

The Fromage Hour - With Friends

"Life is nothing without friendship," says the Roman proverb. The ancients, like ourselves, associated friendship with cheese — "little cheese" was a Roman term of affection. Today we enjoy sharing fine French fromage and fine French wines with convivial friends at the end of the day. It's a classic way to relax, wind down and toast friendships old and new.

Cheese has been delighting mankind since about 9000 B.C., when man first domesticated animals. Some ancient herdsman, perhaps, may have had the courage to nibble the curds from surplus milk. Whatever its beginning, cheese became a staple of virtually every culture. About a thousand years ago, Europe began to create the more complex forms, such as the hard-pressed and blue-veined cheeses. And shortly thereafter, the French monasteries of the Middle Ages struck gold with the superbly silky soft-ripening cheeses.

Just as France makes wines of every variety and nuance, the country produces nearly 400 cheeses, each as distinctive as a fingerprint. The cheese of every region has its own essence — subtleties of the particular climate, soil, grasses, animals and local cheesemaking techniques. Whatever the result, cheese symbolizes friendship and hospitality.

At partytime, you will want a cheeseboard with an interesting variety of fromages, and perhaps a few savory cheese-based hors d'oeuvres. At least one red and one white wine will be required to complement the different cheeses. The rule of thumb is simple — lighter wines for milder cheeses, more robust wines for pungent cheeses.

The most successful cheeseboard offers a harmonious range of tastes from delicate to assertive — but take comfort, for there is no "right" or "wrong" about the assortment. Although cheesemaking is an art at which the French have long excelled, cheese is the least snobbish of foods — basic, pure, earthy, enjoyed by everyone. We suggest the following five cheeses for the board, but by all means substitute to please your own palate: Brie, the famous "king" of soft-ripened cheeses; Explorateur, a rich, fresh, triple crème, delicate in flavor and texture; Pyramide, a triangular chèvre, or goat's milk cheese, with a nutty tang; Bleu d'Auvergne, cow's milk blue cheese, firm texture, assertive taste and aroma; Dolmen de Bougon, a dome-shaped goat's milk cheese, firm in texture, fresh, slightly sharp in taste.

French party food often includes *crudités*, raw vegetables served with flavorful dips. We suggest either Mustard Dip, teaming sour cream and Dijon mustard or Cold Roquefort Vinaigrette, the tangy blue-veined cheese is a perfect complement to the vegetables. And for sumptuous fare to treat your guests, let 'em eat Eggs Marie Antoinette — stuffed eggs baked on artichoke bottoms, topped with cheese sauce, and sprinkled with crisp crumbled bacon and French baguette cubes. St. Paulin, one of the great ancient monastery cheeses, goes into the sauce.

As for the French wines for this friendly gathering, we suggest one red and one white. A red from the sunny Côtes du Rhône vineyards would make an excellent complement to the menu and the cheeses. The historic wine-producing region of the Rhône Valley stretches for almost 125 miles south from the renowned gastronomic city of Lyon to Avignon, the residence of the popes in the 14th century.

Vineyards climb hillsides, cover the plain, flow into valleys and surround the 162 villages which have the right to the appellation Côtes du Rhône... red, white and rosé wines are produced. In the third century the Romans initiated viticulture in this region which has become one of France's most lavish production areas. Its ruby red wines are noted for their elegance and finesse — warm powerful wines, aromatic of raspberries, violets or currants. Both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson stocked them in their wine cellars. For a fromage hour with friends, choose a simple Côtes du Rhône Villages, or a Gigondas, or a Châteauneuf-du-Pape — all from the southern part of the growing area. Also recommended are either Côté Rotie or Hermitage from the northern vineyards.

For the white wine, Mâcon Blanc is an ideal choice. It is a white Burgundy, less famous than its illustrious Burgundian cousins, yet a pleasant modest-priced wine; look for bottles labeled Mâcon, Mâcon Supérieur, Mâcon-Villages, or Pinot-Chardonnay-Mâcon. In general, the Mâconnais wines are light, dry, crisp, well-balanced — especially favored for goat's milk cheeses.

Fine wines, fine cheeses, and friendship provide the trilogy for a perfect party. We'll drink to that!

