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INSIDE:
Cheese & Whisky



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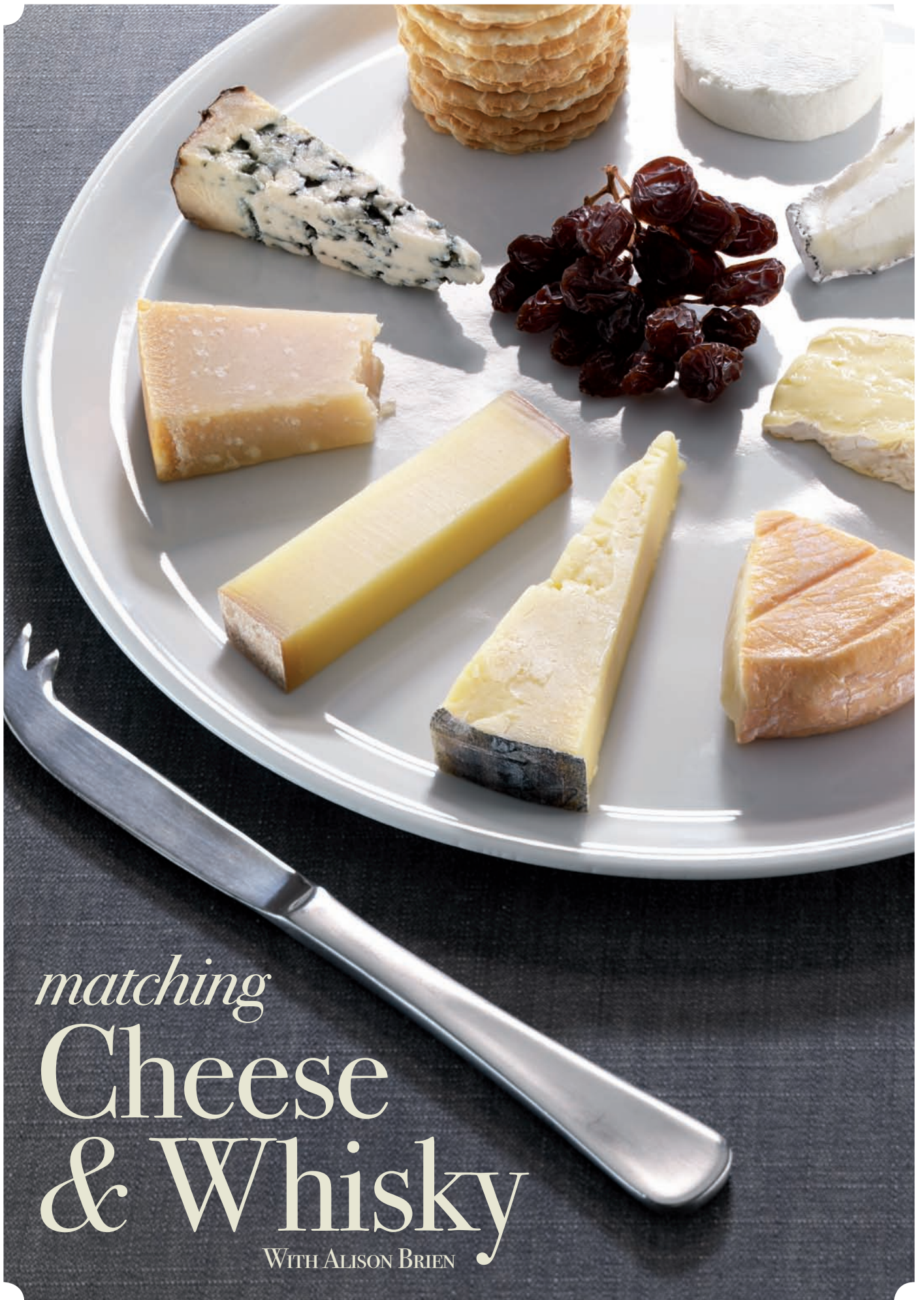


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matching
**Cheese
& Whisky**
WITH ALISON BRIEN

Putting together an array of tastes and flavours to compliment whisky is easy when you know how!



