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## Montcabrer captivates with charcoal-coated rind

Janet Fletcher

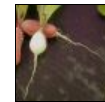
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Montcabrer cheese as seen in San Francisco, California on Wednesday, June 13, 2012. Photo: Craig Lee, Special To The Chronicle / SF

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In my fantasy life, I have Michele Buster's job.

This New York cheese importer travels frequently to Spain and Italy to sniff out the next new and fabulous cheese we've never heard of. I'm sure her job has aggravations, like shipments held up by customs, or producers who can't deliver what they promised, or cheeses ruined in transit, but the sleuthing part sounds like fun.

Montcabrer, an aged Spanish goat cheese, is among the gems exclusive to Buster's company, Forever Cheese. Produced by Josep Cuixart, the same Catalan cheesemaker who devised the lovely Nevat, Montcabrer is a semi-firm, lightly pressed 3-pound wheel matured for two to three months.

Cuixart buys the milk for Montcabrer. The local breed is the Murciana, a brown- to black-skinned goat renowned for its adaptability to hot, dry climates and for the high quality of its milk.

Despite working with pasteurized milk, Cuixart manages to craft a wheel with abundant aroma, compelling texture and a captivating rind. According to Buster, he coats the young wheels with vegetable oil and charcoal, the latter used to neutralize the surface acidity and

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encourage mold to grow.

You will notice the carbon-black ash when you buy a wedge of Montcabrer, but you may also see a riot of white and gray molds on top of the ash and even underneath. This is a good thing. These desirable molds contribute to aroma development and to the gradual transformation of the interior.

Under that fascinating rind is a dark ivory paste with many tiny openings, with a scent reminiscent of bacon and smoke. From the appearance, I anticipated a chalkier quality, but Montcabrer is buttery on the tongue, with a sweetness that makes you want to keep nibbling.

Look for the cheese at Cowgirl Creamery, Cheese Plus and Fatted Calf in San Francisco; Woodlands Market in Kentfield; Pasta Shop in Berkeley and Oakland; Spanish Table in Berkeley and Mill Valley; and Oxbow Cheese Merchant in Napa.

A fruity Zinfandel, not too alcoholic, would be pleasing with Montcabrer. The cheese is too meaty for white wine.

**Next up:** Pecorino di Rocca, an aged sheep's milk cheese from Tuscany.

*Janet Fletcher teaches cheese-appreciation classes and is the author of "Cheese & Wine: A Guide to Selecting, Pairing, and Enjoying" and "The Cheese Course," both from Chronicle Books. Go to [www.janetfletcher.com](http://www.janetfletcher.com) for a schedule. E-mail: [fletcher@foodwriter.com](mailto:fletcher@foodwriter.com)*

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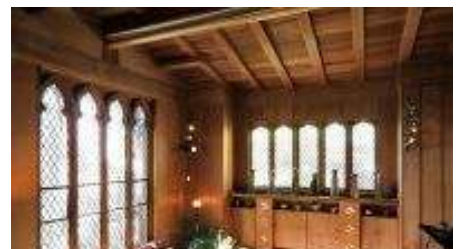
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