The NEW RULES of cheese

A Freewheeling & Informative Guide

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contents

RULE 4

Learn the five basic styles of cheese.

You can slice and dice this as many ways as there are cheeses in the world (literally thousands), but I think that the world of cheese can be neatly divided into five categories. Knowing the rudiments of these different categories can help you understand what you're looking at, and what to ask for when you're at the cheese counter.

1. FRESH CHEESE: These are young, rindless cheeses, like fresh chèvre, mozzarella, queso fresco, and ricotta. They are the easiest to make, and they tend to be mild, milky, and slightly tangy in flavor.

2. MOLD-RIPENED OR "BLOOMY" RIND CHEESE: The surface of these cheeses is covered by a white downy mold and/or yeast that ripens the cheese from the outside in. Brie and Camembert are two of the most famous examples of this category. Bloomy rind cheeses tend to have a yeasty, fruity, mushroomy, and buttery flavor profile.

3. NATURAL RIND CHEESE: These cheeses have a tough, dry, natural rind (comprised of ambient molds) that forms after the cheese is salted and aged in a cave. Tomme de Savoie and Caerphilly are two examples of this style. The flavors of natural rind cheeses vary greatly depending on what type of milk they're made from, what the cheesemaking process is like, and how long they are aged, but they all share an earthy, mineral-heavy flavor imparted by the rind.

4. WASHED RIND CHEESE: These are the stinkers! The rinds of washed rind cheeses are moist and sticky and have a reddish orange color caused by the different bacteria and fungi that are either present in the milk used to make the cheese or introduced via the salt brine used to wash the cheese. Taleggio, Époisses, and even Gruyère are examples of this style of cheese. Washed rind cheeses tend to be strong, with meaty, fruity, and pungent flavor notes.

5. BLUE CHEESE: Blue cheeses are inoculated with strains of blue mold, which causes the interior veining of the cheese to turn blue. Contrary to popular belief, the blue is not injected into the cheese; rather, the cheesemaker pierces the cheese with metal rods. In order for the blue coloration to happen, the mold needs to be exposed to oxygen. The piercing, or spiking, of the cheese allows oxygen to enter the interior and activate the mold. Blue cheeses tend to be mushroomy, earthy, chocolaty, and nutty in flavor.

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NATURAL RIND CHEESE

MOLD-RIPENED OR "BLOOMY" RIND CHEESE

FRESH CHEESE

BLUE CHEESE

WASHED RIND CHEESE

RULE 9.

Being lactose intolerant does not mean you can't eat cheese.

Most of the world's population is lactose intolerant. Studies estimate that 65 to 75 percent of us humans cannot digest lactose. That's not so odd, considering that evolutionarily, mammals only need to drink milk until we are weaned and our digestive system matures enough to eat other kinds of foods. In order to digest lactose, a person's gut must contain the enzyme lactase to break it down. Without lactase, the lactose in milk can wreak gastrointestinal havoc, causing cramping, nausea, bloating, and diarrhea. A genetic mutation in central Europeans around the year 5,500 BCE enabled them to continue to drink milk into adulthood, something that many of us (especially Americans!) do to this day. Must've been that harsh cold climate…Mother Nature decided to give those early humans a break—and more access to the fat, protein, and naturally occurring sugar found in fluid milk.

However, cheese and other fermented dairy products contain virtually no lactose. That's why cultures across most of the world have been consuming some form or another of fermented dairy for the past 9,000 years or so. During the fermentation process, lactic acid bacteria that are naturally occurring in milk and/or have been added to the milk by the cheesemaker consume the lactose present and convert it into lactic acid. Then, after the milk is coagulated and the curd is cut, separating the solid curds and liquid whey (see "Learn the basics—cheesemaking 101," this page), more lactose is removed as the whey is drained off. In hard, aged cheeses like Cheddar, Parmigiano-Reggiano, aged Gouda, and the like, there is virtually zero lactose left. There may be trace amounts, but not nearly enough to cause an upset stomach.

Some fresh cheeses, on the other hand, are lactose culprits. For example, most American mozzarella does not undergo fermentation (see this page); therefore, it still contains LOTS of lactose. If you're lactose intolerant, watch out for pizza and other dishes that include mozzarella. It's delicious, of course, but might necessitate a lactase supplement for you to enjoy it with minimal side effects! Ricotta, mascarpone, and other fresh, creamy, sweet cheeses should be avoided also. Your cheesemonger is always a good source of information for how long a cheese is aged and whether it likely contains lactose.

CHEESE TO AVOID AND ENJOY WHEN LACTOSE INTOLERANT

ENJOY: Aged Cheddar, Parmigiano-Reggiano, Grana Padano, and any firm, aged, cow, goat, or sheep's milk cheese

AVOID: Fresh mozzarella, mascarpone, ricotta, and other soft, sweet, creamy cheeses

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RULE 17.