INDULGENCE ISSUE: Matching Cheese & Whisky

Alison Brien is a fromager who runs cheese appreciation sessions via her business Cheese Boardroom. She regularly runs tastings in cheese and whisky matching and here shares her tips on finding the perfect cheese for your favourite dram.

After dinner, some people's thoughts turn to cheese, others to a good dram. But why not have both? For years the focus has been on cheese and wine matching, and all along an even better partnership has been waiting in the wings.

Over the last few years, I've noticed an increased interest in whisky and cheese matching. When I run my tastings, people often turn up 'just for the whisky' with only a passing interest in the cheese. As the evening progresses it is great to see them really getting into the pairings as their eyes are opened to how delicious the two can be together. Most people are pleasantly surprised at how well the combinations marry to provide a flavour sensation that is somehow greater than the sum of the parts.

On contemplation, it's not really surprising that whisky and cheese work well together. The flavours are quite complementary: whiskies exhibit notes of dried fruit, nuts,

citrus, salty crackers and cured meats – all foods that are traditionally served with cheese. Even better, whisky lacks the acidic tannins found in wine that often clash with the acidity naturally present in cheese.

In addition, there are many similarities in their production: both require quality ingredients, a process of fermentation in a large vat, and careful monitoring. During maturation, both require carefully controlled environments and handling by experienced professionals. As they mature and develop, both lose moisture through evaporation – much to the frustration of distillers and cheesemakers everywhere!

What comes out part of the process is part method, part magic. Much like different casks of whisky have their own individual character, each individual cheese is subtly different, influenced by the seasons, the cheesemaker's mood at the time, the maturing conditions and the microbes in the cheese going about their work.

The four steps to a perfect match

When enjoying whisky and cheese together you should, first and foremost, think about the flavour combinations. You want to make sure that the flavours in both are going to complement and enhance each other, not clash or drown each other out. If you are having a light, floral whisky; choose a young, fresh cheese. Enjoying a peat monster? Then pick a cheese with a robust flavour that will meet the whisky head on.

There is a flavour to match every whisky.





INDULGENCE ISSUE: Matching Cheese & Whisky

Second, consider the alcoholic strength of the whisky you are drinking. If it has been bottled at cask strength, your cheese needs the flavour and texture to stand up to that, without being so strong it overpowers the finer flavours in the whisky. Sometimes it can be a fine balance.

Third, consider when you will be enjoying your whisky and cheese matches. If you plan to serve whisky and cheese as an aperitif, you want a combination that will enliven the palate and not be too heavy. If you are settling on the sofa after dinner on a winter's night, then a big peaty style and blue cheese might be in order.

Last, but not least, think about what you enjoy. Taste is a very personal thing – everyone likes different flavours, and different combinations will appeal to some and not to others. When you are first experimenting, go with what you know – don't leap too far out of your comfort zone. If you've never tried them together before, you might be surprised at the delicious result of simply pairing your favourite cheese with your favourite whisky.

Despite my love for a good dram, I am a cheese person at heart so it seemed natural for me to use cheese as a starting point and then suggest whiskies that would go well with them, rather than the other way round. The following is designed to be a quick guide to cheeses and suggested whisky styles to get you on your merry, matching way.



Alison Brien with a great selection of cheese.

Goat's Cheese

Perhaps not the first food that comes to mind when thinking whisky, but goat's cheeses are a delightful partner to delicate, floral whiskies such as Lowlands styles. Look for semi-matured cheeses with a wrinkly mould such as Holy Goat La Luna from Victoria, or Caseificio dell'Alta Langa Brunet from Italy. Some harder styles also work well, such as Garrotxa from Spain or a Tomme de Chevre from France. This is a lovely combination to enjoy before dinner because it creates such a light and refreshing sensation on the palate. On my last trip to Lark Distillery in Tasmania, I bought a bottle of Cask LD105, which has been the perfect partner for goat's cheese.

