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Soft and spreadable, Sun-dried Tomato and Basil Pesto Mascarpone pairs well with both red and white wines.

WINE & CHEESE

PAULA LAMBERT ON PERFECT PAIRINGS FOR YOUR SPRING GATHERINGS BY ELAINE ROGERS

Even following the mildest of winters, Texans find the lure of spring hard to resist, and we cluster together on patios and decks, enjoying the longer evenings and warming nights.

There may never be a bad season for serving wine and cheese, but renowned artisan cheesemaker Paula Lambert of The Mozzarella Company in Dallas says any time people gather casually for conversation and conviviality, the scene is especially well-suited to that happy combination. And, fortunately, she has plenty of advice on how to do it with flair.

Producing multiple gourmet cheeses to rival those found on her many European travels, Lambert frequently pairs her creamy creations with Texas wines. (Favorite vintages include Fall Creek Vineyards and McPherson Cellars.) A Ft. Worth native, she began her love affair with cheese years ago while living abroad in the post-college years. By 1981, Lambert had returned to the Metroplex but was visiting friends in Italy when she had an epiphany and realized she would have to learn the art of cheese-making herself if she were ever to enjoy the flavorful cheeses at home that she'd grown so accustomed to in Italy and France. She extended her stay to apprentice informally with the owner of a local cheese factory who agreed to teach her his craft, and reported for duty each morning at 6:00 sharp wearing rubber boots and a white cotton cheesemaker's hat.

To say she succeeded at bringing fresh mozzarella home is an understatement. Lambert and The Mozzarella Company have earned numerous awards and culinary recognitions over the years, producing 250,000 pounds a year of a long list of specialty gourmet cheeses from both cow's and goat's milk. Besides conducting a variety of monthly cooking classes at her Dallas factory, she takes a small group of fellow cheese lovers to France twice a year for a week of exploring markets, visiting



Paula Lambert, founder and owner of The Mozzarella Company in Dallas. As author of *The Cheese Lover's Cookbook and Guide*, Lambert has recently finished compiling a whole new list of recipes for her second book, *Cheese Glorious Cheese*, scheduled for release in February 2007.

chateaus and villages, tasting cheeses and cooking with local ingredients. "We stay in a renovated farmhouse and have a wonderful time," Lambert says, noting that the next culinary tour is scheduled for May 30-June 6.

Of course, you don't need a passport or travel budget to jump on the wine and cheese bandwagon. Lambert is a fan of the European cheese course, a culinary habit she says Americans often neglect. In her book, *The Cheese Lover's Cookbook and Guide*, she notes that it was widely believed in France during the 18th century that cheese aided digestion, and it was served after the main course, before dessert. The British interpretation of this is to serve cheese after dessert, usually with a glass of port. Regardless of timing, Lambert says the cheese course is a wonderful venue for home entertaining because there are no rules...or limits. You might opt for one grand cheese offering or an assortment; choosing flavors that either compliment your meal or contrast with it. No rules, no limits and no slaving over a hot stove to produce the ensemble.

Well, okay: Some suggestions if not rules. Lambert recommends serving cheese at room temperature, and an accompaniment of bread or crackers is sensible. Fruits, nuts and even fruit chutneys are welcome additions. And, of course, there's the wine. Lambert says cheeses served shouldn't require a lighter

wine than what you served with dinner, and you might transition from the dinner wine to a sweet dessert wine.

There's also the more tried-and-true American custom of serving wine and cheese as appetizers, and for those inspired to do more than simply place some cheese and crackers on a tray, Lambert has plenty of crowd-pleasing cheese appetizer recipes from which to choose. Following are two cheesy recipes that are sure to impress: Sun-Dried Tomato and Basil Pesto Mascarpone and Savory Herbed Cheesecake.

Savory Herbed Cheesecake

CRUST:

4 ounces (1 cup) Parmigiano-Reggiano, grated
1 cup dried bread crumbs
1/2 teaspoon minced fresh rosemary
5 1/3 tablespoons (1/3 cup) unsalted butter, melted

FILLING:

10 cloves garlic, unpeeled
1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
1 1/2 pounds (3 cups) cream cheese, softened
1 cup (8 ounces) Crème Fraîche or sour cream
3 large eggs
3 tablespoons unbleached all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons minced fresh flat-leaf parsley
1 tablespoon minced fresh chervil
1 tablespoon minced fresh basil
1 tablespoon minced fresh oregano
1 tablespoon minced fresh sage
1/3 cup finely diced red bell pepper
1/3 cup finely diced carrot
freshly ground black pepper to taste
2 large egg whites, at room temperature
additional herbs and/or vegetables for decoration on top (optional)



For the crust, mix all the ingredients together in a small bowl. Press the mixture into the bottom and up the sides of a 9-inch springform pan. Refrigerate while you make the filling.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Place the unpeeled cloves of garlic in a small ramekin or ovenproof dish and drizzle with the olive oil. Bake uncovered for 10-15 minutes or until soft. Remove and set aside. Reduce oven temperature to 325 degrees.