CRUDITES WITH DIJON MUSTARD DIP AND COLD ROQUEFORT VINAIGRETTE

Select spears of raw zucchini, halved raw mushrooms, cherry tomatoes, endive spears, broccoli or cauliflower flowerets, carrots, celery...

HOT MUSTARD DIP

(Makes 2 cups)

- 1/4 cup butter
- 1/4 cup flour
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 1 cup sour cream
- 2 T. Dijon mustard
- 2 T. chopped capers
- 2 T. minced cornichons
- French midget gherkins
- Salt

In saucepan, melt butter and stir in flour. Gradually stir in chicken broth, sour cream, mustard, capers and cornichons. Stir over medium heat until sauce bubbles and thickens. Season to taste with salt. Place into serving dish and keep warm.

COLD ROQUEFORT VINAIGRETTE

(Makes 1-2/3 cups)

- 1 cup French olive or walnut oil
- 1/3 cup French red wine vinegar
- 1 tsp. Herbes de Provence
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1/4 tsp. pepper
- 1/4 cup chopped chives
- 1/2 cup firmly packed Roquefort

Combine all ingredients in bowl and beat with electric mixer until thick and well-blended. Let stand at room temperature for several hours to blend flavors. Beat again before serving. Serve cold.



EGGS MARIE ANTOINETTE

(Makes 6 servings)

- 6 hard cooked eggs
- Sour cream
- Salt
- 6 fonds d'artichauts (artichoke bottoms)
- 1/3 cup butter
- 1/3 cup flour
- 2 cups milk
- 2 cups (8 oz.) shredded St. Paulin or other semi-soft French cheese
- 6 strips bacon, chopped and fried until crisp
- 2 slices French baguette, cut into 1/2-inch cubes

Slice top tip from eggs and carefully remove egg yolks. Place egg yolks into bowl and mash. Stir in sour cream until mixture is creamy but still holds its shape. Season to taste with salt. Use mixture to stuff eggs. Cut thin slice from bottom of each egg so it will stand upright. Place artichoke bottoms into shallow casserole, side by side. Place one stuffed egg on each artichoke bottom. In saucepan, melt butter and stir in flour. Gradually stir in milk. Stir over low heat until sauce bubbles and thickens. Gradually stir in cheese. When sauce is smooth, season to taste with salt and pour sauce over eggs. Sprinkle eggs with bacon and baguette cubes. Bake in preheated hot oven (400° F.) for 20 to 25 minutes or until lightly browned and bubbly.

MARRIAGE OF FRENCH CHEESE AND WINE

CHEESE	FAMILY	CHARACTERISTICS	WINE	REGION	CHARACTERISTICS
EXPLORATEUR	Triple crème	Contains 72% butterfat; rich, creamy with tangy aftertaste	CÔTES DU RHÔNE VILLAGES	Rhone Valley	Dry, aromatic red wine
BRIE and CAMEMBERT	Soft-ripened	Creamy interior, subtle flavor, edible, flowery rind	BEAUJOLAIS	Burgundy	Fruity, medium-bodied red wine
PONT L'ÉVÊQUE	Soft-ripened	Spicy, assertive flavor; edible washed rind	HERMITAGE	Rhone Valley	Hearty, full-bodied red wine
REBLOCHON	Semi-soft	Flavorful, slightly putty taste, inedible rind	MACON-VILLAGES	Burgundy	Dry, medium-bodied white wine
PYRAMIDE	Chèvre	Tangy flavored goat's milk cheese, sometimes coated with vine ash	SANCERRE	Loire Valley	Light, crisp dry white wine
DOLMEN DE BOUGON	Chèvre	Dome-shaped goat's milk cheese with zesty taste	MACON-SUPÉRIEUR	Burgundy	Fruity, medium-bodied white wine
BLEU D'AUVERGNE	Blue-veined	Creamy piquant taste with distinctive blue marbling	CÔTE ROTIE	Rhone Valley	Robust, full-flavored red wine
ROQUEFORT	Blue-veined	Assertive, tangy sheep's milk cheese, aged in limestone caves	CHATEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE	Rhone Valley	Hearty, distinctive red wine
CANTAL	Semi-hard	Mellow, smooth taste, inedible rind	GIGONDAS	Rhone Valley	Elegant, full-bodied red wine

General Guideline: Light delicate cheeses go best with light, dry wines. More robust cheeses go best with hearty, full-bodied wines.