

The accompaniments you keep





## Matching cheese and condiments is a matter of personal taste

BY MAX MCCALMAN

At an American Cheese Society conference many years ago, cheesemakers were encouraged to develop a cheese a chef would incorporate into a recipe, the idea being that the recipe would be enhanced by including this one particular cheese. Although I've cooked with cheese often and appreciate how it can add a special element — I thought the focus should be directed on crafting a cheese that would stand out on its own. The question I asked at the time was — why not make a cheese that can stand up on its own four legs?

A couple of years later Thomas Keller's *The French Laundry Cookbook* featured the "composed" cheese course. Not exactly cooking with the cheese, yet the cheese was not left on its own. At the time, I found these two trends — developing cheeses strictly for cooking and mixing fine cheeses with other ingredients to create "cheese courses" — a little disappointing.

It's perfectly understandable that a world-renowned chef would hesitate to

send a cheese into the dining room without adding a personal touch. After all, a cheese course that simple might not be considered special, worthwhile, or different from what one might do at home. Having some interesting accompaniments to enhance the cheeses would satisfy the creative urge, whether the chef's or the cook's.

There are classic accompaniments such as honeys, chutneys, and balsamic vinegars, as well as the default grapes. The "purist" in me might opt for a fresh baguette and an appropriate wine — cheese, wine and bread, the "holy trinity of gastronomy" — whereas the "nutritionist" in me might look for accompaniments to make up for those few missing or deficient components in cheese: fiber, vitamin C, and water. The first accompaniment I served with my cheese courses was more of a garnish than a complementing accompaniment; it was a simple Medjool date.

Instead of worrying about the few nutrients cheese lacks, we often consider the aesthetics of the cheese course. The classic cheese course is rather simple yet elegant. There is the idea of serving the one "perfect" cheese, though

what that is I cannot begin to describe. One chef with whom I was discussing his cheese course informed me it would be heresy to add anything else.

Today U.S. chefs are adding attractive do-dads to their platters and plates; it's not only accepted, it's expected. Some chefs find it acceptable to have the basic cheese course — cheese and bread alone — but for others the accompaniments entice curious diners to experiment with new cheeses they might not otherwise try.

One of the shining stars in the art of creating cheese accompaniments is Tia Keenan, who designed the original cheese program at New York City's Casellula restaurant. [Editor's note: Casellula was featured in the premier issue of CHEESE CONNOISSEUR.] The condiments Tia constructed provided a "bridge" to better familiarize the diner's palate to the diversity of cheese types. Familiar flavors and aromas in her accompaniments served as a "platform" to the unfamiliar flavors in cheeses and encouraged her guests to taste a cheese they might otherwise avoid. Flavors familiar to her mostly American clientele would, in theory, stir the memory and help create a sense of wonder and

excitement about sampling different cheeses.

She constructed uniquely American accompaniments crafted by food products rarely found elsewhere — fudge, corn, popcorn, caramel, cranberries, maple, molasses, brittle, and pumpkin. Along with these familiar flavors, she recognized the importance of texture balances and contrasts.

How these various foods would play off the cheeses might present challenges to a palate less attuned than Tia's, but she has a knack for recognizing attributes in foods and beverages. When she tasted a cheese that reminded me of a mild, young Wabash Cannonball — a goat's milk cheese with citrus-y hints and a touch of spiciness from Capriole Farm — she immediately thought of red bell pepper as the basis of a food accompaniment. She looks at constructing condiments as a similar exercise to composing jazz music. It's not just "noise." You need to have a clear understanding of melody to construct jazz.

### sweet or savory?

Since cheese is well established as a



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pairing partner with wines, beers, and other beverages, one has to question what the accompaniment might do against those partners, even if it works beautifully with the cheese. Might a sweet condiment override to the fruit in your drink — the natural balancing component to the savory essence of cheese?

One way to get around that potential conflict is to make the accompaniment savory. Some interesting cheese accompaniments have a bit of a savory or salty note. A favorite American platform for cheese is a saltine cracker. And it works fine, not a lot differently from a traditional croccantini.

Another excellent candidate is mustard. The acids in mustard can help break down the delicious fats in cheeses, as well as the proteins, making them more easily digested. Several cooked, pressed Alpine styles of cheeses, such as Uplands Pleasant Ridge Reserve or Thistle Hill Farm Tarentaise, work especially well with mustards. Meanwhile a complementing fruity wine or an ale will likely find less of a conflict with such a savory accompaniment.

Some sweeter condiments are natural balancing partners. Brindisa quince paste (membrillo) from Cataluña, Spain, paired with Roncal, the nutty sheep cheese from Navarre, Spain, is one of my favorite matches. The touch of lemon and dash of sugar in the membrillo play off the olive oil flavor of this magnificent cheese. Brindisa membrillo is an exquisite accompaniment — I've seen people eat more of it than the cheese.

Some sweet accompaniments can find synergy with cheeses and wines. Good dark chocolate and blue cheese are admirable partners — add a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon or Port and you have a ménage à trois. Guffanti's Gorgonzola Piccante is popular at our single-session Chocolate and Cheese class at the Artisanal Cheese Center.

### complex or simple flavors?

Because cheese is relatively complex, a successful accompaniment is likely to have its own layers of flavors. One outstanding condiment is Rick's Picks Smokra — okra pickled with cider vinegar to which smoked paprika, garlic, salt, curry powder, mustard seed, chili flakes, dried chili peppers and cayenne pepper are added. All these flavors balance some

of the deepest flavors of cheeses, and the okra itself provides a palate-refreshing texture. Match Smokra with a big-flavored cheese such as Prattigauer.

Another excellent texture platform with relatively familiar flavors for big-flavored cheeses is Anjou Bakery's Fruit Nut Crostini made with whole wheat flour, golden raisins, almonds, black currants, pecans, sunflower seeds, rolled 7-grain cereal, rye, barley, and a little salt and sugar. Yum! For anyone who might hesitate to taste a perfectly ripened Grayson — Meadow Creek Dairy's thick, buttery, raw cow's milk, washed-rind cheese — the Anjou Crostini will provide the limo ride to get this aromatic cheese passed the lips.

Other accompaniments find cheese pairing success with simplicity. Olives, nuts, fava beans, and berries immediately come to mind. Some Old-World jams and preserves, such as those produced in Portugal, Armenia, and increasingly around the U.S., harmonize with cheeses deliciously. Their subtle attributes are delivered by a very few ingredients: fruit, a bit of sugar, a touch of cinnamon, and/or a little citric acid. These condiments allow the cheeses to stand

out and deliver aromatic harmonics.

Harvest Song preserves from Armenia make exceptional cheese partners: apple and pear preserves with Fiscalini's Clothbound Cheddar; sour cherry with Evora, a raw sheep's milk cheese from Portugal with the flavor of a rustic olive oil; and fig preserves with Gamonedo, a Spanish mixed-milk blue cheese with a sharp smoky flavor. A basic Portuguese tomato jam spread over a wedge of Pecorino delle Balze Volterrane sweetens this full-flavored, aged sheep-milk cheese.

Firmer cheeses actually have a little advantage in pairing with jams, preserves and chutneys. You can easily spoon some directly onto your cheese. However, I usually advise people to try the cheese on its own, perhaps try the accompaniment on its own as well, and then try the two together to see what happens.

As with any blending of ingredients, grouping of dishes, and marriage with beverages, there's more to contemplate than salt/sweet balances. The acidity, bitter notes, umami, aromatics, texture qualities, and overall "heft" of the combined elements play a role. Experimenting with all these components can add pleasurable surprises to your food experiences. **CC**

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