Squeeze the roasted garlic out of the skins and mash or chop the garlic to a puree. Combine the garlic puree with the cream cheese, crème fraîche,

whole eggs, flour and salt in a food processor. Process for two minutes. Add the parsley, chervil, basil, oregano and sage; process for another minute. Pour the cream cheese mixture into a large bowl. Stir in the red pepper and carrot. Season with salt and pepper.

In a clean bowl, beat the egg whites until soft peaks form. Blend a spoonful of egg whites into the cream cheese mixture, then gently fold in the remaining egg whites.

Pour the cheesecake batter into the chilled crust. Line a baking pan with foil and set the springform pan on top of the foil (to catch any drips). Using the additional herbs and vegetables, float a design on top of the batter. (Or, alternatively, you can decorate the cheesecake after it is baked.)

Place the cheesecake in the oven and bake for about 45 minutes. When done, the cake will have risen and the center will be almost set. Turn the oven off and allow the cheesecake to remain in it for another hour (door closed). Don't worry if the cake is cracked. Remove the cheesecake and set it on a rack to cool for 1 1/2 hours.

Remove the outer ring of the springform pan. Loosen the cheesecake from the bottom of the pan, using a knife, and slide onto a serving plate. Serve at room temperature or cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight. Remove two hours before serving. If desired, decorate the top of the cheesecake with herbs and/or vegetables.

CLEVER COMBINATIONS

Personal taste is always a top consideration when you're planning a wine and cheese party, but cheese authority Paula Lambert offers several tips for making sure your selections are well-matched.

Aged mellow cheeses go best with older, more robust wines like Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel

Soft-ripened cheeses like Brie and Camembert are best with full-flavored Chardonnays

Young, milky cheeses pair with delicate wines that are light and fruity, either red or white, like Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir.

Champagne goes well with Brie and also, rich triple-crème cheeses like Brillat-Savarin or Explorateur

Try Australian Shiraz with aged Gouda

Beujolais pairs well with Tomme de Savoie or Banon cheeses

Serve Gruyère with Gewürtztraminer

For more information about serving cheese, visit www.mozzco.com or sign up for classes at The Mozzarella Company. On the docket: Beer & Cheese, April 11 and May 9; Wine & Cheese, April 13 and May 11; Cheesemaking, April 15 and May 13.

Sun-dried Tomato and Basil Pesto Mascarpone

Prepare Savory Tart Crust below

1 pound (2 cups) mascarpone
2 tablespoons finely chopped oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes (or more to taste) plus 1 to 2 oil-packed sun-dried tomato halves, sliced into strips
2 tablespoons Basil Pesto (Lambert's homemade recipe: Mince together and puree: 2 large cloves garlic, peeled; 1/2 cup walnuts; 1/2 teaspoon salt; 2 cups tightly packed fresh basil leaves; 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil. Refrigerate or freeze, with extra olive oil drizzle on top to retain color.)
4 ounces Texas Basil Caciotta or substitute with another mild cheese like low-moisture mozzarella or Monterey Jack
1/4 cup toasted pine nuts for garnish
fresh herb sprigs for garnish (optional)
crackers, plain water biscuits or toasted slices of baguette for serving

Divide the mascarpone in half and place in two bowls. Stir in the finely chopped sun-dried tomatoes into one bowl and the pesto into the other. Using a cheese plane or wire cheese cutter, thinly slice the caciotta. Line a small, two-cup bowl with plastic wrap, allowing excess to extend over sides. Arrange the strips of sun-dried tomato in a pattern on the bottom, then gently spoon the tomato or pesto mascarpone into the mold to make a

one-inch layer. Place a few slices of cheese over the mascarpone and gently press down to evenly distribute the mascarpone underneath. Repeat the procedure, alternating the two colors of the mascarpone, with cheese slices in between. Top the last layer with the remaining caciotta and gently press down to compress the layers. Bring the sides of the plastic wrap up and cover the top. Press again and refrigerate for several hours.

About 30 minutes before serving, spread open the plastic wrap and invert the torta onto a serving platter, removing the mold. Peel away plastic wrap carefully and garnish with pine nuts and herb sprigs. Serve at room temperature with crackers, biscuits or toasted French bread.

