



CHEESEBOARD NOTES FROM RAY MCVINNIE

When I order cheese as a course in a restaurant or serve it myself, I want the hero of this course to be perfectly cared for cheese. Cheese is a product like estate bottled wine or olive oil which varies slightly depending when it was made. It remains alive and needs on-going attention to keep it in peak condition.

The chef's skill should be shown not by what he can do to the cheese but rather by how he can show the diner that in his restaurant cheese is understood and cared for.

The chef's cooking techniques, which are what is used for most other items on the menu, are irrelevant here. A chef's taste, style and knowledge is shown by perfect cheese service. Choosing, storage and presentation are all crucial to good cheese service and inevitably reflect the chef's or the homecook's expertise.

Cheese is already a dish that only needs simple accompaniments, things which enhance the cheese, otherwise it could be like adding a mixer to a fine red wine, unnecessary and destructive.

## There are two occasions when cheese is served:

### 1. Cheese as part of a multi course meal in the European style.

Either as a course after the main and before the dessert to finish the red wine, or after or instead of, a sweet course when cheese can be chosen as a final rich, but not sweet course. Blue cheeses can be served with sweet wine as they have a stronger flavour and should be eaten last.

This gives two options for accompaniments. If the cheese is there to finish the red wine then no accompaniments should be detrimental to the wine.

Accompaniments containing vinegar, and citrus fruit, grapes and tropical fruit do not go well with wine. Apples, pears and figs however go well with cheese and wine. If the cheese is being served instead of or after dessert, then there is more leeway for accompaniments, as red wine doesn't play a determining role.

2. Cheese as snack, lunch or other light meal. (The English are good at this, eg the ploughman's lunch, which always contains cheese) and also in this case there is more leeway for accompaniments.

In both cases selection of the cheese is important. It needs to be well looked after, in peak condition and ready to eat. Better to leave cheese in as big a piece as possible and let people cut it themselves. Cheese can dry out easily when cut into small pieces. Better to have one great piece of cheese than lots of small pieces.

Choose cheeses from the six basic cheese styles and from different animals if possible, so that you have a balance and variety of colours and textures. Three to five cheeses are plenty for a mixed cheeseboard.

You can choose from fresh cheeses, soft white rinded cheeses (eg Whitestone Lindis Pass Brie), semi soft cheeses (eg, Whitestone Aged Airedale or Livingstone Gold), hard cheeses (eg Whitestone Totara Tasty), blue cheeses (eg Whitestone Windsor Blue) or flavour added cheeses. It is the variety of several pieces of cheese or the quality of just one perfect piece that is the interest on a cheeseboard, anything else present is to enhance the cheese.

Bread is the best accompaniment for a cheeseboard. Good quality, traditionally made breads are best. Walnut and bread containing dried fruit can work well with cheese, but plain breads are often best. Many people like crackers with cheese but they are often too salty and purists believe their crunchy texture detracts from the cheese.

Nuts, except cashews and peanuts, are a great accompaniment to cheese and work also with red wine. Almonds, walnuts and hazelnuts in the shell are usually fresher and sweeter than shelled nuts and cracking nuts at the table adds ceremony to the course.

Fresh fruit should be European varieties, seasonal and served separately. Citrus is too tart and tropical fruit too sweet for cheese.

Dried fruit such as figs, raisins and prunes are a good accompaniment to cheese as are the Spanish-style fruit pastes made from quince or pears.

In Italy they love to drizzle honey over their gorgonzola and this works well on Whitestone Windsor Blue.

Keep pickles and chutneys for when the cheeseboard is being served as snack or meal and these things go best with hard mature cheeses. The vinegar in pickles and chutneys is not good with red wine. If serving cheese in this manner the range of accompaniments is more expanded and can include things like pickled onions, olives, spring onions, rocket leaves, cherry tomatoes or even a simple dressed salad.



What ever you decide to put on your cheeseboard, present it as naturally as possible, with little evidence of handling and do not crowd it. A wooden board is the best looking and easiest thing to cut and serve cheese on, (hence the term cheeseboard).

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