

French Cheese Cookery from Alpine Kitchens

High in the spectacular Alpine regions of eastern France are meadows lush with grasses and herbs, dappled summer pasturelands for cows bred to withstand the rigors of altitude. Since the Middle Ages, farmers have solved the problem of toting the daily milk to markets far below by transporting it in the form of cheese. And from such rustic origins derive the sturdy firm-textured fromages that are the great cooking cheeses of France.

Their flavors are distinctive—mildly nutty, subtly sweet from the pure, rich grassy milk. The cheeses store beautifully, melt readily, and grate well; they go into a wide variety of dishes that include quiches, fondues, omelettes, soups, and a flock of *au gratin* dishes with aromatic crusty toppings.

The picturesque French Alpine provinces of Savoie and Franche-Comté, the department of the Jura, as well as the mountainous heart of France, the Auvergne, have their own regional dishes—savory, robust, a no-nonsense kind of country cookery. On a blustery winter night, for instance, what could be cozier than Pork Chops with Cabbage? The chops are browned in a skillet and simmered in a casserole with the cabbage, cream, and a topping of shredded St. Nectaire cheese. Or try Gratin Jardinière, a hearty vegetable casserole that teams zucchini, eggplant, and green peppers in a cheese-cream sauce made with grated French gruyère, topped with more gruyère and baked till it's a bubbly golden-brown.

Raclette is both the name of a cheese and a dish—savory, aromatic—a great favorite with skiers of the French Alps. "Raclet" means "to scrape," and the dish was formerly made by cutting the wheel of cheese and exposing a piece to an open fire. The melted cheese was then scraped onto a plate with boiled potatoes, gherkins, and pickled onions. Today little serving pans bubble with the cheese right at the table—in the fashion of fondue—and the recipe combines the cheese with the traditional ingredients as well as ham, salami, mushrooms, and baby corn. It's a creative dish, and by all means serve it with anything that strikes your fancy. Raclette is a super party fare, and as for anything cooked at the table, great informal fun.

These mountainous regions are also well known for their distinctive wines—mostly white. Jura is famous for its *chais jaunes*—yellow wines made from late-harvested grapes and aged in sealed barrels for at least six years. An unusual bouquet and flavor are characteristic of the wines of this area. Not too far south is the Savoie region that produces lighter, fruitier white wines. Here, in the foothills of the French Alps, Crépé is made from the Chasselas grapes grown on the shores of Lake Geneva; and Seyssel is made from Roussette grapes from vineyards near the source of the Rhône River. Both of these wines harmonize beautifully with the area's cheeses, of course, but they are also perfect accompaniments to poultry and the fresh fish caught in cold mountain streams and lakes.

Pork and cabbage are also staples in homes further north—in Alsace, for example. An Alsace Riesling, dry and lively, would fit quite nicely with this hearty cheese cookery, as would a crisp, well-balanced white Macon from the vineyards of southern Burgundy.

Whatever wine you find to go with this menu, it serves as the supporting cast to the real stars: the wonderful, flavorful mountain cheeses. All are perfect for out-of-hand nibbling, as well as for cookery, and are great favorites with children. And most adapt themselves easily to the recipes that follow.

Many of the cheeses produced in these mountainous regions have the A.O.C. label. This *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée* distinction is given to cheeses—as well as wines—that follow strict, traditional rules governing their place of origin and production techniques. Only 27 of the 400 plus cheeses made in France qualify for A.O.C.; five of the following nine are among those 27:



Gruyère—a generic term that includes three great French Alpine cheeses produced in characteristic large wheels. Emmental may weigh as much as 220 pounds, has distinctive large "eyes"; Comté (A.O.C.) is the smallest gruyère (about 77 pounds), pale, delicate aroma, smaller irregular eyes; Beaufort (A.O.C.) was called "the Prince of Gruyères" by Brillat-Savarin, weighs in at about 90 to over 130 pounds.

