

MELLOW TO MANIC,
BLUE
THE RANGE OF THIS STYLE
FOR
WILL MAKE YOU THINK TWICE
YOU

IT'S ONE OF THE EASIEST DESSERTS on the planet: a wedge of blue cheese, a drizzle of honey and a few toasted hazelnuts scattered around. Pour a sweet wine — maybe Madeira — and watch for the “a-ha” moment. Even guests who usually shun blues will clean their plate.

“People who say they don’t care for blue cheese have only tried one or two, and they’ve done those intense, punch-you-in-the-mouth blues,” says Steve Ehlers of Larry’s Market, a Milwaukee retailer. But the right blue with the right accompaniments can provide one of those peak taste experiences that define successful food and wine matching.

If you are cautious around blues, getting to know the vast lineup a little better will help you find at least a few to like. If you’re already an enthusiast, you’ll be happy to know that new ones arrive all the time, from both domestic and international producers. Mellow to fierce, creamy to crumbly, blues cover such a range of taste profiles that you cannot dismiss the entire category based on tasting just one variety.

The spidery veins throughout the interior of a blue cheese often appear more gray or green than blue. But whatever their hue, they are molds; hard-working fungi that have found a moist place to roost. In your closet, bathroom, or vegetable bin, mold is never a welcome guest, but the molds that wend their way through these cheeses were invited.

Starting With Mistakes

Centuries ago, blue cheeses were probably all mistakes, notes Neville McNaughton, an international cheesemaking consultant based in Missouri. “It doesn’t matter whether it’s the Roquefort story, the Gorgonzola story, or even Stilton, they were all about cracks and defects,” McNaughton says. In the days before cheesemakers fully understood the microbiology of their craft, if a cheese rind cracked or didn’t form properly, air would enter the wheel, activating molds that needed oxygen to grow. McNaughton believes that Stilton, England’s famous blue, probably descends from cheddar breached in this way.

Modern cheesemakers prefer consistency and control, so they inoculate the milk or curds with the mold of their choosing, usually some strain of *Penicillium roqueforti*. The mold slumbers for days or even weeks until the young wheel is pierced, typically with mechanical needles. Provided with oxygen, the mold kicks into gear and begins proliferating in the channels left by the needles and in any other pockets of air. Inspect the outside of a wheel of blue cheese and you may still see the evenly spaced needle marks.

More Veining, More Sharpness

Generally speaking, the more veining in a blue cheese, the more piquant it will be. The interior of Spanish Cabrales can



MOUNTAIN GORGONZOLA

A densely marbled blue, with assertive, yet balanced salty tang.



MONTE ENEBRO

(Mon-te Eh-neb-roh) A close-textured goat's-milk cheese with exterior blue rind.

Lemony when young, more intense and pungent with age.

be almost overrun with blueing, due to months of aging in humid natural caves. One look at that well-marbled paste and you know to expect a peppery bite. Cheeses with less extensive veining, such as Ireland's Cashel Blue or Spain's La Peral, tend to pack less punch. Through their choice of cultures and the aging conditions they provide, cheesemakers influence the eventual degree of sharpness.

If blue cheeses strike you as more salty than other types, give your tastebuds an A. Salt helps keep the aggressive *Penicillium* mold in check, to prevent it from breaking down a wheel's paste, or interior, too quickly. An undersalted blue "will have no keeping quality at all," says McNaughton. Consequently, a Roquefort may contain almost twice as much salt as a cheddar, as a percentage of weight. The task for the cheesemaker is to make a wheel with balanced flavor, so that the cheese seems



OREGONZOLA

Based on Italian Gorgonzola, Oregonzola has some of its cousin's piquant, creamy characteristics.

well seasoned but not too salty. Notice, also, that blue veining rarely extends right up to the rind; that's because the salt concentration is highest near the surface.

Although blue cheeses can theoretically be made with any type of milk, the preponderance are cow's milk cheeses. Fans of sheep's milk cheese have a few options, including the beloved Roquefort and its neighbor, Bleu des Basques, and the rare Beenleigh Blue from the south of England and Crozier Blue from Ireland. American Cheese Society judges have awarded ribbons to a handful of domestic sheep's milk blues in recent years, including Ewe's Blue from Old Chatham Sheepherding Company in New York, Ba Ba Blue from Wisconsin's Carr Valley Cheese, and Big Woods Blue from Shepherd's Way Farm in Minnesota.

New Goat Blues

Blue cheeses from goat's milk are even scarcer, for reasons that probably have more to do with local tradition and farm economies than any technical barriers. In the world of cheese, speculates McNaughton, blue cheeses are luxury goods that take time, painstaking attention, and controlled conditions to perfect. Goat cheeses, historically, have been sustenance prod-

ucts, made on small farms and sold quickly for cash flow. The hard-to-get Harbourne Blue, a small-production cheese from England, proves that goat's milk can produce an exquisite blue wheel. A few new entries from domestic producers — such as Hopelessly Bleu from Pure Luck Farm and Dairy in Texas, Cayuga Blue from Lively Run Goat Dairy in New York, and Echo Mountain Blue, a goat/cow blend from Oregon's Rogue Creamery—suggest that this is a niche to watch. Also worth noting are two unusual goat's milk cheeses with blue-mold growth only on the outside: Spain's Monte Enebro and the classic Blue Log from Westfield Farm in Massachusetts.

