



Try tasting wines, fine natural cheeses

The popularity of wine drinking in this country is at an all-time high, and experts predict the trend will continue.

For greater enjoyment, wine authorities recommend branching out from standard, familiar white wines to the interesting and flavorful red wines such as cabernet sauvignon and zinfandel.

The perfect forum to experiment with new wines is an informal tasting, a chance to sample different wines, accompanied by cheeses and a selection of simple appetizers. A little planning ahead will insure that you select the right natural cheese to complement the wines.

Fortunately, the variety of high-quality natural cheeses available today means that the basics to an enjoyable cheese and wine tasting party are as close as your supermarket. There is a wealth of natural cheeses available ranging from imported Roquefort to sharp cheddar.

A word of caution, however: It's wiser to limit your tasting to taste only red wines and cheese that complement them well.

Cheese to accompany red wines need to have enough flavor to stand up to these fuller-flavored, sometimes tannic wines. Probably the first cheese to come to mind is sharp cheddar, a cheese which originated in England and pairs beautifully with Burgundy.

YOU MIGHT try comparing one extra sharp cheddar with New York extra sharp cheddar, with sips of the wine or a bit of bread or cracker in between to clear the palate.

Pinot noir, the great red wine of Burgundy's Cote d'Or region is receiving acclaim as a California wine. To accompany this new favorite, you could choose bleu cheese or imported Roquefort.

The piquancy of the cheese is mellowed by the soft fullness of the wine. For lighter reds such as gamay beaujolais or ruby claret, select monterey jack or colby cheese, which are on the mild side.

In planning quantities, remember that the greater variety of cheeses and wines that you serve, the more you'll need to allow each an adequate portion. A good rule of thumb is to plan on about a half bottle of wine per person, with each tasting portion being one to two ounces.

For the cheese, estimate between a quarter and a half-pound per person — but be generous, as cheese is one of the most versatile leftovers.

For eye appeal and ease of service, cut the cheeses into different shapes such as wedges, sticks, slices and chunks. Then assemble your cheese tray ahead of time and refrigerate it, tightly wrapped, until about an hour before the serving. At that time, remove the wrapping tray and set it out to allow the cheeses to reach room temperature for optimum flavor.

If you want to prepare something for your guests, but would like to highlight the cheese flavor to go with the wines, try intriguing cheeses, grape and bread or cracker combinations.

Frosted table grapes add a touch of elegance, and they're easy to prepare. Simply dip small bunches into lightly beaten egg white, then dust with sugar or fruit-flavored gelatin and place on racks to dry. Then, take small wedges of monterey jack, bleu cheese or another favorite, and place with a couple of frosted grapes on a cracker. This decorative idea makes a great light dessert or snack, too.

Another easy appetizer is a layered cheddar cheese spread, perfect for either dipping or spreading on crackers. A crock or large wine glass full of this spread makes a thoughtful take-along to a wine tasting.

PESTIVELY LAYERED CHEDDAR SPREAD
1 8-oz package cream cheese
1/4 cup chopped onion
2 tablespoons chopped pimiento
1 cup heavy cream, whipped
3 cups (12 ounces) shredded sharp natural cheddar cheese

Combine softened cream cheese, onion and pimiento; fold in whipped cream. Alternate layers of cheddar cheese and cream cheese mixture in two 20-ounce glasses. Chill Serve with crackers.

SOCIABLE CHEESE AND GRAPE APPETIZERS
Assorted crackers
Monterey jack cheese cut in wedges
Bleu cheese, cut in wedges
Frosted grapes

For each appetizer, top cracker with cheese and frosted grapes.

Note: To frost grapes, dip small bunches of red or green grapes into lightly beaten egg white; sprinkle with granulated sugar and place on rack to dry.

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