

# Brie—Cheese of 1,000 Delights

**A**MERICANS are having a love affair with Brie. Among all the cheeses imported from the dairylands of the world, it is Brie that has come to epitomize France—its flavor, life style, spirit. Perhaps many cheese lovers were introduced to Brie on their first trip to Paris... and neither memory will ever die. As Vivienne Marquis and Patricia Haskell state in their definitive "The Cheese Book," "No cheese has been more celebrated than Brie, and with reason. It is the ultimate cheese, the towering wonder of them all."

Brie is often described as "moonlike," a large white disc as thin as primitive man imagined the moon. Like the moon, Brie tends to diminish rapidly; set before cheese lovers, it goes in a twinkling from full to half to sliver. Authors Marquis and Haskell point out that even if it were less beautiful, it would be beloved for its taste and texture. "The taste of this cheese is like no other. It is a mixture: part mushrooms, part cream, part Cognac, part earth... with a shade of truffle and with something of the scent of ripe Anjou pears, perhaps. The texture is more easily described: it is like heavy honey. Satin alone can match its gloss."

A sensuous cheese. It was created sometime before the eighth century in the province of Brie northeast of Paris, today the major centers are the cities of Meaux and Melun. The cheese was immediately acclaimed for its fineness and aroma. Brie has had some impressive endorsers. "One of the most delectable foods imaginable," said Charlemagne at first bite, according to his chronicler. Returning from Italy, the king and his warriors had stopped at a monastery in Brie for refreshment and the monks had offered one of their prized local cheeses. When the knights made the mistake of removing the flowery rind, they were respectfully urged to leave it on. And Charlemagne requested "a goodly quantity" to be sent to him twice a year.

Centuries later royalty still doted on Brie. Louis XII dispensed Brie to New Year's gifts, packing the cheese with poems. Louis XVI's arrest didn't seem to slow down his appetite; he asked his jailers to send him "red wine and Brie."

Artistic lions were devotees as well. Alexander Dumas' menus for his heroic Musketeers always ended with Brie and a fine bottle of Burgundy. Auguste Renoir, when a struggling young painter, frequented a tiny bistro where the Brie was always *à point*. The apogee of Brie's fame came in 1815 when the diplomats assembled at the Congress of Vienna were redrawing the map of Europe. That consummate French diplomat and epicure, Talleyrand, proposed a complete dish of seasonal cheeses at a banquet. Brie was judged the best in a field of 60 and thus was crowned the "King of Cheeses."

This paragon of cheeses derives from cow's milk. The cheese not only stands alone, but makes itself—Brie is neither cooked, pressed, nor kneaded but left to drain slowly and ripen naturally. Americans are catching up with the French in their devotion to Brie—we delight our way through more than 6,000 tons each year which France ships to assuage our appetites.

There are some dramatic ways to embellish a wheel of Brie. You can stud the top with whole nuts and toast the "moon" lightly under the broiler as in Brie aux Noix. Strawberry Brie Cake teams the cheese with berries, shortcake fashion. The cheese is melted slightly and garnished with more berries and mint leaves. Quick Brie Quiche calls for Brie to top bacon and onion in a pie crust. All three are unusual and versatile dishes for adding elegance to parties. Also, each is made with a one-kilo (2.2 lbs.) Brie which conveniently serves eight and is a more economical dish than a calorie-rich pastry shop creation.

- quality—The only Brie, of course, is French Brie. Other cheeses made elsewhere may be called Brie—but in vain. They lack the distinction of true Gallic ingredients.

- size—Brie comes in one-kilo (2.2 pounds) and two-kilo wheels.

- ripeness—This is crucial. Soft cheeses ripen from the outside in, from rind to center. The firm white inner texture of Brie ripens to a creamy pale yellow. At the peak of ripeness, "à point," Brie is soft, a fresh-butter color throughout. No white center. When it is too soft and runny, the cheese is overripe. Since you cannot check the appearance when buying a whole wheel, you are dependent on your cheese dealer. Find one you have confidence in and specify when you plan to serve the cheese.

- serving—As for all cheese, Brie should be served at room temperature. Remove from refrigerator an hour or two before serving. Customarily it is cut in a long, thin, pie-shaped wedge.

- storing—Once cheese is cut, ripening stops. Wrap in foil and store in the refrigerator, where the Brie will keep from four to five days.

- accompaniments—Brie is traditionally consumed with crusty French bread, crisp French rusks, or unsalted crackers; with grapes or with firm-fleshed fruit such as apples or pears, and with a light-bodied red wine such as fruity Burgundy or a mellow Bordeaux.



## STRAWBERRY BRIE CAKE

(Makes 8 to 10 servings)

With a wet knife, cut a 1-kilo Brie in half horizontally, making 2 thin layers. Top one layer with a pint of hulled whole strawberries. Replace top layer and bake in a preheated moderate oven (350°F.) for about 7 minutes to just melt the cheese slightly. Garnish top with a rosette of sliced strawberries and mint leaves. Serve warm.

## BRIE AUX NOIX

(Makes 8 to 10 servings)

Stud top rind of 1-kilo (2.2 lbs.) Brie with nuts such as Brazil, almond, hazelnut, walnut, pecan, pistachio, macadamia, etc. Place under broiler 6 inches away from source of heat and broil until nuts are toasted and cheese is slightly melted. Serve warm.

## QUICK BRIE QUICHE

(Makes 8 to 10 servings)

Line bottom and sides of 10-inch quiche pan with pie crust. Prick bottom with fork. (Remove rim of box containing 1-kilo Brie and use it to hold the sides of the crust in place during baking.) Bake at 400°F. for 15 to 20 minutes or until golden brown. With a sharp knife, remove rind from the side of the Brie but do not remove the crust from the top and bottom. Fry 1/2 pound of bacon, chopped, with 1 large onion, chopped, until bacon is crisp. Remove crisp pieces of bacon and onion and drain. Spread 3/4 of the bacon and onion on the bottom of the shell. Top with Brie and bake at 400°F. for 10 to 12 minutes or until cheese melts and fills the shell. Garnish top with remaining bacon and parsley. Serve warm.

*Della Robbia Brie is a dessert piece de resistance—in a word, spectacular. A fine, French red wine, perhaps a Chambertin from Burgundy or a lovely St. Emilion from Bordeaux, will complement the harmony of flavors—adding a stunning finale to every dinner party.*

## DELLA ROBBIA BRIE

(Makes about 12-14 servings)

Place a wheel of Brie (weighing 1 kilo or about 2 pounds), on a round cheese board or serving platter 3 or 4 inches larger than the Brie itself to allow space for an attractive arrangement of frosted Tokay, Concord and green grapes, slices of red and Golden Delicious apples, and slices of Anjou and Bosc pears, to create a colorful Della Robbia effect. (To prevent fruit from discoloring, dip slices in acidulated water beforehand.) Arrange platter in advance and keep chilled. About one hour before serving, place platter on table to serve as centerpiece. By the time you are ready for dessert, the cheese will have reached room temperature and be ready for serving. To serve, cut cheese from center to outer rim into long, thin triangular wedges (about one-inch at rim). Place it on the dessert plate with a small bunch of grapes; 2-4 slices of fruit, a few unsalted pecans and 2-3 thin slices of French baguette.

To frost grapes: Cut individual portions of grapes from main bunch. Dip them into lemon juice or slightly beaten egg white, then granulated sugar. Chill 15-20 minutes, then repeat process.

