



## Say cheese

By **L. PIERCE CARSON** Register Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, January 26, 2010 12:00 am

If you've sidled up to a supermarket cheese display lately, you know there are a lot more options than Velveeta, Laughing Cow and other processed selections.

Hard, semi-soft, fresh, ripened, blue-veined — whatever's your pleasure is sure to be there in spades.

Today, consumers are ripe for trying all kinds of cheese — ranging from Old World imports to savory offerings from a new breed of American cheesemakers.

Indicative of the growing interest in cheese, the Oxbow Cheese and Wine Merchant last week hosted a substantial supertime crowd to a "Terroir Exchange," a tasting of cheeses from California and France along with Old and New World wines.

Six California cheesemakers and a quartet of French affineurs were on hand to serve and discuss respective products, ranging from Cowgirl Creamery Red Hawk and Point Reyes Farmstead Original Blue to Fromagerie Berthaut Epoisses and E. Graindorge Camembert au Calvados, to name but a few.

"This is the first time we've been able to do this," said Oxbow Cheese Merchant general manager Lassa Skinner, with reference to bringing European and California cheesemakers together for a tasting. "It's because the French producers were here earlier in the week attending the Fancy Food Show in San Francisco and they agreed to stay to take part in the Napa event."

Area residents nibbled on Humbolt Fog, Taupinere and Le Chevrot, oohing and aahing over distinct flavor profiles, then asking pointed questions of the producers themselves.

Ancien chardonnay and pinot noir paired well with cheese-slathered baguette toasts. And the "buzzsaw acidity" of Domaine Germain Pere et Fils Saint-Roman Blanc (a most accurate assessment of this Old World chardonnay by the Wine Merchant's Peter Granoff) cut through the fat in little chunks of Morbier and Pont L'Eveque.

Skinner said last week's event was but the first of many she has planned. Consumers have expressed an interest in the cheeses of Spain, Italy and Mexico, she said, so events featuring cheeses from those regions of the world will be scheduled in upcoming months.

Cheese at home

When you're having friends over for dinner, serving them a bit of cheese along with a glass of wine is an appealing way to kick off the evening.

Obviously, dropping by Oxbox Cheese and Wine Merchant can solve the issue of both cheese and wine offerings for hors d'oeuvres and dinner. Skinner will gladly consult with locals who want a professional's input in the menu.

"First thing I always ask is what's for dinner ... then what wine will they be serving," Skinner advised. "If it's a heavy meal, then obviously they'd start with lighter cheeses."

Additionally, Skinner tells people hosting home wine and cheese pairings they might "think in terms of different milks — goat, sheep and cow — and offer three distinctly different cheeses. You could also put out hard, soft and semi-soft (cheese) and throw in a blue vein. Most important though, like the cheese you put out."

As for cooking with cheese, Skinner says home cooks should experiment in putting together new dishes. "Not all cheeses are good melters — some separate and get oily and nasty. Try out a new recipe with cheese before you serve it to friends.

"Almost every kind of cheese can be used in some form. For example, I tell people to grate an aged Gouda on a dish instead of a hard Italian cheese — just for something different."

First and foremost, Skinner insists that "you start with a good cheese. A bad cheese won't be any better if you cook it."

You can find numerous tips in the magazine founded by Skinner — “Culture: The Word on Cheese.” To learn more about the magazine or to subscribe, log onto [www.culturecheesemag.com](http://www.culturecheesemag.com).

Included in today’s recipes are ones from:

- Clark Wolf’s “American Cheeses” (Simon & Schuster, \$25), a recipe from acclaimed New York chef Marcus Samuelsson for a savory cheesecake.
- Chef/restaurateur Lidia Matticchio Bastianich’s “Lidia Cooks from the Heart of Sicily” (Knopf, \$35), a recipe from Sardinia for baked eggplant.

Three additional recipes can be found online at [www.napavalleyregister.com](http://www.napavalleyregister.com)

- Chef/restaurateur Scott Conant’s “Bold Italian” (Broadway Books, \$19.95) recipe for fried mozzarella with a chunky tomato sauce.
- From Robin Aspell’s “New Vegetarian” (Chronicle Books, \$19.95), a hearty braised garlic and Kabocha squash tart with aged Gouda.
- Tim Porter and Farina Wong Kingsley’s “Organic Marin” (Andrews McMeel Publishing, \$29.99), offers a delightful Point Reyes blue cheese dressing with pancetta for iceberg wedges.