



Tasting a sense of place in French chèvre: Salad with Baked Goat Cheese

by TERRY B on MAY 7, 2014

Disks of Crottin, a classic French goat cheese, are baked on buttery toasts, then placed atop a simple salad of mixed greens and Dijon mustard vinaigrette to produce a classic bistro dish. Recipe below.



Terroir, the idea that a "sense of place" flavors agricultural products, is most closely associated with wines. But increasingly, the term is being used with coffee, tea, chocolate, hops and, germane to this story, cheese.

We were recently asked to sample a number of French chèvres, cheeses made from goat's milk, each produced in a different region. They beautifully illustrated for us just how deeply place is ingrained into French agriculture. And how complex the notion of terroir can be.

Terroir comes from the French word *terre*, land, leading some to think it refers only to the earth or dirt: soil rich in minerals produces flinty wines, for instance. But terroir encompasses geology, geography, climate and even topography. The sense of place created by all these factors is so important that, since the 1930s, the French have regulated hundreds of wines and scores of cheeses with their Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) system. It translates to controlled area of production. Champagne, for example, may only be called champagne if it is produced from grapes grown in a specific region of France, using traditional methods. As the European Union has adopted similar standards, French wine and cheese makers are switching to the EU's Appellation d'Origine Protégée (AOP) system—protected area of production. Fourteen goat cheese varieties are AOPs, produced in very specific regions, often based around a town or village.

Location has a very direct bearing on the character of the chèvre produced there. Goats that graze on the lush grasses of the Loire Valley, for instance, produce rich cheeses with a grassy note. In the south of France, where lavender and thyme make up part of the goats' diets, those flavors come through in the cheese.

Goat cheese has been made in France for centuries, at least since Gallo-Roman times. In the middle ages, chèvre served as bartering currency. As with any traditional food, each region has developed its own styles of cheeses, sometimes varying from town to town, a kind of cultural terroir. Besides differences in flavor, the cheeses are molded in distinctive shapes, including logs, disks, cylinders and even bells and pyramids. These shapes may denote both flavor—shape can affect ripening time and process, flavor and texture—and where the cheese was made.



Photo credit: The Original Cheese website

Some chèvres are made to be eaten fresh. Others are aged from as little as a week to up to 12 weeks or considerably longer. The flavor, the texture and the color all change as the cheese matures.

Here in the US, we're relative newcomers to goat cheese—I'm sure many regular readers saw the subject of this post and thought eh, I'll check back next week. But increasingly, American cheese lovers are embracing the mild tanginess of goat cheeses. And American chèvre producers are adopting traditional French production methods.

For this recipe, I chose a Crottin, a soft-aged cheese with a natural, wrinkled rind. The most famous of this variety, Crottin de Chavignol, has been produced in the village of Chavignol in the Loire Valley since the 16th century. Crottin is molded into round puck-shaped disks and ripened at least ten days and has a mild, salty, nutty taste. This famous chèvre is the basis of a classic French dish, a simple green salad topped with baked cheese.

There are numerous variations on this salad, some in which the cheese is coated in bread crumbs, others that feature bacon. I kept it simple, wanting to let the cheese be the star. If you can't find Crottin, try Le Chevre, Chabichou du Poitou, Bucheron, Ste. Maure or some other French chèvre. And failing that, any log of domestic chèvre you can find.

Salad with Baked Goat Cheese

Serves 2

1 generous tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
1/2 generous teaspoon Dijon mustard
1/2 generous teaspoon balsamic vinegar
1 teaspoon minced shallot
salt and freshly ground black pepper
4 cups mesclun or other mixed salad greens (see Kitchen Notes)
2 1/2-inch thick slices baguette or country bread (see Kitchen Notes)
1 tablespoon unsalted butter, softened
1 3-1/2-ounce (or so) round of goat cheese, preferably Crottin

This recipe comes together quickly. Have your salad dressing made and your mixed greens already in the bowl before toasting the bread or baking the cheese. Besides, salads are best when the greens aren't still cold from the fridge.

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Combine the olive oil, Dijon mustard, vinegar and shallot in a small bowl. Season with salt and pepper and whisk together. Set aside.

Butter one side of each slice of bread and place on a baking sheet lined with foil, parchment paper or a Silpat baking mat. Bake until golden, about 6 minutes. While bread is toasting, halve the Crottin horizontally (keeping it refrigerated until you're ready to slice it makes doing so easier). Top each slice of toasted bread with a round of cheese, cut side up—the rind will help it maintain its shape, at least somewhat. Return to oven and bake until cheese is soft and warm, about 8 minutes.

Meanwhile, whisk the salad dressing again and dress salad. Divide between serving plates. Top each with a toast and baked cheese. Serve.

Kitchen Notes

Mixing up the greens. Any greens will do, but I would go with something tender, like a spring mix, mesclun or butter lettuce. Some versions called for frisée. I like it as part of the mix here, but think it's a little wiry and assertive on its own.

Choosing the right bread. Don't go all chewy and multigrain or pumpernickel here. It will take over. Your best choice is some kind of rustic white bread or baguette. With the baguette, make sure it's slightly larger than the cheese round, or you'll have cheese running all over the baking sheet. And the good-sized baguette I found shrank slightly as it toasted, just so you know.

Find out more about French chèvre. Visit the Goat Cheeses of France website. And if you can't find French chèvre locally, try Murray's Cheese in New York. They shipped our cheeses carefully and answered questions for me.