

CHEESE CAN PLEASE AT HOLIDAY GATHERINGS

The Sun - Baltimore, Md.

Author: ROB KASPER
 Date: Dec 24, 2008
 Start Page: C.1
 Section: TASTE
 Text Word Count: 1070

Document Text

What to serve after Christmas dinner? Clark Wolf says cheese. "A nice blue cheese, a Maytag or a Rogue River, with walnuts and port. Cheese tastes better with walnuts, and walnuts are in season. Also, blue cheese makes port taste better, so you don't have to spend a lot of money on port," Wolf says.

What to serve on New Year's Day? Again, Clark Wolf replies cheese. "A rich, creamy cheese, maybe a Constant Bliss from Jasper Hill Farm in Vermont - something ripe and crazy so you can eat while sipping a good sparkling wine or champagne. You have this for the New Year for the same reason you prefer crystal over plastic. You want something real, something solid, something delicious that makes you happy."

Wolf, as you might have guessed by now, is a cheese head. He is the author of a new book, *American Cheeses*, that lists some of the nation's best cheese makers, among them Maryland's FireFly Farms. The book also offers tips on storing cheese (Wolf prefers waxed-paper sandwich bags); on what to drink with cheese (almost anything except red wine); and what to do if a piece of cheese "goes South" (sniff, perform surgery and, if all else fails, make macaroni and cheese with the salvageable parts).

Now the president of a restaurant and food consulting business with offices in New York and Sonoma, Calif., Wolf is quick with a pithy quote and is regularly cited by food writers looking for the latest developments in the culinary world.

His interest in cheese is long-standing, not trendy, he said. It began in 1976 when he ran a cheese shop in San Francisco near the massage parlors on Geary Street. "The women working the massage parlors would come in and order a lot of soft cheese for their customers," Wolf said. "I never asked what they did with it."

Later, he became the manager of the San Francisco branch of the Oakville grocery, an establishment that featured locally produced goods, including cheese, long before "locavore" was in the food-world vocabulary.

He was glad he waited until now, some 30 years later, to write a book, because the American cheese scene has matured. "It takes a while to get it right," he said during a telephone interview.

For instance, he said that a couple of years back, the people at Cato Corner Farm in Colchester, Conn., were making good cheese. "But now they are making great cheese. That step from good to great takes time." Nowadays, he said, many American cheeses - dry Jack, the Vermont cheddars - "are world-class."

Wolf had praise for Maryland cheese makers Mike Koch and Pablo Solanet of FireFly Farms in Garrett County. Their Mountain Top Bleu, "creamy, flavorful and mildly goaty," was Wolf's favorite.

He also noted the work of Sue Conley and Peggy Smith, two Washington, D.C., women who ventured out to California and make cheese at a creamery in Petaluma, and have opened a branch of their Cowgirl Creamery at 919 F St. N.W. in the district. Their Red Hawk cheese is, Wolf wrote, "a washed-rind winner." It or their MT Tam would be good cheeses to enjoy with those glasses of New Year's sparkling wine, he said.

When it comes to storing cheese, Wolf recommends wrapping it in waxed-paper bags or waxed butcher paper, then keeping all cheese, except blue, in one drawer, or in a closed container in the fridge.

"You store blue separately because it can reach out and grow things," Wolf said. "But all other cheeses are more comfortable when they are together. Storing cheese with broccoli, however, is less good."

You know something is amiss with your cheese, he said, when you sniff it and you get "that window-cleaner-meets-cat-box moment." When this occurs, Wolf recommends first letting the cheese "air out," then if the unpleasant odor emanates from the surface of the cheese, you cut away the offending parts. "If the inside is still good, you melt it or cook with it. I have three or four recipes for macaroni and cheese in the book," he said.

As for what he sips when he eats cheese, Wolf ticked off many beverages: "white wine, bubbly, port, apple juice and beer." But with big red wines, he changes his routine. He drinks the red wine, then eats the cheese. He does this because strong cheese dulls his palate and overpowers the subtle flavors of red wine. Wolf said a study at the University of California, Davis backs him up on this point.

Finally, for a salad - the dish that many people turn to after the indulgences of the holidays - Wolf recommends - what else? - cheese. In this case, slices of warm goat cheese coated with sourdough bread crumbs and served on a bed of greens. "It is a meal in a bowl," he said.

BAKED GOAT CHEESE SALAD

(serves 4)

8 ounces fresh goat cheese

1 1/4 cups extra-virgin olive oil (divided use)

3 to 4 sprigs fresh thyme, chopped

1 sprig fresh rosemary, chopped

1/2 sourdough baguette

1 tablespoon red-wine vinegar

1 teaspoon sherry vinegar

salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

2 cups lettuce leaves

Slice the goat cheese into 8 discs, about 1/2 inch thick. Pour 1 cup of the olive oil over the discs and sprinkle with the chopped thyme and rosemary. Cover and store in a cool place for several hours or up to a week.

Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Cut the baguette in half lengthwise and bake for about 20 minutes, until dry and lightly colored. Grate into fine crumbs on a box grater or in a food processor. (Crumbs can be made in advance and stored.)

Heat the oven to 400 degrees. Remove the cheese from the marinade and roll in bread crumbs, coating thoroughly. Place on a baking sheet and bake for 6 minutes, until the cheese is warm.

Combine the vinegars in a small bowl with a pinch of salt. Whisk in the remaining 1/4 cup oil and a little pepper. Taste for seasoning and adjust.

Toss the lettuce lightly with the vinaigrette. Divide among 4 plates. Carefully place 2 discs of cheese over the greens and serve.

From "American Cheeses" by Clark Wolf

Per serving: 429 calories, 16 grams protein, 30 grams fat, 11 grams saturated fat, 25 grams carbohydrate, 1 gram fiber, 26 milligrams cholesterol, 488 milligrams sodium

Credit: rob.kasper@baltsun.com

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

The book also offers tips on storing cheese (Wolf prefers waxed-paper sandwich bags); on what to drink with cheese (almost anything except red wine); and what to do if a piece of cheese "goes South" (sniff, perform surgery and, if all else fails, make macaroni and cheese with the salvageable parts).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.