



By Simon Tam

A Match Made in Heaven?

If you're planning to throw a wine and cheese party, check out these tips on the compatibility of two of life's most enduring epicurean luxuries

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ONE OF THE world's oldest pairings is the heavenly combination of wine and cheese. But not all cheeses are created equal, and not all wines go well with dairy products. In fact, their two worlds are so diverse that it's impossible to generalise about which wines and cheeses make a perfect match. What follows are a few basic suggestions. For the rest, let your nose and taste buds guide you.

Let's start with the fresh styles of bocconcini, feta and buffalo mozzarella. These heavy, young cheeses are designed to be enjoyed immediately, while they're fresh. Bocconcini and buffalo mozzarella are extremely moist, while feta is soaked in salty brine.

The whey or moisture content of these three cheeses makes them difficult to pair with wine because they will easily and rapidly dilute the taste, so that the flavours become indistinguishable from each other. The exceptions are very dry, lean wines such as Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc.

Rind or washed-rind cheeses such as Brie and Camembert are more popular choices for cheese boards. The chalky, yellow-white rinds encase straw-coloured, soft cheese that can be scooped up with crackers or spooned into the mouth. This rich, succulent, gooey cheese coats the mouth and can render the most assertive reds flavourless by neutralising the impact of the tannins on the palate.

While the mere thought of such a combination may sound sacrilegious to many wine lovers, it is precisely the desired effect others seek. The coating lets drinkers taste the flavours of gutsy Bordeaux and

Cabernets, for example, without the overpowering impact of the tannins, which dry and pucker the mouth.

The differences between Brie and Camembert can be subtle, especially to an untrained palate; Brie is generally milder in flavour. The rind itself is never eaten in professional cheese competitions; it is examined for its aromatic characteristics, but the judges' evaluations are primarily about the cheeses' runny cores.

Creating a wine pairing for Brie and Camembert begins by crafting a balance between all the ingredients on a cheese board. Elaborate on a traditional platter of dried fruits and nuts by adding pecans, roasted almonds and fresh, juicy strawberries. The richness of the cheese will be balanced by the vibrant acidity of the berries. Then pair the platter with wine that can match the creamy cheese, waltz with the bitter nuts by offering some sweet relief and extend the fruity notes of the strawberries.

An Australian "sticky" or a French Sauternes or Barsac will complete the equation. These wines' intense, fruity sweetness will match the richly flavoured cheese and spread the tastes throughout the palate.

Hard cheeses, such as matured Cheddar, Parmesan and pecorino, deliver richness and intensity without being overly creamy. Through an eight-month to three-year maturation period, the cheeses lose much of their moisture. The crumbly end product delivers a flavourful punch that only big, concentrated red wines can match.

Pair these robust hard cheeses with Bordeaux, Rhone Valley Shiraz or Coonawarra or Napa Valley Cabernet. Italians might opt instead for Brunello di Montalcino or Chianti with hard cheeses sourced from their local villages.

Blue cheese, an acquired taste, provides outstanding rewards for the initiated. The blue mould of the cheese is created by injections of penicillium cultures. Classic blues such as Gorgonzola, Danish blue and English Stilton are appreciated for their rich creaminess and their savoury earth and mushroom characteristics. The aroma is intense and requires a wine that's equally powerful.

The quintessential wine-and-cheese pairing, at least for the British, is Stilton and port. The savoury richness of the blue cheese is offset nicely by sweet tawny or vintage port, depending on your taste and budget.

Finally, here's a final tip. While it's difficult to nail down the perfect cheese-and-wine match, contemplating the decision reminded me of an old saying I learned from a wise master of wine: "Buy on apple, sell on cheese."

When buying wine, it's never a good idea to accept a vendor's offer of cheese. That's because cheese, especially soft cheese, coats the mouth and hides the overpowering tannins of an inferior or unbalanced red wine, which would otherwise taste dry, bitter and coarse. Apple, on the other hand, is acidic and sweet and has the potential to reduce wine to oblivion. If a wine stands up after a mouthful of apple, it means it has strong characteristics and is well balanced. ■