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AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT

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Issue: November 2009

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## Cheese Teams U.S.A.

After a decade of "search and nibble" book research for his recently published *American Cheeses: The Best Regional, Artisan, and Farmhouse Cheeses, Who Makes Them, and Where to Find Them*, restaurant/hotel consultant and menu Svengali Clark Wolf, ever at one with the tastes and tenor of the times, suggests three American regional matchups that could be turned into one-time promotions or year-round menus.

American cheeses have come of age, a boon to diners and restaurateurs. Whether as basic bar snack or penultimate climax to a grand tasting menu, what could be more appealing than a plate of artisan foods swiftly delivered and attractively plated? I propose cheeses on three different tiers, in terms of price point, presentation, regional spread, and engaging backstories.

### Tier One

Start with the basics: three distinctively delicious cheeses that will appeal to nearly every palate. Classic, buttery, mellow, and just a bit sharp, Cabot Clothbound Cheddar is cave aged by the folks at Jasper Hill Farm in Greensboro, Vermont, who are not only at the forefront of cheesemaking and ripening but are also advocates for the burgeoning American cheese movement. Then, for something creamy and award-winning that everyone will love, try the triple crème Brie or the creamy soft-ripened blue called Le Petit Bleu from Petaluma, California's Marin French Cheese Company. Very smooth. Finish the plate with world-class Roth Käse Grand Cru Surchoix from Madison, Wisconsin. Folks should recognize it as a Gruyère, and as extraordinarily delicious. Believe it or not, sparkling wine or an oaky Chardonnay are some good, underpromoted pairings, along with dried fruit and organic walnuts.

### Tier Two

For a broader mid-range collection, think about a plate of five. The soft-ripened, bloomy, white mold Constant Bliss from Jasper Hill Farm is a crowd-pleaser, not to mention an American Cheese Society award-winner in its debut year. To that, add Red Hawk, which evolved from a mistake to become an award-winning washed-rind-or "stinky"-cheese from Cowgirl Creamery in Point Reyes Station, California, in the area the *New York Times* has called "a new Normandy north of the Bay." Their creamery as well as their shops have become regional destinations for restaurateurs and consumers alike.

Then move to chèvre with one of the little artisan numbers from Vermont Butter & Cheese Company in Barre, Vermont—a Bonne Bouche, Bijou, or Coupole-whatever's available and ready to serve. Cheesemakers Allison Hooper and Bob Reese were instrumental in making chèvre widely available in the United States. Contrast with some aged Gouda, a sharp, slightly caramelized firm wheel from the high desert town of Winchester in Southern California. Then finish up with Rogue River Blue, creamy and mellow with a winery hint and fruity finish from the Rogue River Valley Creamery in Central Point, southern Oregon.

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This collection could easily be matched with a nice array of artisan beers: pale ale for the softies, deeper richer lagers for the washed-rind and Gouda, and mellow stouts for the blue. A flight of sparkling wines in a range of styles will work, too.

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### Tier Three

If you want to go whole hog-or rather sheep, goat, and cow-with the nation's most rarified, expensive, and lauded, there's surprisingly much from which to choose. Almost anything from Soyoung Scanlan's transcendent Andante Dairy is a must (most of her cheeses are sold before they are even made). Once only available to top chefs, her new creamery near Petaluma, California, allows more of us to share her treasured soft-ripened cheeses. I especially like the delicate balance of her Melange-a mix of goat's and cow's milk.

Pleasant Ridge Reserve from Uplands Cheese Company in Dodgeville, Wisconsin, is also at the top of the list. Cheesemaker/owner Mike Gingrich is so meticulous about the quality of the cow's milk that he relies on a mixture of breeds to ensure consistency and only makes his cheese during the months when the grasses thrive. This is a constant winner, in the style of an aged alpine *tomme* that makes you think roaring fire and Alsatian Gewürtztraminer. Firm, nutty, and fruity, but with the definite tang only mature, aged, and well made cheeses provide.

Then there's Green Hill from Sweet Grass Dairy in Thomasville, Georgia, a Camembert-style cheese that makes you almost forget France. OK, the fresh goat's milk cheese is amazing, too. Add to that some Hooligan-a washed-rind from Cato Corner Farm in Colchester, Connecticut-for some unctuous and aromatic dimensions. Made by the mother and son team of Elizabeth MacAlister and Mark Gillman, this was the first of a now impressive collection, all worth seeking out and sharing. In 2006 Hooligan won the Gallo Family Vineyards Gold Medal Award for Outstanding Dairy.

If you can, serve some of the brilliant work of Sally Jackson from high up in northern Washington State in Oroville. Forthrightly called Sally Jackson Goat, Sally Jackson Sheep, or Sally Jackson Cow-her cheeses, often hand wrapped in chestnut leaves, exhale the earthy, musty quality of deep-country cheesemaking. Finally, opt for some whole, unpasteurized Jersey cow's milk cheese, Berkshire Blue. This exquisite, classically crafted English-style blue is entirely handmade in Berkshire County, Massachusetts.

For this big-time collection, some thoughtful matchups are in order. Crisp Champagne or steely Chablis for the Andante; something a bit more buttery, white Burgundy-style or a light red Rhône for the Camembert (a Russian River Pinot Noir works too-sexy but not too funky); then a medium lager or a spicy Gewürtztraminer for the Pleasant Ridge. Clean and refreshing to accompany the Hooligan is a slightly sparkling apple cider. Pair the blue with a bolder choice, such as Port of any variety. And with the Sally Jackson? Well, break out the Cognac! Or maybe lean into some lightly smoky single malt Scotch.

With all pairings, the added options of pears, apples, dried fruits, and nuts-not to mention chocolates, honeys, chutneys, gelées, *mostardas*, and countless other spreads and pastes-make for a more lively and satisfying adventure at the table. But don't worry too much about the perfection of the pairings. Cheeses are living foods that change and evolve from day to day, hour to hour. Don't go all geeky intellectual. Allow diners to enjoy the tasting experience, reaping the rewards of others' fine labors.

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