

After Manchego

BY SAM GUGINO

Michele Buster started bringing cheese from Spain into the United States 15 years ago, when Spanish cheeses were emerging onto the culinary scene. Since then, Buster, owner of Forever Cheese, has not only observed the evolution of Spanish cheese in this country; she has also been responsible for some of it.

"Spain has really grown up. Before, many of my suppliers worked out of their houses. Now you see factories," says Buster, who imports more than 55 well-known cheeses in addition to a dozen or so small-production, artisanal labels from Spain.

Spain's cheese revolution has even affected Spanish consumers, many of whom had only been familiar with cheese from their own region. "Spain has become less rural and more urban and more cosmopolitan," says Enric Canut, who has held a variety of positions in the Spanish cheese industry over the past 35 years. "Better technology and better transportation have meant a good selection of Spanish cheeses in all [Spanish] supermarkets."

"It's like Spanish wine. In the past 10 to 20 years, the focus has been on improving quality," says Jonathan Harris, of La Tienda (www.latienda.com), an importer and online retailer that has increased its Spanish cheese portfolio from just a few to more than 30. "More and more cheesemakers are also raising their own animals, especially sheep."

Spain does sheep's milk cheeses better than any other country, and Manchego, the sheep's milk cheese from La Mancha, became so popular in the United States that it has almost turned into a commodity on the American market.

But after Manchego, what? "While goat cheese was acceptable in America—thank you, Laura Chenel—somehow the flavor profile of sheep's milk cheese wasn't," Buster says. Manchego was an exception because it was less gamy, or "sheepy," and because as its popularity grew, Manchego was increasingly made by large companies and from pasteurized milk, both of which stripped out some of the cheese's character.

There is still plenty of artisanal Manchego around, as well as other excellent traditional Spanish sheep's milk cheeses such as Roncal, Idiazabal and La Serena. A few high quality, newer, sheep's milk cheeses include Miticana de Oveja, a lip-smacking log from Murcia that is said to intensify in flavor with age, though it's unlikely to last very long. Malvarosa is an earthy, rich and buttery cheese made in Valencia with milk from the rare Guirra sheep.

But the big news is how many first-rate Spanish cheeses are made from goat's milk. "Goat cheese is huge," says Buster, whose portfolio is almost half goat cheese. "Goats are pretty sturdy, so they get along well in a lot of territory, especially the dry, flat land of La Mancha."

Among goat cheeses I obtained from Forever Cheese (www.forevercheese.com), several stood out. Leonora, a bloomy-rind cheese from

Léon, offered three layers: a snow-white, edible rind, followed by an almost liquid second layer, then a wonderfully unctuous center that offers a pleasant goat flavor and a nicely acidic snap. Montealva, a young goat cheese from Andalucía, is dense and creamy, with mild goat tang and a lemony finish. MontCabrer, a 60- to 90-day-old cheese from Catalonia, is coated in charcoal and loaded with sweet, milky flavor, accented by earthy notes.

Catalonia is a region to watch. "I'm impressed with the breadth and depth of what I find there," Buster says. Catalonia makes some excellent



Tempranillo pairs well with goat cheeses from Spain, such as (from left) MontCabrer, Leonora and Montealva.

cow's milk cheeses, including two from Alt Urgell in the Pyrenees: Ermesenda is an earthy, raw milk cheese reminiscent of full-flavored mountain cheeses from France and Switzerland. Castellot is a rich, *tomme*-style cheese with a sharp edge.

Catalonia even produces a buffalo's milk cheese, though the 1,500 water buffalo used to make it were trekked in from Lombardy, Italy. Oriol de Montbrú is made by goat cheese producers in a style similar to Garrotxa, the fine goat cheese of Catalonia. It's mild and earthy, with the kind of milkiness one sees in mozzarella.

Two Spanish red wines and one white were good matches for a variety of Spanish cheeses. The reds—a Garnacha from Catalonia and a Tempranillo from Navarra—were ripe and fruit-forward, with no oak, which made them much more accommodating with cheese than most reds are. Much to my surprise, Albariño was the only Spanish white wine that went well with the cheeses, thanks to its spritzy acidity and peachy fruit.

You too may be surprised, but pleasantly so, when you explore Spanish cheese beyond Manchego.

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