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A CLOSER LOOK AT VERMOUTH & CHEESE PAIRING

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Serving wine and cheese before dinner is an oh-so-American tradition that befuddles the more European palate. Cheese can be quite filling, especially piled high in all-American fashion, and wine can overpower the pre-dinner palate, and often bulldoze the cheese as well.

Luckily there's vermouth, the aromatized wine—full of flavors of herbs, bark, roots—bitter, sweet, citrusy botanicals that perk up the flagging appetite.

Vermouth is an aperitif (from the Latin word for "open") made bitter with botanical infusions, made sweet and boozy with the introduction of brandy or other neutral spirits to up the alcohol a notch over table wine level.

Vermouths vary widely by style, from the "dry" white familiar from Martinis and cooking to the less dry bianco/blanc style, to the "sweet" reds that are well known for mixing in Manhattans. They come from France (Dolin is a great one, or try the classic Noilly Prat), Italy (also known as

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Torino-style, named for Italy's historic vermouth hub, like Carpano, Starlino, and Contratto), Spain (La Pivón, Axa, Yzaguirre—we also tried some tasty La Copa vermouths made from sherry), or the good old USA (Lo-fi, Uncouth, Vya, Oso de Oro). Even Japan has entered the burgeoning vermouth race with Oka Kura Bermutto made from sake!

Professional and home bartenders are embracing the vermouth-as-aperitif trend. "There was a time during my career as a bartender where I thought vermouth was only mean for cocktails – sweet for Manhattans and dry for Martinis," says Fatima Butler, Bartender and Founder/CEO of Rooted in Hospitality. "I was so wrong. Their herbal flavors make them so perfect on their own. They're great with a twist of lemon and also work on ice with soda."

Butler also noted the increasing popularity of vermouth in the US. According to a report from Vine Pair, interest in vermouth has continued to rise in the wine category.

Recently, we conducted a (very fun) tasting of a wide range of vermouths with an array of cheese styles. On the beverage side, we also included wine-based aperitifs in our cheese tasting session. Why? Because their citrus-y, earthy, herbal aromatics are just so darn fun with cheese., and they align with the vermouth family so closely. Our findings did not yield precise pairings, as much as informal recommendations.

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La Pivón Rojo Vermouth from Madrid showed herbal and floral, with a big rose petal aroma, and worked very nicely with grassy Gruyere. We suspect Manchego and other aged cheeses would also do nicely with this beverage.

Overall, we highly recommend an exploration of the bitter, fruity, saline, and herbal characters of the aperitif wine world matched with the creamy, nutty, grassy, and lactic flavors found in cheese. These non-traditional partnerships will make a fun evening of aromatic adventure for your next gathering. Start with your local vermouth, perhaps or a bottle of aperitif from your favorite region of Europe, build a cheese board (plus some charcuterie never hurts) and enjoy.

LA PIVÓN / ROJO VERMOUTH