled cheese - Kraft singles on white bread - was another childhood hit. "Any melted cheese was OK in my book," she adds.

Those memories no doubt helped propel Werlin from a career in TV journalism to food writing.

"I thought, 'I have to write a book about cheese - American cheese,'" she said "The 'have to' part, though, will always remain a bit of a mystery to me for the rest of my life."

Her first book, "The New American Cheese" (Abrams, \$35) published in 2000, was followed by "The All American Cheese and Wine Book," which earned a James Beard Award. Her latest book, "Laura Werlin's Cheese Essentials" (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, \$24.95), an easy-to-digest guide that ranges from dairies to dinner parties, adds to her reputation as a consumer-friendly cheese ambassador.

"I don't come to what I do as an expert," says Werlin, who is a spokeswoman for the California Milk Advisory Board. "I set out to answer my questions about cheese. I figured if I had these questions, others did, too."

Today, Werlin believes, cheese made in the United States is following the same upward trajectory as U.S.

wine. "Wine drinkers once disparaged American wine, then slowly began to learn great wine is being made here," she says. "Now cheese aficionados are learning the same applies to cheese."

Holiday parties - whether it's after-work cocktails with colleagues or a New Year's bash - are perfect times to indulge your appetite for cheese. With Werlin's help, here's a primer on selecting, storing and serving it with flair and finesse.

In classes at food and wine festivals, Werlin doesn't hesitate to pick "The World's Best Cheeses," as she did at the 2007 Aspen Food and Wine Classic. But she demurs when asked to choose a "desert island" cheese.

"If I have a cheese that is exceptionally well made, in that moment it is my favorite. It will melt me," she says. "It will every time."

MARTINIS, BUBBLES, REDS OR WHITES?

For fancy celebrations, "what better time to break out the bubbly?" Werlin says. "Sparkling wine and cheese go together nicely. The bubbles cut the richness and saltiness."

Pinot noir, Rhone wines and other medium-bodied reds are tasty companions for winter-hearty cheeses such as cheddars, Stilton and other semi-hard varieties. Avoid quaffing bold cabernet sauvignons with cheese: "They are either too big for the cheese, or the cheese will accent the tannins in the wine and make it taste bitter."

Whites - especially unappreciated rieslings - are Werlin's favorites. "Today rieslings aren't the ones we had before we were 21," she says. "Other higher acid, lighter whites like pinot grigio and sauvignon blanc are

good. Stay away from oaky chardonnays, because you'll only taste the oak."

Sweet cocktails like Cosmos aren't cheese-friendly, but martinis with olives are a match with goat cheese, and bitter cocktails such as Manhattans can be sipped with an aged Gouda.

THE CHEESE COURSE

First, last or intermezzo?

Tradition, especially in Europe, calls for serving cheese after the meal, Werlin notes. The idea that cheese is too filling after dinner is a misconception, she adds. "One way around this is to serve only one great cheese. If you want to serve more, cut and plate it before the guests get there so you can control the portions." Toasted or candied nuts and a dessert wine are festive pairings.

Cheese can be an appetizer, too, but Werlin cautions, "Don't have a huge amount. Your friends will be full before they come to the table because people don't stop when it comes to cheese." Avoid "meaty" blue cheeses and keep the accompaniments savory; olives are a good choice.

Cheese can also be a bridge between the meal and dessert. A dollop of fig jam or honey served with a rich triple-creme cheese eases the transition from savory to sweet, she says.

CRACKER OR BREAD?

A plain baguette is the "most neutral host" for cheese, Werlin believes. "You really want to taste the cheese. Crackers work, too, but not the flavored ones. These days there's a wider variety to choose from that don't overwhelm the cheese."

For an after-dinner cheese course, Werlin suggests an artisan bread sweetened with raisins, dried figs or apples.

AN AMERICAN CHEESE TASTING: 11 TO SAVOR

Spicy candied walnuts pair well with all of these cheeses. Try apple chutney with the cheddar and aged gouda, and your favorite honey with the blue cheeses.

- Haystack Mountain Red Cloud: This Colorado washed-rind cheese has buttery flavors not typical of goat cheese, along with hints of bacon and nuts. A small wheel is a perfect party size.

- Bayley Hazen Blue: Jasper Hill Farms in Vermont makes this crumbly but creamy blue cheese, which is aged four to six months. Savory and salty, it is the "closest to Stilton we have in this county," Werlin says.

