

A black cheese plate is the central focus, featuring a variety of cheeses: a wedge of blue cheese, a slice of Swiss cheese with a prominent hole, a wedge of white cheese with a rind, a slice of soft cheese, and a wedge of hard cheese. Accompanying the cheeses are several walnuts, some whole and some shelled, and a piece of crusty bread. In the upper left corner, a glass of red wine is partially visible. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a tablecloth or countertop.

THE CHEESE PLATE IN SPRING

Making the most of the season's bounty

BY MAX MCCALMAN

There was a time when the cheese selections available in spring offered little to choose from or less than ideal quality. The dearth of top-quality cheeses at this time of year could be attributed to simple seasonality. Northern-hemisphere dairy animals would be well into their lactation cycles so excellent milk would be available for cheese making. Although a few fresh cheeses were made, and made quickly available, the cheeses requiring a little aging simply would not be ready.

A raw-milk cheese crafted in February wouldn't be available until April at the earliest, due to the 60-day minimum aging requirements for raw-milk cheeses. Historically, February is more closely associated with birthing at dairy farms than with cheesemaking. That's not to say cheesemaking grinds to a snail's pace in February, only that with less diversity in the pasture, the milk for cheesemaking might be a bit less flavorful, just might be.

Fortunately, today many fine cheeses, both raw and pasteurized, are available in spring. For aged cheeses this is less of a problem: A cheese requiring six or more months aging usually has a long peak-ripeness phase, so a cheese could be produced in September or May, and either would likely be in great form. The vegetation would be relatively lush both months.

Fresh, young cheeses produced in late February and early March begin to come available a few days or weeks



after they're made. The use of frozen curd to produce young cheeses outside their normal seasons may sound wrong, but many fine such examples exist, especially goat varieties. After all, the demand for fresh, young cheeses is still present in late winter and early spring. Staggered lactation cycles and the increasing use of blended milk cheeses have given us more varieties to choose from in the spring than ever before.

One family of cheeses reliably available in spring is the alpage, aka alpine, variety. Cheeses crafted the previous year will have had enough aging to reach their optimal levels of ripeness; it's almost a guarantee some nice alpage cheeses will be available in spring, a better guarantee than in winter. They arrive in good form and should only improve in proper cellar conditions. Cheeses purchased in winter may be in top form if over a year old but many of them may be a bit young. The younger alpine cheeses can be delicious but for most of them, their fuller flavors require more aging to develop.

Among the disappointing categories in spring are many of the sheep milk cheeses. Staggered lactation means milk is available to produce a pressed sheep cheese that will be four months old in spring, but the milk may not be nearly as rich as that produced when the ewes have more fresh vegetation to eat.

Part of what influences spring cheese preferences is the aura associated with the season, the aura of freshness: fresh flowers and grasses, warming weather, and new beginnings. This makes fresh, young cheeses desirable. I still wait until late spring to select the fresh, young goat cheeses and younger sheep cheeses. I usually skip the aged, pressed sheep-milk cheeses; the thistle-rennet sheep cheeses you see are generally a bit long in the tooth. For the most part, this magnificent family is best left until later in the year.

what to include

Some enterprising cheesemakers are rising to the demand to produce cheeses outside their typical seasons. I'll include any one of several cheeses from Vermont Butter and Cheese Creamery on my early spring cheese plate; they taste as lovely at this time of year as they do in October. They may even seem to be a little more "appropriate" in spring than in the fall. The lovelies from Nettle Meadow are delicious year-round but they seem to be especially attractive in the spring.

Keep in mind that some of the aged cheeses reach their zeniths in the spring, even though the idea of a well-aged Gruyère or Comté may not fit your definition of "new beginnings." I find it hard to imagine any time of year when one of those splendid specimens would not find a spot on my plate. Blue cheeses, such as Stilton, are often associated with winter. Yet Stiltons and most blues are just as delicious in spring as they are in winter. The dedicated blue cheese lover likely won't forgo a blue just because the jonquils are blooming

outside the dining room window.

