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The 12 days of Christmas cheese

As we enter the entertainment zone, Kris Lloyd has some helpful ideas for making cheese the centre of your festive table.

The weather is warming, time to up the ante on entertaining. With Christmas just around the corner, the parties are already starting. I love this time of year, catching up with friends and colleagues to reflect on the year gone by and I am pleased to say that cheese features at most of these gatherings, as it should.

But sometimes working out the best ways to serve cheese in summer can be a challenge, so here are my 12 tips for Christmas and holiday season cheese plates:

One – We catch up with a group of old friends for breakfast every Christmas morning, and this year is my turn to be host. A favourite I will be serving is homemade mini pikelets (made the day before). I like Marg Fulton's recipe, or you can even buy baby Golden pikelets. Top with Harris Smokehouse smoked salmon and a dollop of Woodside fresh goat curd, sprinkle fresh finely chopped dill on top and add a couple of Australian Caper Company baby capers. All local produce, simple, easy and elegant with a glass of Champagne.

Two – Another breakfast dish, again simple and perfect with Champagne. One or two Woodside Edith (choose firm younger cheeses) cut into pieces as thin as possible. Once cut, cover with wrap and place in the fridge. Take two to three Packham pears (in season), wash and cut thin slices but thick enough for people to be able to hold in their hand rather than using a cracker. Place a piece of Edith on top of the pear. Finish with a small piece of Buzz honeycomb and a few toasted pine nuts. Assemble just before serving to avoid the pear discolouring. Everyone loves this and it is light on carbs. I think this means you can have several.

Three – I am a big fan of serving one cheese on a cheese board. Choose a cheese that will be ripe when you want to serve it. Determine this by feeling, smelling and, if possible, tasting the cheese. There is nothing more disappointing than serving up a Brie or Camembert that is chalky and bland. Generally with a Brie or Camembert the closer it is to the best before date, the more likely you have a winner. If serving one cheese, choose a generous portion. Cheeses that fly solo on a cheese plate well are Brie, Camembert, Comte, Triple Cream (superb with Champagne) and a good cloth wrapped Cheddar. Given your cheese offering will be simple, splash out on some accompaniments such as chutneys, jellies, jams, pastes, nuts, baby vegetables and seasonal fresh fruit.

Four – Temperature can make or break your culinary experience. I set timers to remind me to take cheese out of the fridge to allow a generous rest in a cool pantry or room. The length to rest the cheese will depend on the size and thickness of the cheese. A typical Camembert will need about 40 minutes on a 20 degree day, a 400g wedge of Comte which is dense in texture about 50 minutes to an hour. I also like white wine served just off the chill. A 10 to 15 minute period out of the fridge delivers a far more rounded, full bouquet. Obviously you need to take the weather into account and adjust your resting times accordingly.

Five – If you have bought a large wheel of cheese and it is unlikely you will use it all, cut a wedge and return the remainder to the fridge rather than have the whole wheel sitting out for hours. You can always top up if it disappears. It is safer and the cheese will maintain its integrity. Avoid leaving cheese sitting out for hours and hours and then returning it to the fridge.

Six – Salads play a major role on the Christmas buffet. Try baby beetroot boiled with a little vinegar and sugar until tender, cool and thinly slice. Arrange on a platter, squeeze a blood orange over, add some roasted walnuts and crumble soft goat milk chevre – the more the better! Finish with baby herbs, such as basil or flat leaf parsley, sea salt to taste and a generous amount of olive oil. Looks smart, tastes great.

Seven – Try goat curd with your roast potatoes if you are having a hot Christmas lunch or Woodside Tapas which is goat curd infused with organic garlic and pepper. Goat curd – the sophisticated sour cream.

Eight – When cutting cheese wedges from larger wheels I like to scald the knife with boiling water. This prevents any contamination occurring.

Nine – If you are buying a few wheels of

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cheese to take away with you, always try to keep the original wrapper. Cheese paper is designed especially for cheese and allows it to breathe and not become sweaty. If the cheese paper is not available, wax paper can be used. Store cheese in drawer compartments, which are the warmest and moistest part of the fridge, to avoid the cheese drying out. Depending on your fridge you may also need to put the cheese in a plastic container.

Ten – Cheese is a great food to share. It can be as simple or as complicated as you want it to be. Try some of these ideas and mix and match the different styles. My Aussie picks are Strezlecki Blue, Alexandrina Aged Cheddar, Milawa Gold washed rind, La Casa del Formaggio fresh Ricotta, Woodside Edith, Island Pure Haloumi, Heidi Farm Raclette, Shaw River Buffalo Mozzarella and Pyengana Cloth Bound Cheddar.

Eleven – I recommend buying smaller quantities of cheese more often to avoid drying out. The various Farmers Markets around South Australia are the perfect place to buy cheese and other local produce for the Christmas table. Make sure you talk to your cheesemonger to buy the perfect cheese for your occasion, letting them know when you plan to use it.

Twelve – Cheese works with beverages other than wine. Try Champagne, beer, cider, single malt whiskey and even grappa. Have fun with the wonderful selection of cheeses available to us here in South Australia, experiment with some you may not have tried before, share and enjoy

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