Perfect Partners

Considering all the whiskies and all the cheeses in the world, one could spend hours analysing potential matches and prescribing specific partnerships, but that can take the fun out of it a bit. [Editor: only hours? I think you could spend a lifetime – and call it a vocation!] When I run my tastings, I do spend quite a lot of time testing various matches but that isn't really practical for the home whisky and cheese enthusiast. I wrote this article to give some guidelines for those of you who want to try matching whisky and cheeses at home. What whisky are you enjoying at the moment, what have you got open? Go to your local cheese shop and buy a few cheeses you think might work well with it and experiment. Perhaps invite your friends for a whisky and cheese night – each person can bring along something and you can mix and match to your heart's (and tastebuds') content!

Bries and Camemberts

A lot of people enjoy Brie and Camembert with classic Highland styles, but for me this combination can be a bit hit and miss. These types of cheeses mature so quickly, and can be very different from day to day, and season to season. It is particularly important to make sure your cheese isn't overripe, as sometimes the ammonia can combine with certain notes in whisky to create an unpleasant metallic hotness in the mouth. If you do want to try this match, find a good French Brie and experiment with whiskies with soft fruit notes and a full, round mouthfeel. If you find unpleasant notes coming through, try just eating the soft interior of the cheese and give the rind a miss.





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Washed Rind Cheeses (a.k.a 'the stinkies')

Washed rind cheeses are so called because they are washed with a brine solution as they mature – this creates their sticky, orange rind and 'smelly socks' aroma. These pungent cheeses are a great match with most whiskies, particularly any with a well developed sweet note – look out for mentions of vanilla, desserts, rich dried fruits or chocolate in the whisky tasting notes. Don't be put off by the stinky cheese aroma – their bite is often quite pleasant compared to their bark. Milawa King River Gold from Victoria, Epoisses from France or Taleggio from Italy are all great cheese choices. These cheeses will also match well with lightly peated and coastal style whiskies.

Cheddars

Full flavoured, matured cheddars are great matches with full flavoured peaty whiskies. Pyengana Cheddar from Tasmania and Alexandrina Black Waxed Cheddar from South Australia are both excellent choices if you are feeling patriotic, otherwise try Quicke's Traditional Extra Mature Cheddar from the UK. In this case, it really is a case of the bigger the whisky, the bigger the cheese – you really need a well developed cheddar tang to offset the rich peat and slight saltiness in the whisky.


Hard Cheeses

There is something divine about a sherried whisky matched with a good quality Parmigiano Reggiano which has been matured for at least 24 months. A heady mix of salty-sweetness, dried fruit and roasted nuts – the perfect aperitif! Simply put out a big wedge of parmigiano and let your guests chisel off bite-size chunks as you serve drinks. Dutch Gouda, French Mimolette (a bit like an aged Edam), and Gruyere are also great partners to any whiskies that have been matured in ex-sherry and/or bourbon casks and have a rich fruity and floral note.

Blue Cheeses

As a general rule, blue cheeses are firm friends with coastal and peaty malts. You could quite easily have an entire tasting session devoted to these partners in crime – there is something about the match of spicy blue mould mingling with salty smoke that just can't be beaten. However, generalisations can be dangerous, and just as whiskies vary in their flavour intensity, so do blue cheeses – some are mild and creamy, and some will just about knock your

socks off. This can be amplified further when you match a peat monster with a big blue cheese – the results can be literally breathtaking. To begin with try Blue de Laqueville from France, or an Italian Gorgonzola Dolce (a milder style) – both cheeses are medium strength and have a nice balance of spiciness and cream. When you feel ready to 'go all the way' try Roquefort (a very strong French sheep's milk blue) with Ardbeg Uigeadail – it lives up the old cliché of 'an iron fist in a velvet glove' and is a match I never grow tired of.

Hopefully this gives you a few ideas to start with, and you may even like to keep a little whisky and cheese diary with notes about your matches. Remember to have fun in your experimentation and don't be shy to ask your local cheesemonger for help and advice when selecting your cheeses. 

HOW ABOUT TRYING IT FOR YOURSELF?



Alison Brien's next public whisky and cheese tasting will be with the Sydney branch of the Scotch Malt Whisky Society on Friday 16 April 2010. Private cheese and whisky (or cheese and wine tastings) can be arranged for groups of 20 or more people.

Visit www.cheeseboardroom.com.au for more details.

