



Hosting a
Cheese Tasting:

Cheese Principles

by Sarah Parkin

The international appeal of cheese makes it is easy to understand why people host cheese-tasting parties. Cheese is available in numerous textures, smells, and flavors from countries all over the globe. A tasting party allows everyone an opportunity to try small amounts of a variety of cheeses they might not try on their own. Go ahead. Invite a group of friends over and have a tasting.

Chef Laura Slama who owns Celebrated Cuisine, a catering service specializing in elegant cocktail parties and intimate dining, presents cheese-tasting parties on a regular basis. People frequently combine cheese with wine for a tasting party to complement each offering. "It's hard to do a cheese presentation without wine," she said "Taste the wine, and then taste the cheese, and then taste the wine again."

Finding the right cheese

When planning your gathering, the first challenge is to decide which cheeses to serve. The vast array of choices can be overwhelming when facing a good cheese counter at an upscale grocery store or specialty cheese shop. The selection of cheddars or blues alone can be awe-inspiring. The possibilities are endless. It is helpful to focus on what type of tasting you want to present.

Brendan Sheehan, a Team Specialist at Whole Foods Market in Tempe, Arizona, works in the dairy department and assists customers in selecting cheeses. "I would recommend a variety of textures and milks," he suggests. Cheese comes in many textures, including soft, semi-soft, firm, hard, and blue. In some presentations, one item from each category is chosen. Soft cheeses, such as brie, are usually creamy. Semi-soft cheeses such as edam and havarti slice easily, but also melt well. Semi-hard cheeses, such as cheddar, slice well. Hard cheese often grate or shave more easily than slicing, such as parmesan. Blues are often crumbly and have a strong flavor and aroma.

Cheese is a fascinating product made with the same three basic ingredients everywhere, but it becomes something completely different when made in different parts of the world. Milk, rennet, and salt combine to make literally all types of cheese. However, the changes in the type of milk, temperature, humidity, and amount of aging create different types of cheese.

It shouldn't be a surprise that cheese is deeply integrated into our diets. We eat it in many of our comfort foods, such as macaroni and cheese, and grilled cheese sandwiches. We also find

it in many international dishes, including lasagna, quesadillas, and Greek salad. Cheese has been around for thousands of years. Traditionally, it sets on the table next to bread and wine. Historians believe cheese manufacturing took place as early as 12,000 years ago when people first began domesticating goats. Homer refers to a sheep's milk cheese that was probably an early form of feta in *The Odyssey*. Throughout the millennia, people have been making and eating cheese around the world.

An interesting taste test is to present the same type of cheese made with different types of milk. Milk for cheese can come from cows, goats, sheep, or even water buffalo. Different animals provide individual characteristics resulting in changes in flavor and textures. The majority of them come from cow's milk. Goat's milk has less fat and tends to taste lighter, but also tangier. Sheep have the fattest milk, resulting in a richer tasting product.

Consider selecting cheeses that come from the same region. This type of tasting frequently includes the tasting of wines from the same area. Choosing varieties of each from the South of France or Northern Italy often provides flavors that complement one another. The diet of the animal in a certain region can affect the flavor of the cheese. In addition, the temperature and humidity affect the flavor in the ripening process.

The reverse also works, by choosing a specific type of cheese and trying it from many different regions. "Compare cheddars to cheddars," said Chef Laura. "There are cheddars made with beer. There are cheddars that are extra sharp. There is cheddar that has Colby in it."

Mixing it up

Just when you decide on the type of cheese tasting you will serve, you face the inevitable task of choosing wines to complement them. "A quick way to solve the problem of pairings is to pair regions. For example, pair a Spanish cheese with a Spanish wine, or an Italian cheese with an Italian wine," said Sheehan.

Chef Laura takes a different approach. "I like to get a combination of textures, flavors, things that will pair with a variety of different wines. I like to provide as much variety and new education as possible."

For the best tasting experience, start by bringing the cheese to room temperature. This will bring out the flavor and aroma. Then, begin with the mildest. The stronger cheeses will overpower the taste of the milder cheeses. Do not use your fingers. Use toothpicks or small forks to keep the flavors and scents from mingling. Smell the cheese. Taste, have a drink, and then taste again. Take a bite of something bland, like a plain cracker or a piece of bread before going on to the next cheese.

If you want to serve other foods, good pairings include nuts, olives, dried fruits, chutneys, fresh seasonal fruits,

Well-known cheeses from specific regions:

Denmark – Havarti, Danish Blue cheese, Fontina
 England – Cheddar, Stilton, Cheshire, Gloucester
 France – Brie, Camembert, Chevre, Raclette, Roquefort
 Greece – Feta
 Holland – Edam, Gouda
 Italy – Asiago, Mozzarella, Gorgonzola, Parmigiano Reggiano, Pecorino, Romano
 Spain – Manchego
 Switzerland – Emmental, Swiss
 United States – Cheddar, Cojack, Maytag Blue, Monterey Jack, Pepper Jack, Swiss

aged meats, crackers, baguettes, honey, or a balsamic reduction sauce.

