

SAY CHEESE

*Take a World Cheese Tour
with Janet Fletcher*

BY JILLIAN DARA

For Janet Fletcher, dinner isn't complete without an end-of-meal cheese course. The Napa Valley food writer and cheese aficionado became "hooked" on this ritual while studying in Aix-en-Provence for a semester. Fletcher said she saved up enough francs for a meal at a fine dining restaurant and recalled when the cheese trolley came to the table instead of dessert.

"I had never seen such a thing, and I asked the waiter how many I could try. 'As many as you like, Mademoiselle,' he said." To this day, Fletcher and her husband still finish their dinners at home with a bite of cheese.

Fletcher works to share that same eye-opening experience with the attendees of her limited-run cheese class series, World Cheese Tour, held at Winston's Cafe in Napa. "I love turning people on to artisan cheese and sharing what I have learned over the many years that I've been writing



Photo by Douglas Fletcher

about cheese," said Fletcher. "Cheese is a lot like wine in that the more you know about it—the history, geography, process, and people behind it—the more you appreciate it."

Fletcher began this series to share the exceptional wheels she's enjoyed from France, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, the U.K.,

and the U.S. with a new audience. The classes follow a casual format: the small group of attendees gathers for an aperitif and hors d'oeuvre to get to know one another before class. Then, guests take their seats for a tasting as Fletcher guides them through the cheese selections and "helps boost your cheese IQ."

Entering its 11th season, this year's 10-part series began with Desert Island Cheeses in February. During this class, Fletcher showcased several kinds of cheese on her 'GOAT (greatest of all time) list,' which includes "sheep's milk cheeses from the French Pyrenees and the aged cow's milk cheese from the Swiss Alps." As to why Fletcher considers these the greatest of all time? "They're consistent, complex, and often good value, too."

The second theme of 2023 focused on high-altitude cheesemaking, then there was Aged to Perfection and New Arrivals from Europe. Upcoming classes will run

once a month until November and focus on everything from cheese rinds to American west coast cheeses, but Fletcher said she's particularly excited about June's History of Cheese in Seven Slices. "It is my attempt, in 90 minutes, to tell the story of five centuries of cheese through seven wheels that have had lasting significance and paved the way for those to come," she said.

When asked what fascinating tidbits one may glean from her June History of Cheese course, Fletcher said it was discovering how and when milk was transformed into cheese. "Who first figured out how to transform milk into cheese? We'll never know, but it was genius because it made perishable milk into a nutritious food you could transport and store. Over time, cheese-makers have discovered several substances that will coagulate milk, but one of the more interesting ones is cardoon flowers. They contain an enzyme that turns milk into curds. Some tasty Portuguese and



Clochette // Photo by Douglas Fletcher

Spanish cheeses are made that way, with an extract from cardoon flowers."

The August course is another one that Fletcher highly anticipates as she promises an interesting take on pairing cheese with beer. While most believe wine and cheese are the perfect combination, Fletcher explained that some cheeses are hard on wine of all types, but the carbonation in beer is very pleasing with cheese.

"I have never met a cheese for which I couldn't find an appropriate beer. It helps scrub your palate and get it ready for

another bite. But I also think the malty flavors in beer echo the nutty, buttery, faint caramel flavors in many kinds of cheese," Fletcher said. One of her favorite pairings is a Belgian-style saison with a mushroomy, bloomy-rind cheese like Camembert. Saisons have high effervescence and fruity aromas, which she called "the cider of beer and cider and Camembert are a match with deep roots in tradition."

World Cheese Tour classes are for anyone from cheese newcomers to avid enthusiasts. Attendees include wine industry guests who

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want to know more about cheeses that might go with the wines they make or sell, Napa Valley visitors searching for a unique experience, or locals who like cheese and are searching for new ones. One of Fletcher's key objectives through her classes is she hopes guests will start to recognize and appreciate the difference between commodity cheese—the kind found at the supermarket—and artisan cheese, which represents great care and skill.

Visit www.janetfletcher.com to learn more or to sign up for one or more of Janet's monthly World Cheese Tour 2023 classes.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
www.janetfletcher.com