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Jazzing Up a Cheese Platter

By CHERYL LU-LIEN TAN

There tends to be a constant at parties of all types and sizes: the cheese platter.

But just because it's ubiquitous doesn't mean it has to be predictable. Laura Werlin, the James Beard Award-winning author of five books on cheese, believes that when there are interesting cheeses at a party, the platter "often plays a starring role."



Heidi Schumann for The Wall Street Journal

Laura Werlin writes about cheese.

"People want to know what they are—they want to taste them, they want to talk about them," she says.

Whether she's expecting six or 60 guests, she'll offer the same number of cheese types—five to seven. "If you have too many types, it's a feast for the eyes, but less so for the stomach because it's confusing," says Ms. Werlin. "Your guests are not going to remember one of them."

When selecting a mix of cheeses, she sometimes uses the traditional rule of offering a range of soft, semi-soft and hard versions. Other times, Ms. Werlin sets out "the same cheese but made by different people, perhaps in different parts of the world." For example, she may offer soft, Brie-like cheeses from the U.S., Australia and England. Or she may set out the same type of cheese made with several different animals' milks.

Ms. Werlin tries to find unusual cheeses that will intrigue her guests. Recently, she's been into "some really exciting cheeses coming in from Switzerland that most people have not heard of yet," such as Scharfe Maxx, a nutty cow's-milk cheese, and Challerhocker, an

Laura Werlin

Author of five books on cheese, the most recent of which was the 2011 'Grilled Cheese, Please!'

Won a James Beard Award for her 2003 book 'The All American Cheese and Wine Book.'

Instructor at The Cheese School of San Francisco.

Her sixth book, 'Mac & Cheese, Please!: 50 Super Cheesy Recipes' will be published in December.

"earthy, buttery cheese that's aged in hay."

Often, Ms. Werlin chooses cheeses from small producers, which can come with nifty stories. A favorite is the Harbison cheese from Jasper Hill Farm in Greensboro, Vt. "It's a very creamy cheese, so creamy, in fact, that they shave spruce bark off their trees on the farm, soak it, and wrap that around each wheel of cheese so the bark girdles the cheese and holds it in,"

she says. "The bark imparts a bit of flavor to the cheese—it's smoky, mustardy and buttery."

Another go-to is the Pleasant Ridge Reserve from Uplands Cheese Company in Dodgeville, Wis. She says the cheese is "made in the spring when the cows are out on pasture, and that's reflected in the golden yellow color and flavor—it's kind of grassy, earthy and a little sweet."

When setting out cheeses, Ms. Werlin likes to present them on two or three surfaces. If the cheeses are crowded on one slab, "when you're trying to cut a particular cheese, your knuckles are going to get into a different cheese," she says. Marble or glass surfaces are better for creamy cheeses, as the "cheese won't seep in or stick to it," she notes.



Heidi Schumann for The Wall Street Journal

Ms. Werlin sets out cheeses on butcher paper, where she writes each one's name.

Sometimes, Ms. Werlin sets out her cheeses on butcher paper, where she writes the name of each one. "This way, you're creating a visual memory for people, and butcher paper is fun because it's rustic and festive." Alternatively, Ms. Werlin may set a cheese menu next to her platter—or photocopy little menus to hand out so guests can write notes and "have a little souvenir."

It's important to put out a different knife for each cheese, so the flavors stay distinct, and to have the right knives. "If you've ever cut a soft cheese and had the cheese stick to the knife, the knife blade is too thick or too wide for that cheese," she says. She likes a skeleton

knife or blade that has cut-out holes. "For a soft cheese, minimize the knife surface," she says.

A knife with a forked tongue at the end will work with a wide variety of cheeses, Ms. Werlin says. For hard cheeses such as Parmigiano, short stubby knives with sharp tips work best for digging out chunks.

Ms. Werlin serves cheeses at room temperature. "If a cheese is too cold, the flavors are muted," she says. If a cheese stands out too long, butter fat beads on its surface, affecting flavor.

Ms. Werlin wraps any leftovers in cheese paper; plastic wrap can impart a plastic flavor to cheese. The next day, she uses leftover cheeses in a grilled-cheese sandwich or tosses them in a food processor with butter and a little wine. The result, she says, is "the ultimate cheese spread."

Recipe: Fromage Fort

From "The New American Cheese" by Laura Werlin.

A catch-all for cheese leftovers, *fromage fort*, or "strong cheese," is a great way to use up small pieces of cheese. In France, the home of *fromage fort*, it is a little more elaborate than simply leftover cheese. Traditionally leftover cheeses were mixed together and then allowed to ferment in a liquid such as milk or vegetable broth. Wine or oil was then added to stabilize the mixture, and herbs, salt and more wine were added to season it. It was often put in a stoneware pot to age, and when it was time to eat it, apparently the word "fort" took on a whole new meaning. *Fromage fort* is still made in France, but usually with just one cheese, which is determined by the region where it is being made. Because of its runny consistency, it is sold by the ladleful.

Ingredients:

1 pound assorted leftover cheeses, at room temperature

¼ cup white wine

3 tablespoons unsalted butter, at room temperature

2 tablespoons fresh herbs (such as thyme, flat-leaf parsley, tarragon or basil; optional)

1 clove garlic (optional)

What to Do:

Remove the rind, hard spots and any mold from the cheese. Cut the soft cheeses into ½-inch cubes, and grate any hard cheeses.

Combine the cheeses, wine, butter, optional herbs and garlic in a food processor and blend until very smooth and creamy, 3 to 5 minutes. Serve immediately or refrigerate for at least 1 hour or up to 5 days to allow the flavors to meld. Makes about 2½ cups.

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