Educate your guests as you taste. Tell them about different types of cheeses, regions, animals, and cheese making methods. Encourage them to try things they may not try on their own. Serve with plain crackers or baguettes so as not to interfere with the flavors. Then, offer grapes or pears, or hard sausage to see if the cheese tastes differently with one or the other. See if a one tastes better with a bold red wine or a light white wine. Try it with beer, or perhaps champagne.

"I love cheese presentations that marry a variety of cheeses that have nothing to do with each other and to keep people exploring," said Chef Laura. "One of my favorite things to do with cheese is to surprise people."

When asked about the most popular cheese served, Chef Laura didn't hesitate. "Brie. People love it wrapped in puff pastry, wrapped in phyllo dough, with chutney, without chutney, toasted almonds, buttered almonds, balsamic reduction – what can't you do to brie? Melt it down and I make brie and papaya quesadillas with chipotle and a little white balsamic vinaigrette as an appetizer. People love that. You can do that with mango as well. Brie is very versatile."

After your cheese tasting, you may be lucky enough to have leftovers. Avoid wrapping it tightly in plastic wrap. Most cheese mongers recommend that you wrap it in wax paper and then loosely in plastic wrap in order for the cheese to breathe. Change the wrapping every few days.

"The one thing I would want people to know is don't go with your own preconceived notion of a cheese," said Chef Laura. "Explore. Take a chance. If you tasted one before and you didn't like it, taste it again, maybe by a different cheese maker or a different country or whatever. You could surprise yourself."

Recipes courtesy of Chef Laura Slama with Celebrated Cuisine

Bleu Cheese Stuffed Figs wrapped in Prosciutto

Serves 8

2 cups balsamic vinegar
¼ cup sugar
3 oz. crumbled bleu cheese
12 fresh figs, cut in half lengthwise
4 oz. prosciutto, paper thin,
about 1" wide and 4" long

1. To make the balsamic syrup, boil the balsamic vinegar and sugar in a saucepan until reduced to ½ cup (about 30 minutes). Let cool to room temperature. Syrup will thicken as it cools.
2. Place 1 tablespoon of crumbled bleu cheese on to the cut surface of each fig. Wrap each with a piece of prosciutto.
3. Transfer the wrapped figs to a platter and drizzle with balsamic syrup.
4. Serve at room temperature or gently warmed in an oven.

Baby Spinach, Mango-Giner Stilton and Almonds in White Miso Vinaigrette

Serves 6

Stilton with Mango and Ginger
12 oz. baby spinach
¾ cup white miso paste
¼ cup sugar
¾ cup rice vinegar
1 tablespoon peeled and minced ginger
¼ cup canola oil
1 tablespoon soy sauce
Sesame oil to taste
Toasted Almonds

1. Combine miso, sugar, rice vinegar, and ginger in a bowl. Whisk well. Add canola oil and soy sauce. Drizzle in sesame oil for seasoning to taste. Refrigerate until ready to use.
2. Toss baby spinach with white miso vinaigrette (do not drown greens). Plate greens, tossing with almonds and cheese, drizzling with additional vinaigrette if desired.

Fennel, Taleggio and Cardamom Tart

Serves 8

3 medium fennel bulbs, trimmed of stalks, quartered lengthwise
8 cardamom pods, flattened, seeds removed, then crushed
¼ cup dry white wine
¼ cup water
¼ cup olive oil
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 teaspoon sea salt
½ teaspoon black pepper
2 large eggs
1 large egg yolk
4 oz. whole milk
4 oz. heavy cream
¼ cup crème fraîche
3 oz. taleggio cheese, chilled, medium diced
Prepared pastry crust

1. Bring wine, water, oil, butter, cardamom, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper to a simmer in a 12" sauté pan. Add fennel and cook, covered, over low heat until fennel is tender. Cool.
2. Roll out dough to a 15" round and fit into tart pan. Prick shell with a fork, line with foil or parchment. Weigh down with pie weights and bake in a 375 degree oven until set. Remove foil and weights and bake longer to turn the bottom of the shell golden.
3. Whisk together the eggs and egg yolk until foamy, then add the milk, cream, and crème fraîche, and season with remaining salt and pepper.
4. Transfer the fennel mixture to the crust, pour custard over and bake the tart until it is set, 20-25 minutes. Cool 15 minutes before serving. 

