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Raclette: Fondue minus the clichés and '70s flashbacks

By Michele Kayal
The Associated Press

When Cowgirl Creamery breaks out the raclette on weekends in San Francisco's Ferry Building Market-place, people float into the store almost trancelike.

“They smell that aroma coming down the hall in the ferry building and they're drawn to it like a cartoon,” Sue Conley, co-founder of the San Francisco-based cheese company that also has a store in D.C., says of raclette — the name of a cheese, as well as a dish and the machine used to make it.

Which is surprisingly unhelpful. What is raclette? Consider it a more sophisticated answer to fondue.

Raclette — which derives from the French word meaning “to scrape” — involves melting the surface of a wheel of semisoft raclette cheese, then scraping the gooey part onto boiled potatoes and other accompaniments. A tradition of the Swiss Alps, raclette is still little-known in the United States. But that may be changing.

The pungent, washed-rind cheese has been made in Switzerland for centuries in the canton of Valais. Its most distinctive feature is that it becomes creamy and smooth when melted. The Swiss eat it as a meal, accompanied by boiled potatoes, cornichons and pearl onions, with liberal drafts of white wine or tea. Raclette also makes great street

food, served on a slab of bread.

In the United States, it's hard to find outside high-end cheese shops, supermarkets such as Whole Foods Market and the occasional very, very cool party. Shops such as Cowgirl Creamery sell and serve raclette. Murray's Cheese in New York also is experimenting with it.

Raclette should naturally appeal to palates weaned on grilled cheese. But a number of obstacles have slowed its rise. Raclette traditionally has been imported, which can make it both expensive and hard to find. While most raclette still is imported, a number of American cheese makers have begun producing it.

Emmi Roth USA, the American arm of a large Swiss cheese maker, has been making small amounts of raclette for about 20 years. Leelanau Cheese Co. in Michigan began crafting handmade raclette in 1995. And last winter, Spring Brook Farm in Vermont also began offering raclette. While that means there is more of it is available, getting the word out is another story.

“Even the imported Swiss and French raclette aren't really marketed and there are only a few producers in the U.S. making it,” says Nora Weiser, executive director of the American Cheese Society, based in Denver. “It's a matter of awareness in many cases. If awareness is raised and more people try it, I think people will get into it.”

The Vine Guy » **Scott Greenberg**

Sparklers for New Year's Eve

During a recent trip, I was reading an interesting article about Champagne in the in-flight magazine when a particular statistic caught my attention. The author noted that 80 percent of Champagne sales occur in the fourth quarter of each year. This is due in part that consumers purchase more bottles of sparkling wines and Champagne to celebrate the holiday season with than they do throughout the rest of the year.

Unfortunately, other than to mark notable occasions with the festive pop of the cork, sparkling wines seem to go mostly unnoticed. I have repeatedly advocated for more broad consumption of sparkling wines and Champagnes in this column, noting that they are extremely versatile and pair well with an assortment of cuisines.

Since just about every wine-growing region on the planet produces some version of sparkling wine, there must be something to it. Here are a few sparkling wines from around the world that you should definitely consider making a resolution to enjoy this New Year's Eve and throughout the year to come. Retail prices are approximate.

I have been a fan of Georgian sparkling wines since a friend introduced me to the Bagrationi winery sev-

eral years ago. The nonvintage **Bagrationi 1882 Reserve Brut (\$26)** from Tbilisi, Georgia, is made from a blend of chinebuli, mtsvane, tsitska and kakhur grapes that was harvested and sorted by hand, then produced in the traditional Methode Champenoise (the method used in Champagne). Aromas of ripe apricot and white nectarine combine with well-balanced flavors of apple, pear, peach and apricot that are delivered across the palate by delicate bubbles. **QPR 9**



Not all sparkling wines produced in France are Champagne. The Loire Valley is home to the nonvintage **Chateau Gaudrelle Cremant de Loire (\$18)**. This sparkler is made in the Methode Champenoise from a unique blend of 50 percent chenin blanc and 50 percent chardonnay. The aromas of hazelnuts and pear integrate beautifully with the flavors of peach, dried apricot and butter toast that feel rich and full in the mouth. There is just a touch of roasted almonds that intertwine with citrus-based acidity. **QPR 9**

During a recent dinner at a restaurant, the sommelier brought a round of sparkling wine to the table to whet our appetites. I was shocked that the wine was actually a Cava from Spain, since I am generally not a huge fan. But this was not just any

Cava, it was a vintage Cava. This little lesson in humility pushed me to explore the **2009 Naveran Dama Cava (\$15)**. This predominately chardonnay-based wine sports a bouquet of honeysuckle and green melon on the nose followed by flavors of crisp apples and pear notes up front. The tight bubbles carry hints of baked bread and clove on the fresh finish. **QPR 9.5**

No matter how many times I tell my friends that New Mexico — yes, New Mexico — makes a delicious, value-oriented sparkling wine, I still have to actually pour the nonvintage **Gruet Blanc de Noirs (\$15)** to convince them. This wine is a white wine made from pinot noir grapes. Aromas of strawberry and rose petals dominate the nose while flavors of strawberry, ripe apricots and baked bread glide over the tongue on a crisp frame. The bright finish delivers notes of toasty oak and vanilla. **QPR 9**

A fun and delicious sparkler is the nonvintage **La Tordera Prosecco Brut (\$20)** from Vento, Italy. Made from the prosecco grape, this straw gold white wine is fermented on the lees in stainless steel tanks at cool temperatures and carbonated via the Charmat Methode (carbonation is introduced after vinification). Scents of melon and citrus are found on the nose while flavors of green apple, nectarine and honeydew melon are carried across the palate on medium-size bubbles. Just a touch of ever-so-slight sweetness gives the wine good depth. **QPR 9.5**

Note: QPR is a rating system that compares the quality a wine delivers relative to the price. A QPR of 10 is considered an excellent value.



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