Part of what shapes cheese preferences any time of the year is what accompaniments are available. When most any fruit or vegetable can be acquired at any date on the calendar, this may be less relevant than it once was, unless, like me, you cling to the traditional seasons and buy only fresh local produce. One fruit available in the early spring is an excellent accompaniment for many cheese types — fresh strawberries. The image of a Triple Crème cheese — such as Brillat-Savarin or Chaource — accompanied by one plump strawberry and a glass of champagne is a romantic classic.

The idea of having the one "perfect" cheese for the day, month, or season has its merits but I always want more. Three is fine; nine is divine. To cover most of the basic categories of table cheeses, I don't see how you can settle for less.

With three only, you might simply choose one cheese type from each of the main dairy species: goat, sheep and cow. Species is only part of what defines cheese types. Other variables, such as rinds, textures, rennet and culture choices, textures, and provenances, have profound implications on the character of a cheese. So with all that's available, why not have a larger selection?

Try including a young goat cheese, a mixed-milk cheese (or two), a bloomy-rind, a pressed sheep-milk cheese, a semi-soft washed-rind, a milled cheese, an alpine style, a Gouda type, and a blue. There may be some crossover among these types but this selection of nine cheeses will cover quite a few bases. Many additional distinct styles, such as pasta filata, flavored and

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smoked, are available in the spring.

This may sound like gluttony but the suggestion is to have a little bit of many types. This is one of the great things about cheese: a little goes a long way. Some people express fear of eating too much cheese. Quite frankly, it's almost impossible to overeat cheese. Cheese brings a feeling of satiety. Variety is more important than quantity, and variety will bring on satiation more quickly than eating just one cheese.

One reason to have an extra cheese or two in the spring is to start getting in shape for bathing suit season. A diet that includes cheese on a daily basis has been shown to have "thinning" effects and provides a little extra CLA (conjugated linoleic acid) to protect skin from increasing exposure to springtime sun. Different cheeses contain differing levels of nutrients.

Another driver of spring cheese success is elevated fat content in many milks. Cheeses crafted during winter when many animals spend more time indoors eating hay can be especially flavorful and satisfying. The wide

diversity of plant species available during the warmer parts of the year contributes to bigger flavors, yet the relatively high fat content of winter milks gives those cheeses available in spring their own special appeal. This makes springtime a bit of a get-in-while-you-can time of year. Fans of "plump" cheeses like Winnimere should know those cheeses' days are numbered in the spring. Enjoy them and be willing to wait until late fall for many of those styles to come around again.

Rogue River Blue is a phenomenal blue cheese to enjoy at this time; less will be available in the summer so this is another get-it-while-you-can cheese during the spring.

what to drink

Wine choices evolve with the change in seasons. Hearty red wines may be perfect in winter, but a light white wine seems more appropriate for spring. The cheeses that pair better with the lighter white wines are, on the whole, also lighter and younger. For example, a young Sauvignon Blanc will find greater synergy with one of the goat cheeses

from Capriole, such as Piper's Pyramide, than it will with a pungent washed-rind cow cheese. Another spring appropriate cheese is Nancy's Hudson Valley Camembert, a better partner for a white Bordeaux than an aged Gouda. If a buttery Chardonnay is your preference, an alpine style such as Uplands Pleasant Ridge can pair beautifully.

Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, or most any well-made white wine you would have in spring should pair well with all these cheeses. The Chardonnay may carry you over to the blues but be careful with the Sauvignon Blanc. Perhaps worth trying but be forewarned.

I recommend you place less emphasis on the pairings though. In more cases than not, cheeses and wines pair well together. But if they don't meld well all the way to the finish, then think of the match as a great guy and a great gal who were simply not destined to be lifelong lovers. Pairing principles can be applied but they shouldn't prevent experimentation. It isn't as though mismatching cheeses and wines is some egregious error. **CC**

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