- Pleasant Ridge Reserve: Awards continue to pour in for this semi-hard Alpine-style cheese from Uplands Cheese company in Wisconsin. "Nutty, fruity, buttery and grassy - it's the best of all cheeses in one bite," says Werlin.

- Rogue River Blue: A consistent winner at the World Cheese Awards in London, Rogue River Blue from

Oregon's Rogue Creamery is wrapped in grape leaves that have been macerated in pear eau de vie. "There's a haunting sweetness you don't expect," Werlin says. "It's almost like eating candy." The annual production usually sells out, but the cheese is available this month in limited supply at Whole Foods.

- Flagship Reserve: This cheddar from Beecher's Handmade Cheese Company in Seattle was ranked top cheddar in this year's American Cheese Society competition. Savory, nutty and earthy, "it's everything a cheddar should be - and more," Werlin says.

- SarVecchio Parmesan: "The closest thing to Parmigiano-Reggiano made in this country" is how Werlin describes this hard cheese from Wisconsin's Sartori Foods. Sweet and salty flavors have caramel overtones.

- Everona Piedmont: Everona Dairy in Virginia makes this award-winning aged sheep's milk cheese. Rich, nutty flavors combine to taste "a little like browned butter," Werlin says.

- Carmody: Made from Jersey cow milk by Bellwether Farms in California's Sonoma County and aged six months, Carmody is semi-soft, tangy, buttery and mild. Werlin loves it melted.

- Humboldt Fog: A soft-ripened goat cheese made by Cypress Grove Chevre in California. Tangy and creamy with a signature layer of edible vegetable ash under the skin and across the center. Serve with olives or dried apricots.

- Rouge et Noir Triple Creme Brie: From Marin French Cheese Co. in California, this cow's milk cheese took top honors in a 2005 international brie competition. "It tastes like butter - what more do you need to know?" Laura Werlin says.

- Winchester Sharp Gouda: Aged six months, this award-winner is made in the Dutch traditional style by Winchester Cheese Co. in California. "Assertive, complex, delicious cheese," Werlin says.

CHEESE TALK

Blue: A complex process involving the interaction of *Penicillium roqueforti* mold and air creates the telltale veining in Stilton, gorgonzola and other cheeses in this group. Salty and musty flavors sometimes have smoky or bacon overtones. Avoid any with an ammonia scent.

Chevre: French for goat, it usually refers to fresh cheese made with pasteurized goat's milk.

Hard cheese: Salty-sweet Parmigiano-Reggiano sums up this group's characteristics - aged and often salted and/or pressed until they become hard; medium-strong to strong flavors; often grated for cooking.

Fresh cheese: Think ricotta, cottage cheese and fresh mozzarella. These cheeses have not been ripened or aged. Taste is mild.

Rind: The exterior layer of the cheese formed during the aging process. Should you eat it? No, Werlin says, if it is waxy or has cheese cloth clinging to it. Otherwise - "It depends," she says. "Technically, most rinds are edible, ... but by eating it, you are most likely detracting from the flavors and texture of the cheese." As for the soft rind on brie and the like, there's no right or wrong, so eat it if you like.

Semi-hard: Aging reduces the moisture content to below 50 percent. The cheddars, Goudas and Gruyeres in this group are buttery and earthy with nutty overtones. They last for a long time.

Semi-soft: These cheeses, including Monterey Jack, Havarti and Bel Paese, are 50 to 75 percent moisture because they are aged for two months or less. Most are pale in color and mild-sweet in flavor.

Sharp: A flavor between sharp and bitter.

Soft-ripened: Creamy brie and camembert are typical. Mold is added during the cheese-making process so that the cheese ripens from the rind inward. Buttery flavors and creamy texture create what Werlin calls "the stuff of dreams."

Surface-ripened: Molds or bacteria on the surface of the cheese ripen it and create the characteristically wrinkled rind. Tall and cylindrical, these are mild to mushroomy in flavor. Le Chevrot is typical.

Washed-rind: Orange, pinkish or tan rinds are hallmarks of this group, which includes munster and Taleggio. Rinds are washed with liquids inoculated with *B. linens* bacteria. Salty and often smelly - "like old gym socks, which is a good thing," Werlin says. Remove the rind for a milder taste.

FROM STORE TO TABLE

If possible, buy cheese at a store that offers tastings. "You don't know what a cheese tastes like until you try it," Werlin says. "If you can't taste, buy the smallest piece you can find to take home to try. Don't be afraid to experiment."

