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Myriad wines pair well with Valley Shepherd cheeses

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Staff Writer

Whether you purchase New Jersey artisanal cheeses such as Valley Shepherd, Cherry Grove or Bobolink direct from the dairies, at their farmers' market outlets or sample them in a restaurant, finding the right wine to drink along with the cheese is easier than you might think.

Vieva Grenier, who buys cheeses for Gary's Wine and Marketplace in Bernardsville, says that "there are really no die-hard rules," and the beauty of the sheep's milk Pyrenees-style cheeses made at Valley Shepherd is that "they can go with red or white. The flavor of sheep's milk cheeses tends to be sweet and salty at the same time," so the wine choice can be broad.

Although Gary's no longer stocks Valley Shepherd cheeses, the store carries a wide variety of similar, artisanal cheeses from both Europe and California. French Abbaye de Belloc and Ossau-Iraty, raw-milk cheeses made by shepherds in Pyrenees mountain cooperatives, compare to Valley Shepherd's Oldwick Shepherd and "can go with either a nice Bordeaux blend or something fruity like a Shiraz, but can also go well with a Chardonnay," Grenier says.

John Kafarski, cheese buyer for Stage Left and Catherine Lombardi restaurants in New Brunswick, believes Valley Shepherd's sheep's milk cheeses favorably compare to any of the finest cheeses produced in Europe or California. He would match Oldwick Shepherd, the dairy's first to be introduced to the public, with a dry white wine with high acidity.

"Although it's a relatively hard, nutty cheese, it has a ton of flavor and enough fat to stay on the palate," he says. "It's versatile enough for a Savennieres from the Loire region or a white Syrah from the Rhone Valley."

At The Frog and the Peach in New Brunswick, one local cheese always is among the five offered on the restaurant's cheese plate. Pastry chef Jacqueline Mazza says the current offering is Bobolink's cheddar.

A tasting flight of three cheeses also is available. Jim Mullen, The Frog and Peach's general manager and wine director, likes to pair Bobolink cheddar with "a young, vibrant wine, such as a Pinot Noir or Burgundy — whether (it is) a domestic or imported label."

"Cheddars are great red-wine cheeses," says Grenier, so for cheddars such as Valley Shepherd's Hunterdon or Valley Thunder, or Fiscalini Farms' artisanal bandaged cheddar from California, a raw cow's milk cheese aged for 16 months, she recommends "a big, ripe California Cabernet Sauvignon or Australian Shiraz."

Joe Sparatta, sous chef at Elements in Princeton, believes Valley Shepherd cheeses "resist classical pairings because of their unusual ingredients and variations" from batch to batch. He incorporates Valley Shepherd cheeses in Elements' mushroom crepes and its market salad as well as a cheese course. He would pair Nettlesome with a "late-harvest Riesling."

Soft-textured cheeses, triple-creams typically are served with champagne, which also would work with Shepherd's Cushions from Valley Shepherd, Grenier says. The Camembert-like creaminess, full flavor and lingering finish of Shepherd's Cushions also would pair nicely with a Chardonnay, she says.

To assist customers with wine and cheese choices, Gary's holds tastings noon to 4 p.m. on many

Saturdays.

"The goal is to educate our guests and make them comfortable with pairings so they can find what they enjoy best," Grenier says.

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