Dare to pair.

Cheese's inherent complexity of flavor makes it an ideal food to pair with fermented beverages—wine, beer, cider, and even spirits. (And of course, it pairs wonderfully with all kinds of foods and accompaniments.) A great pairing will elevate both elements—the cheese and the beverage—to new and dizzying heights of gustatory pleasure. I have gotten countless questions about pairings over the course of my career as a cheesemonger, and when push comes to shove, my answer is this: The best pairing is the one you like best. I know that seems vaguely obnoxious, but I really do believe it. Because we all perceive flavor in slightly different ways, your dream pairing might be one that simply hasn't been dreamed up yet.

That said, if you're a total beginner or want more concrete guidance, I will (somewhat reluctantly) try to steer your cheese-pairing ship down an adventurous and successful course. There are some basic rules that hold true and can be a sturdy starting point for pairing explorations. However, I beseech you: Don't forget that pairing cheese and wine (or anything else) should be fun, unpretentious, educational, and a bit of an adventure. If you get too bogged down trying not to make a wrong turn, you might miss out on a great journey!

RULE 17.1 What grows together goes together.

Whoever coined this bit of pairing wisdom deserves a big pat on the back and a slice of stinky cheese. When in doubt, you can follow this rule and rarely will you be disappointed. Dry cider pairs exceptionally well with funky Camembert, both of which come from Normandy, France. Borrowing from some of the best offerings of central Spain, you'll discover that a light, juicy red wine such as Tempranillo is a natural companion to Manchego. Rich lager beers from Germany complement stinky washed rind cheeses, such as Limburger, that German cheesemakers are famous for. And sweet balsamic vinegar from Modena is a joy to drizzle on Italy's famed Parmigiano-Reggiano. If you don't have two things from the exact same region, try to find their European analogs. A dry cider from the States paired with a bloomy rind cheese, like Moses Sleeper from Jasper Hill Farm in Vermont, will follow the same pairing logic as the classic Normandy cider with Camembert.

RULE 17.2 White wines pair better with most cheeses than red wines.

This probably runs counter to a lot of advice you've heard, but in my experience (and for my palate) this holds true. Red wines, though they are extremely tasty and pair very well with other foods, can be too heavy-handed for many cheeses. In general, I prefer to pair cheeses with white wines or sparkling wines, which tend to be a bit lighter in flavor. It levels the playing field and allows both elements to "play nice," rather than one bashing the other over the head with a club. If you're a die-hard red wine fan, choose cheeses with bold flavor profiles.

RULE 17.4 When in doubt, use these tried-and-true pairings.

There are some classic, tried-and-true pairings that will work 99 percent of the time. These are a few of them.

TRIPLE-CREAM CHEESE AND CHAMPAGNE The dense, buttery qualities of the cheese are offset (and lifted up) by the acidity and effervescence of Champagne.

ALPINE-STYLE CHEESE AND OFF-DRY WHITE WINE (THINK RIESLING, CHARDONNAY, CHENIN BLANC) “Alpine-style cheese” refers to any cheese made in the style that originated in the Alps. These cheeses are rich, dense, and well aged, and tend to have nutty, toasted, creamy, grassy flavors. Off-dry whites offer a blend of slight acidity mixed with a hint of sweetness that can be reminiscent of flowers, fruit, melons, or honey and pair beautifully with this noble style of cheese.

CHEDDAR AND STRONG ALE Cheddar is a bold, sharp, acidic style of cheese that often has its fair share of allium attributes as well. A strong ale is the perfect counterpoint—the hoppy, toasty, and malted qualities in the beer will harmonize with and tame the wildness of the Cheddar.

BLUE CHEESE AND SWEET DESSERT WINE (PORT, SAUTERNES) Blue-vein cheeses can be divisive—they are strong, peppery, and earthy and need a high-octane beverage to match their intensity. Sweet dessert wines like port or Sauternes provide all the oomph alcohol-wise and the sugar rush needed to balance the strength found in most blues.

BLOOMY RIND COW’S MILK CHEESE AND CIDER “Bloomy rind cow’s milk cheese” refers to anything that has a white, fluffy, Brie-like rind. The bracing acidity and sourness of hard, dry cider marries exceptionally well with the butter and subtle funk endemic to this style of cheese.

AGED GOUDA AND WHISKEY Hold on to your hat—this combo is incendiary! Most cheeses would be simply demolished by the fire and strength of whiskey, but a Gouda that is aged 2 years or more is up to the task. The cheese becomes dense and sweet—like caramel, toasted nuts, and sweet cream—and the warmth and slight spice of a barrel-aged whiskey sets the tone for a warm belly and sated palate.

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