

TASTING THE SEASONS IN CHEESES

BY KIRSTIN JACKSON-ELLIS

Like vegetables, fruit, and fresh Simpson's episodes, the artisan goat and sheep dairy world is tied to the seasons. A fresh spring chèvre is higher in fat than a leaner summer cheese, for example, and a winter cheese will exhibit fewer herbal notes than one made in summer. Although the differences in flavor and texture profiles linked to the changing weather are not celebrated with as much exultation as the coming of, say, asparagus or the new spring clothing line, experiencing these subtle variations in the dairy world is one of the joys of the changing seasons.

Seasonal variations in cheeses are the result of two specific factors. First, milk production in goats and sheep is tied to breeding or kidding season. Second, animals left to graze or browse on the natural pastures of small dairy farms change their diet with the earth's cycles: The flavors of the changing vegetation are reflected in the animals' milk and the cheese made from it.

According to Jennifer Bice of Redwood Hill Goat Farm in Sonoma, the aspects of seasonality found in cheeses made with goat's and sheep's milk do not appear in those made



Jennifer Bice teaching a visitor how to milk a goat

from cow's milk, since people long ago bred cows to mate and milk year-round. In spring, when a mother goat or sheep first starts to provide milk for her baby, the milk will have higher butterfat in order to provide more nutrients. In summer, the butterfat goes down and a lighter milk is produced, not only because the kid has grown and doesn't need as much nourishment, but also because the weather changes and the mother eats less and drinks more water. In the fall and early winter, when the kids and lambs are eating more solid foods, the mother produces less milk but the butterfat increases because it is concentrated in less liquid. This is why we see richer, fuller-bodied cheeses in spring and fall.

An animal's diet is also affected by the season. Goats in particular demonstrate more variation in their milk, as they are considered "browsers" rather than "grazers" like sheep or cows. Sheep and cows stay closer to home and nibble on grass. Goats, on the other hand, are the Easy Riders of

READY TO TASTE?

These are some cheeses that I have found to show off the bright flavors of spring and summer exceptionally well:

- Redwood Hill Farms chèvre
- Cypress Goat chèvre
- Redwood Hill Farms crottin, bucheret, and camellia
- Bellwether sheep's milk ricotta
- Robiola 3 Latti, a three-milk blend from the Piemonte region of Italy
- Robiola di Capra, a goat's milk cheese wrapped in cabbage, also from Piemonte





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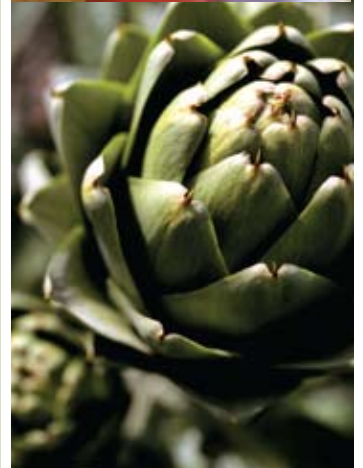
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the milking world. While they eat the usual farm-provided fare of alfalfa, grasses, and grains, they love to roam free and eat wild berries, thistles, and tree bark. Spring means new growth in the field and more thistles. Summer means full-grown vegetation with a wider range of flavors and textures. All of this can be tasted in a cheese, but it is even more noticeable in the grassy, lemony taste of fresh milk from a browsing goat.

WHEN TO EAT

Experiencing the effects of the season is as easy as picking up and tasting a fresh chèvre, sheep's milk ricotta, or French-style natural rind younger cheese, such as *crottin*. The general rule, suggests Bice, is that the cheese will tell the story of the season in which it was made. Redwood Hill's *crottin*, for example, takes five days to prepare and two weeks to age. By the time it hits the store that *crottin* will only be about two weeks old, depending on how long it sat on the shelf before you bought it. With an aged cheese, you would need to know when it was made in order to taste the seasonality. 🌿

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CHÈVRE CHAUD

This recipe was inspired by a trip that my husband and I took two years ago to France. We were in Paris in May, when the trees and flowers were blooming and the city's inhabitants were soaking in the sun at the outdoor tables. We noticed that a hot goat cheese salad (chèvre chaud) could be found on nearly every menu in the city. When we returned home, we constructed a recipe that combined our favorite parts from those salads.

For the croutons:

6 thin slices from a baguette

1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil

Preheat oven to 375°. Place thinly sliced bread on a baking sheet spread with half a tablespoon of olive oil. Flip each slice over in order to evenly distribute oil and drizzle the remaining oil over bread. Lightly season with salt and pepper. Bake for 10–15 minutes or until lightly browned, then set aside.

For the vinaigrette:

1 teaspoon Dijon mustard

1 medium-sized garlic clove, minced

2 tablespoons lemon juice

6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

½ bunch tarragon and/or chervil, leaves picked off and chopped

Mix mustard, garlic, and lemon juice in a small bowl. Slowly add the olive oil to emulsify. Add chopped herbs, salt, and pepper to taste.

For the salad:

7 ounces fresh green beans, washed and trimmed

2 small carrots, washed, peeled, and grated through the large holes of a cheese grater

3 large handfuls of mixed greens

6 ounces Redwood Hill Farms *crottin* goat cheese

Salt and pepper to taste

Niçoise, Picholine, Luque, or mixed olives to taste

Put a medium-sized pot full of water on the stove, salt until it tastes like seawater, and bring to a boil. Add the beans and cook for about five minutes, or until beans are no longer crisp, but still firm. Strain and allow to cool. Lightly dress the green beans and carrots in separate bowls with about a tablespoon each of vinaigrette.

About 7 minutes before you're ready to serve the salad, slice a 1-ounce circle portion of the *crottin* and place on each crouton. Bake until cheese starts to glisten and is hot (5 to 7 minutes). Meanwhile, mix the greens, a pinch of salt, and the vinaigrette, starting with half the remaining vinaigrette and incorporating more as needed to lightly coat the greens.

Place greens on salad plates, top with carrots and green beans, and sprinkle with olives. Top with croutons before serving.

Serves 3

Variations:

Try spreading the baguette slices with an olive tapenade before warming with cheese.

Add crumbled or thinly sliced bacon as a final touch.

Top with a hardboiled egg.