At the risk of oversimplifying, the following categories may help guide you at the cheese counter. Unless otherwise noted, these cheeses are all from cow's milk.

STARTER BLUES: The White Zinfandels of the blue cheese world, these cheeses help introduce people to the concept of internal mold but rely primarily on voluptuous texture for their appeal. The hugely popular Cambozola from Germany and Blue Castello from Denmark exemplify the style; they are rich, spreadable, and mild, but short on flavor. Montbriac from France (sometimes labeled as RocheBaron) has a similar suppleness but more aromatic complexity. The double-cream Saint

POINT REYES BLUE

Creamy textured, lightly marbled yet very full flavored. Definite hints of sea salt.

ROQUEFORT

(Rohk-for) The quintessential sheep's milk blue. Sweet flavors, followed by smoke and salt.



Agur from France also belongs in this group, its dreamy texture a delight with fresh pears.

MELLOW BLUES: The cheeses in this group have plenty of character but little of the bite that develops in some blues. They tend to have buttery textures, often nutty aromas, and flavors that are robust without being overpowering. Ireland's Cashel Blue, England's Shropshire Blue, Spain's La Peral (which may contain a small amount of sheep's milk), France's Bleu de Gex and Bleu de Sassenage, and Australia's Roaring Forties blue cheese all qualify. And mellow is surely the operable word for Gorgonzola Dolce, a moist and luscious younger version of traditional Gorgonzola.

CLASSIC BLUES: These widely available blues have long histories and are revered in their homelands. They provide the quality benchmarks for both producers and consumers. Becoming acquainted with these "gold standard" cheeses should be part of any cheese fan's education, as knowing these cheeses lays the foundation for further knowledge. Any list of classics would have to include Gorgonzola, Roquefort (from sheep's milk), Stilton, Fourme d'Ambert, and Bleu d'Auvergne.

TANGY BLUES: Some blue cheeses have a pronounced buttermilk tang that makes them challenging to pair with wine,

though still enjoyable. Their cultured-milk aromas are especially pleasing in salads and salad dressings. Examples include Wisconsin's Buttermilk Blue, Point Reyes Original Blue from California, Iowa's Maytag Blue, and Great Hill Blue from Massachusetts.

PIQUANT BLUES: For those who like blue cheeses with big personalities, Spain provides a few, including Cabrales and Valdeón (both sometimes made with mixed milk) and the spicy Monje. Valdeón is probably the most approachable. Gore-Dawn-Zola from Vermont's Green Mountain Blue Cheese also has that spicy intensity. If you find yourself with a blue that's more piquant than you like, serve it with some butter to cut the sharpness.

NEW BLUES: In the past decade, several American varieties have debuted that deserve an enthusiastic reception. Don't pass up the chance to sample New York's Ewe's Blue (sheep's milk), Ader Käse from Wisconsin, Bayley Hazen Blue from Vermont, or, from Oregon's Rogue Creamery, the superb Rogue River Blue, Crater Lake Blue, and Oregonzola.

VALDEÓN

(Vahl-day-ohn) A fairly powerful and complex blue cheese, yet not harsh or taxing, with a consistent reliable underlying sweetness.



Blues Clues

Because of their high salt content, blue cheeses love a sweet complement. Explore the honey varieties at your local supermarket, farmers' market, or specialty food store; try light citrus-blossom honey with milder blues, dark chestnut honey with more forceful ones. Fruit pastes, such as Spanish *membrillo* (quince paste), help tame the spice in blues, as do fruit chutneys, dried dates, or dried-fruit compotes. Wine-poached pears, brandied prunes, or candied chestnuts make sublime accompaniments. For fresh fruit, choose apples, pears, Asian pears, figs, Fuyu persimmons, or grapes. The dense Spanish fig cakes and Italian panforte sold at some cheese counters provide a welcome sweet counterpoint to salty blues. Toasted hazelnuts, walnuts, almonds, or pecans also enhance a plate focused on blues. Consider folding some toasted nuts into honey to create a condiment that many stores sell at a high price.

Bottles and Blue

Blue cheeses can be among the most challenging for wine. The mold can wipe out the fruit in dry wines as well as produce unpleasant sensations on the palate. Sweet wines make better companions; the sugar balances the cheese's saltiness, and the extra body in dessert wine seems to help it stand up to blue mold.

Try to match the intensity of the wine to the intensity of the cheese. Spicy Roquefort loves the lush richness of Sauternes, but more mellow blues don't call for that much sweetness in the glass. Consider Tawny Port, Rainwater Madeira, off-dry Oloroso or Amontillado sherry, or France's lovely Muscat de Rivesaltes. Surprisingly, dry sparkling wines can also handle the salt and flavor intensity of blues.

Especially with pungent blues, beer may provide the most pleasing match. Look to full-flavored brews with malty notes and the brisk bitterness of hops, such as India Pale Ales, brown ales, and amber ales. Sweet, mellow porters and high-alcohol barley wines can also partner with many blues successfully. Discovering pairings that harmonize on the palate is a task that anyone can tackle with pleasure. ◀



ROARING FORTIES

A rich, smooth-textured blue; buttery and slightly sweet with fruity flavors.