Morbier—Made in the Franche-Comté district, comes in thick disks, has a light gray rind with a horizontal black streak of vegetable ash through the middle of the cheese.

Cantal—(A.O.C.) An ancient cheese of the Auvergne, produced for the past 2,000 years, come in 90-pound wheels, a firm cheese famous for pleasing taste.

Raclette—Mild, nutty, mellow cheese, yellow to amber interior with small scattered holes; wheels weigh

12 to 16 pounds.

Beaufort—Has distinct flavor, many tiny eyes, a reddish crust that is inedible. From the Savoie region.

Two mountain cheeses of softer texture than the above are often used as recipe ingredients:

St. Nectaire—(A.O.C.) From the Auvergne, has a natural rind, and distinctive flavor with a mild tang, comes in 8-inch disks.

Reblochon—(A.O.C.) Produced in the Haute-Savoie, mild, rather mellow flavor, creamy texture with dappled white, brown-yellow and rosy rind. Comes in 5-inch disks.

For the French mountain dwellers, their beloved cheeses are their "meat." Nutlike, sweet, protein-rich, perfection for cookery, dishes made with these great cheeses translate beautifully to the American kitchen for hearty, cozy meals.

COTES DE PORC AUX CHOUX

(Makes about 6 servings)

- 6 pork chops
- Salt and pepper
- 1/4 cup French peanut oil
- 1 medium-size head green cabbage, cored and shredded
- 1 cup (1/2 pint) heavy cream
- 1-1/2 cups (8 oz.) shredded Beaufort or St. Nectaire

Sprinkle pork chops on both sides with salt and pepper. In large skillet, heat oil and brown chops on all sides. Remove chops. Add cabbage to pan drippings and sauté over high heat until cabbage is lightly browned. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Transfer cabbage to shallow 2-quart casserole. Place browned pork chops atop cabbage. Drizzle cream over casserole. Bake covered in preheated 350° F. oven for 1 hour or until chops are tender. Remove cover, sprinkle cheese over top, and continue baking until cheese melts and is lightly browned. Serve immediately.

GRATIN JARDINIÈRE

(Makes about 6 servings)

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| 1/4 cup (1/2 stick) butter | Sauce |
| 1/4 cup oil | 1/4 cup (1/2 stick) butter |
| 3 zucchini, sliced | 1/4 cup flour |
| 1 medium-size eggplant, unpeeled, diced | 1-1/2 cups milk |
| 2 green bell peppers, diced | 1 cup (1/2 pint) heavy cream |
| 4 tomatoes, diced | Salt and pepper |
| 2 leeks, trimmed and sliced | Dash nutmeg |
| | 2 cups (8 oz.) grated French gruyère* |

Heat butter with oil in large skillet and sauté vegetables for about 10 minutes, or until almost tender. In another saucepan melt butter for sauce and stir in flour. Gradually stir in milk and heavy cream. Stir until sauce thickens. Season to taste with salt, pepper and nutmeg. Stir in 1 cup of the cheese. Mix sautéed vegetables and sauce and pour in greased 2-quart casserole. Sprinkle top with remaining cheese. Bake in preheated oven at 400° F. for 20 to 25 minutes or until bubbly and golden brown.

*Use Beaufort, Comté, or Emmental. Can also be made with softer cheeses such as St. Nectaire or Morbier.

CLASSIC RACLETTE

(Makes about 6 servings)

- 2 lbs. French Raclette
- Salt
- Freshly ground pepper
- Serve with: cornichons (mitiget French gherkins), mushrooms, ham, pearl onions, small potatoes, baby corn, or salami

Remove rind and slice cheese in 1/4 inch slices small enough to fit in Raclette pans. Allow Raclette machine to heat about 10 minutes, then melt cheese in pans according to manufacturer's directions. (Can also be made in ovenproof pans under preheated broiler. Place sliced cheese in pans and heat under broiler, watching carefully, until melted and bubbly but not brown.) Season Raclette to taste with salt and pepper and serve immediately over accompaniments of your choice.