At home, rewrap the cheese in wax paper before putting it in a plastic bag - "otherwise you'll get the taste of plastic." Remove cheese from the refrigerator at least an hour before serving to bring it to room temperature. "The exception is very creamy cheese," Werlin notes. "Take them out for no more than an hour so they don't become too runny."

If you are going to cut and plate cheese to serve later, cover it lightly with plastic wrap so it doesn't dry out.

Does cheese go bad? "Yes, but it is more forgiving than it gets credit for," Werlin says. Brie past its prime smells like ammonia and looks gray and sagging. Toss fresh cheeses if they smell sour.

Mold on harder cheeses "is natural. Cut it off with a sharp knife and you'll find pristine cheese underneath," she says.

PERFECT PARTNERS

Rieslings are ideal wines with cheese. Here are three selections:

- 2005 Charter Riesling from Barth (\$22.95), with candied citrus flavors and a bold acid backbone, works well with rich cheese.

- 2005 Blee-Ferber Riesling Kabinett (\$18.95), a dry-style riesling from Mosel with stone-fruit and citrus flavors and a finish of sliced red apple, is delicious with softer cheeses.

- 2005 Barth Riesling Spatlese (\$24.95), a semi-dry or sweeter riesling, has peach, tangerine and honey flavors and big acidity.

More on German wines can be found at trulyfinewine.com.

BRIE TOASTS WITH CHARDONNAY-SOAKED GOLDEN RAISINS

1 1/2 cups water

1 cup chardonnay

1/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons sugar

1 vanilla bean, split in 1/2 lengthwise

1 cup golden raisins

24 slices Fromager d'Affinois cheese (or any double-creme brie)

24 slices of baguette, cut 1/4 inch thick

4 tablespoons (1/2 stick) unsalted butter, melted

Yields 24 toasts.

In saucepan, combine water, wine and sugar. Bring to a simmer over medium-high heat until sugar is dissolved. Reduce heat to medium and simmer for 5 minutes. Turn off heat. Scrape insides of vanilla bean into liquid and add remaining bean. Add raisins. Let seep uncovered for 1 hour at room temperature. Refrigerate overnight.

Drain raisins, reserving liquid. Discard vanilla bean. Put liquid back in saucepan and bring to a boil. Reduce to 1/3 cup, or until syrup turns a deep golden, 10 to 15 minutes. Watch carefully so syrup doesn't burn. If it starts to foam, remove from heat. Cool completely.

Preheat oven to 400 F. Brush butter onto both sides of bread slices. Bake for 8 to 10 minutes, or until golden brown. Let cool completely. Put 1 slice of cheese on each toast. Sprinkle with a few raisins and drizzle syrup over top.

CHEWY PANFORTE

2 tablespoons canola oil (divided use)

1 cup flour

1 tablespoon unsweetened cocoa powder

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1/4 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg

1 1/4 cups almonds, toasted (see note)

1 1/4 cups hazelnuts, toasted (see note)

1 pound mixed dried fruit, such as prunes, apricots, regular and golden raisins, all but raisins cut into 1/2-inch pieces

2 ounces candied orange peel, cut into 1/4 -inch pieces (or 1 teaspoon grated orange zest)

3/4 cup honey

1 cup sugar

Confectioners' sugar, for dusting

Morbier cheese, cut into slices for serving

Yields about 38 slices.

Oil bottom and sides of 9-inch springform pan with 1 tablespoon of oil. Line bottom with parchment paper and oil the paper. Set aside.

Preheat oven to 300 F.

In large bowl, whisk together flour, cocoa powder, cinnamon and nutmeg. Add nuts, fruit and orange peel. Set aside.

Combine honey and sugar in a saucepan over low heat, stirring until sugar dissolves. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to low and cook for a few minutes without stirring, until mixture reaches soft-ball stage (240 F on a candy thermometer) and looks like maple syrup; be careful not to overcook.

Pour syrup into flour and fruit mixture and stir to coat. The mixture will be very sticky, but keep stirring until it comes together into a ball. Transfer to prepared pan and smooth surface. Bake for about 1 hour, or until firm and the surface has lost its sheen. Let cool completely, preferably overnight.

To serve, run damp, sharp knife around edges and remove sides of pan. Dust with confectioners' sugar, if desired. Cut cake into 1/2-inch-thick slices. Serve with Morbier cheese and additional hazelnuts, if you like.

Note: To toast nuts, place on a baking sheet in a 350 F oven, shaking occasionally, for 8 to 10 minutes. Watch carefully.

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