



Through the Grapevine: Some tips for pairing wine and cheese.

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By Christine Carroll; Through the Grapevine

Mashed potatoes and gravy. Peanut butter and jelly. Bacon and eggs. They're all classic combinations. Wine and cheese is another time-honored pairing, but which varieties taste best together? How can a "non-foodie" sort through the complexities and come up with choices that do justice to both?

Included below are some tips for serving wine and cheese successfully. Remember, the best options are the ones you like best, but experience points to certain pairings that have general appeal and are a safe bet when entertaining guests.

As you experiment, you're likely to find that white wines are easier to pair with cheese than reds. The high acidity common to many whites gives them versatility. The acid cuts through the rich, buttery cheese and enhances the taste of the wine.

When serving soft, creamy cheeses like St. André or Camembert, crisp whites and bubbies are a great match. Or try a fresh Sauvignon Blanc or a Chardonnay that's not too buttery.

For semi-soft cheeses, again, mainly whites fill the bill. If the cheese has hints of sweetness, pick a fruity or slightly sweet white like Viognier or Chenin Blanc; otherwise, the cheese could make the wine taste sour. If you're craving red wine, go with a fruity, low-tannin red like a Beaujolais Nouveau or a soft Pinot Noir.

Goat cheese is in a category all by itself. It's high in acid and best served with a wine of at least equal acidity.

Goat cheese and Sauvignon Blanc make a classic pairing. The two often "grow together," which is something to consider in pairing wine with food.

The combination of soil and climate in certain regions gives the food and wine a special connection. This is true in the Loire Valley in France, which has long been one of the world's most important sources of goat cheese and Sauvignon Blanc. Fortunately, the match works, regardless of the country of origin. So if you pair any goat cheese with Sauvignon Blanc, it's likely to be a good choice. Other high-acid white wines can also pair well with goat cheese, whether fresh or aged.

A clash of flavors is far more likely to occur with a red wine pairing because reds with average acidity often don't have the palate coating effect of whites.

Does this mean you shouldn't serve red wine with cheese? Absolutely not! But you might think twice before matching one of your prized reds with a triple-cream Brie or a Maytag blue.

If you want red wine and cheese to truly complement each other, here's a good rule of thumb: the bigger and more tannic the red, the harder the cheese should be. That's a generalization, but it works a lot of the time. Serving a semi-hard cheese with red wine is a good bet too, especially a nutty one like Edam or an aged

Cheddar. By the way, most hard cheeses also pair nicely with whites.

In short, hard cheeses and high-acid whites, including sparkling wines, are the easiest to pair.

Got the urge for a strong, pungent cheese? For an all-around, extreme- taste experience, try Muenster with a massive red, like a full-bodied Cabernet or Amarone. If you'd rather tame the cheese than challenge it, a sweet wine will be less confrontational and create more of a sense of harmony. Sweet, fortified wines like Port or Late Harvest make good choices with strong cheeses.

Blue cheese is another challenging variety to match and can be a tough pairing with dry, red wine. The classic combinations are Port and Stilton and Sauterne and Roquefort, but most blue-veined cheeses go well with sweet or slightly sweet wines. This is not to say that blue cheese and red wine can't work together, but it's trickier. Just taste a combination before you serve it to guests to see how you like it.

One final note. Don't worry about "mistakes." Your own palate will tell what works and what doesn't. With a few guidelines and some experimentation, you can enhance your enjoyment of wine and cheese, a classic pairing that can be one of life's great pleasures.

For more information, check out Crossing Vineyards' Pairing Wine and Cheese Class on Tuesday, Jan. 19 at 7 p.m. or on Sunday, March 21 at 2 p.m. The cost is \$35 per person and includes instruction, tasting and learning materials. For reservations, call 215-493-6500, ext. 19, or visit www.crossingvineyards.com.

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