

With red wine better not say cheese

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My colleague Michael Broadbent, who started Christie's wine department 40 years ago last Wednesday and who is an internationally famous wine taster, has for some years maintained that red wine and cheese don't go together. After participating last week in the most scientific wine and cheese matching exercise I have ever undertaken, I have to say that I think he is right. And I am someone who, like so many people, almost routinely chooses cheese after the main course if I want to finish up my red wine with something solid.

I spent a fascinating and very well-organised evening trying all sorts of cheese with different styles of wine and other alcoholic drinks alongside fellow wine writer Jamie Goode and Randolph Hodgson, and William Oglethorpe of Neal's Yard Dairy, the internationally acclaimed biggest cheese in the British cheese world. The organisers, and fellow tasters, were Bronwen Bromberger, an American who also works at Neal's Yard, and Francis Percival, food writer and chef who worked for Rowley Leigh at Kensington Place for four years.

We tasted 12 different cheeses representing the most common types and 14 different drinks, as listed below.

Francis and Bronwen clearly have a great future as adulterators. Before we arrived, they had set to doctoring the innocent light St Tola Irish goat's milk soft cheese with differing doses of salt – unsalted, regular and oversalted – and with monosodium glutamate. The two wine and cheese sleuths had also doctored Australia's paradigm Sauvignon Blanc, with differing amounts of sugar, oak essence, tannin and with glycerin, so our evening started out with four little, similar but different, mounds of white paste and six glasses of variably dosed white wine.

The main purpose of tasting all these with each other was to see how sweetness and saltiness reacted together. The bone dry white was horrid with the undersalted cheese but really rather nice with the very salty one. So, it would be fair to assume that salty cheeses, a very high proportion of cheeses in fact, could go pretty well with white wines.

We then tried the variously salted goat's cheeses with the carefully oaked Sauvignon and found that all of them made the wine taste horribly oily and hot. Similarly, when we tried them with the tannin-added Sauvignon, we found that the saltier the cheese, the more uncomfortably astringent the wine tasted. Since so many reds are oaked and/or tannic and so many cheeses are salty, the hallowed combination of red wine and cheese began to look decidedly ill-advised.

The MSG-doctored cheese was there to give us the sensation of umami, the fifth, super-savoury sense. In the event it turned out that it made the regular Sauvignon taste bitter and some sweetness was needed to cover up this bitterness. So don't try bone dry wines with soy sauce.

It was notable, and perhaps inevitable, during these early exercises that Randolph and William were tasting with a view to making the cheeses look as good as possible, while Jamie and I felt protective about the wines and were looking for combinations that most flattered the wine.

Finally, we were allowed to progress from these smears of lab samples to a plate of eight of the Neal's Yard's finest cheeses in perfect condition, arranged clockwise in the order below. I was pretty anxious for a change from acid chèvre and acid Sauvignon so started to work my way enthusiastically round the plate. Not so fast! We had to stick to scientific method and record our reactions to each cheese with each drink apparently.

Chastened, I had to admit that the Perroche, the light Hereford goat's cheese, went extremely well with the regular Sauvignon Blanc, confirming the status of that classic Loire Valley combination of Sancerre and young crottins of chèvre. The much firmer, crumblier Cothelstone, vaguely reminiscent of Lancashire, went best with the cider and the Sauvignon that had had glycerin added to it to make its texture much rounder and softer. The relatively sweet Deiss Gewurztraminer was too rich for this very fresh cheese.

The cheese discovery for me was the lovely, vaguely Camembert-like Tunworth from Hampshire which was seriously good with the big, bold California Chardonnay, because both cheese and wine were so rich and buttery. The cider worked well with this cheese that smelt of grazing cows too because it seemed so pastoral, but perhaps that was a more impressionistic than gustatory match. The dry red Unison Syrah made the rind taste bitter. The (washed) rind of the

Milleen's was even nastier with any red wine, although the core of this soft, rubbery Irish cheese was delicious with the Gewurztraminer, confirming the Alsace habit of drinking wines like this with their Munster.

Both rich white wines, from California and Alsace, were also good with the other Irish cow's milk cheese, made with vegetable rather than animal rennet, Gubbeen, which fought fiercely with both reds.

Once we got to the two samples of Montgomery cheddar, different ages and different starter cultures, I thought that perhaps the reds might come into their own. I was wrong. Both reds tasted distinctly dull and tough with this vividly tangy, salty cheese but both rich whites were delicious – as was, especially, the very sweet Monbazillac. The cheddar was also pretty good with sake whose high glutamate content had also made it marry well with our MSG cheese sample earlier. The vodka seemed to be cheese-neutral, suggesting that alcoholic strength plays a much less important part than sweetness.

Finally we had worked our way round to the Colston Bassett Stilton and with this very strong, salty blue cheese there was no doubt that sweet wines went best – Monbazillac was the finest match but both the Aubert and Gewurz managed to stand up to it too. The Aubert California Chardonnay was in fact the most versatile wine of the evening.

So all of this suggests to me that rich white wine is much more likely to be a good match for cheese than any red. Indeed the only good red wine and cheese combination that we found was the sweetish, potent, strongly berry-flavoured Turley Zinfandel with the creamy young goat Perroche. It reminded me of nothing more than what we regarded as the greatest treat when staying with my grandmother in the 1950s: HP crackers, Hero Swiss black cherry jam and St Ivel, not one of Neal's Yard's specialities.

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The wine and the cheese

THE WINES

- Shaw & Smith Sauvignon Blanc 2005
Adelaide Hills
(regular, at 50 and 150 g/l sugar and
with added oak, tannin and glycerin)
- Aubert, The Quarry Chardonnay 2004
Sonoma Coast
- Deiss, St Hippolyte Gewurztraminer 2005
Alsace
- Ch Tirecul la Gravière, Cuvée Madame
1999 Monbazillac
- Unison Syrah 2004 Hawkes Bay,
New Zealand
- Turley Wine Cellars, Juvenile Zinfandel
2003 California
- Gospel Green Cider 2004 Sussex
- Hakkaisan, Junmai Ginjo sake, Niigata
Prefecture, Japan
- Stolichnaya vodka
(diluted to 10% alcohol)

THE CHEESES

- St Tola soft goats cheese, Ireland
(undersalted, normal salt, oversalted,
with MSG)
- Perroche soft goats cheese, Hereford
- Cotherstone cow's milk, Durham
- Tunworth soft bloomy white rind cow's
milk, Hampshire
- Milleen's soft washed rind cow's milk,
County Cork
- Gubbeen semi-soft washed rind cow's
milk, County Cork
- Montgomery's cheddar
(starter PM49, Dec 2004 and starter FD,
Mar 2005)
- Colston Bassett Stilton,
Nottinghamshire