



Dynamic Duos

BY ALAN MCGINTY

Like ardent lovers, wine and cheese pairings can bring out the best — or the worst — in each other

Fine wines and artisanal cheeses have never been more available, but the variety can also be overwhelming. So when putting together a sensual sampler, where do you start? Here's an idea: Uncork that skinny bottle of icewine that's been gathering dust on the shelf since Christmas — it's a surprisingly delicious companion for blue cheese. And if you're feeling extra decadent, serve it on a square of dark chocolate. The contrast between the pungent, salty, creamy cheese and the sweetness and acidity of the icewine is pure magic. Port is a more typical (and excellent) blue cheese pairing, as are Sauternes, late-harvest Rieslings and Gewürztraminers. And if you've been leery of strong, mouldy cheese, these great pairings will have you reconsidering.

Anne Martin, a Toronto sommelier and wine consultant, has a few suggestions for matching wines with cheeses. "You can pair like with like, or you can contrast," she says. "To pair a wine and a cheese, you need to look at the structure of the cheese, as well as the wine. Is the cheese very earthy or is it more clean and citrusy like goat's cheese? Is it harder and more piquant like a pecorino or parmesan?" According to Martin, Chardonnay is the most all-round cheese-friendly wine, and

she generally recommends whites. "Salty, hard cheeses are the only ones I think go well with red wines," she says. "But even then you have to be careful there's not too much tannin in the wine because the astringency will be too great, and that's nasty in any food pairing."

Toronto's Cheese Boutique has been around since 1970. "It's the city's finest," says the affable manager Afrim Pristine, the third generation to work in the family business. Pristine ages many cheeses and won't offer them until he deems his product ready. "Right now we're selling a ton of our 10-year-old raw milk, northern Quebec cheddar which we've just released from our cheese vault after sitting on it for eight years."

It's rare to find a cheddar that old, and it's extremely good: rich, dense, moist and flavourful — not dry and crumbly like some old cheddars. It works beautifully with a quality Bordeaux of a similar age, since its tannins have smoothed and softened over time. However, Anne Martin warns that “with a younger more tannic red wine, your mouth would just be all puckered up.”

It's one thing to think about matching the cheese with the wine but Pristine also suggests eating whatever is in season. For example, creamier cheeses from France and Spain are best in the autumn. “The cows, goats and sheep eat the tall, rich grasses in spring and summer, and that translates into better quality milk,” he says. “We start to get those cheeses here from Thanksgiving to Christmas. That's when you have the widest selection.”

Depending on the origin and flavour profile of the cheese, try pairing it with Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc; choose a Riesling with more delicate cheeses. In winter, harder and more aged cheeses are a better choice, which work nicely with cool weather favourites like Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Beaujolais (a lighter red made with Gamay grapes) or a Barbera from Italy. Martin also suggests pairing European cheeses and wines by region.

How do the pros do it? At the very stylish Trevor's Kitchen and Bar in downtown Toronto, Trevor Wilkinson offers a different cheese plate every week. In addition to three very different cheeses, the platter has a bowl of honey, a selection of dried fruits and nuts, and raisin crispbread. “We offer ports, dessert wine and nine other wines by the glass, so all the bases are covered,” he says.

Whether your tastes are local or European, conservative or more adventurous, with the season for entertaining upon us, it's good to get cheesy — and even better to get it right. •



Team Canada Fantasy Cheese Plate

Sommelier Anne Martin selects Canadian wines to go with cheese monger Afrim Pristine's three Canadian cheese choices.

Riopelle (a brie-like, cow's milk cheese) with **Henry of Pelham Reserve Chardonnay 2006** The creamy, buttery character of the cheese is matched by the oak notes in this rich, fruity Chardonnay. It also has enough balancing acidity to add refreshment.

Chèvre Noir (an aged, cheddar-like goat's cheese) with **Avento Elige 2005** An elegant Bordeaux blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc from Niagara, this subtle red will pair beautifully with chevre noir, a robust and flavourful cheese.

Ciel de Charlevoix (a blue cheese) with **Cave Spring Dolomite Riesling 2007** An off-dry Riesling with gorgeous mineral notes, this white has just enough sweetness to counterbalance the salt, plus citrus to cut through the creamy fat in the cheese.