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# Vive la France!

## Traditional French Goat Cheeses Meet Their Match With Unique Condiments

STORY BY TIA KEENAN PHOTOS BY GEERT TEUWEN

**G**REAT PAIRINGS BEGIN WITH GREAT CHEESE. Great cheese sings, in both hushed and booming notes, enchanting us with its aesthetic, texture and flavor. A condiment plays a supporting role — it can help reveal what is already there, enhancing or adorning an existing characteristic. Occasionally a pairing makes something new and different, a third taste — a flavor that isn't the cheese and isn't the condiment but what emerges from the union of the two.

Very few categories of cheese are more iconic than French goat cheeses. With hundreds of years of tradition, 3,000 goat cheese producers, 60 goat cheese dairies and a network of affineurs aging cheeses to optimum ripeness, it's no surprise French goat cheese continues to set the bar for goat cheese-making globally.

The people of the Mediterranean have been making goat cheese since 10,000 BC. By the time the Roman Empire hit its stride, goat cheese was a reliable source of protein and

entrenched in Mediterranean culture and cuisine. By the Middle Ages, goat cheese served as a bartering currency and stocks of matured cheeses were mentioned in deeds. Cheese was recognized as an essential and valuable part of life and society. As industrialization and urbanization took hold, cheeses traditionally enjoyed locally in the countryside began to make their way to urban markets, where they were sold for cash or bartered for other goods. Affineurs would buy stocks of cheese, transport them to caves for aging and then sell them in Paris.

It's this heritage and precise tradition that compels me to seek interesting pairings for French goat cheese. We think we know everything about them — and that's why I enjoy playing with them, seeking a side of them I haven't before, to experience them in a different way, unlearning in order to learn again.

So what makes a great pairing? Much like the flavor experience itself, there's subjectivity to what makes a pairing appealing. Before you begin, here are some important points to keep in mind:





#### PAIRING PETIT BILLY

Petit Billy is a fun-loving younger brother, fresh-faced and up for anything. A fresh, mild cheese from Brittany, one could view Petit Billy as a blank canvas ripe for varied applications. By pairing Petit Billy with Lavender Fudge I've considered both the mimicry and contrasting approaches. Using textural protectionist mimicry, both the cheese and the condiment are rich, dense, and creamy. However, I also took some license by adding a floral flavor that contrasts nicely with the bright, high-acid, lemony notes of the cheese.

### LAVENDER FUDGE PAIRED WITH PETIT BILLY

This no-cook recipe is easily adaptable to other floral flavors, including rosewater, orange blossom and lemongrass, to name a few. When working with botanicals, it's best to use a gentle hand. You can always add more — but you can't take it away! A couple drops of essential oil or floral water is usually enough for a standard recipe. When using essential oils, floral waters, and flowers for cooking, confirm they're food grade by checking the label and/or purchasing from a source that specifically sells food-grade botanicals. Petit Billy with Lavender Fudge blends well with dry sparkling wine such as Crémant d'Alsace, which provides a refreshing, uplifting counterpoint to the

richness of the cheese and fudge combination.

	Vegetable oil
$\frac{1}{2}$	lb cream cheese, at room temperature
1	Tbsp lemon zest
1	vanilla bean, split and paste removed
6-7	drops lavender essential oil
$\frac{1}{4}$	tsp sea salt
1	lb white chocolate, chopped
1	cup sifted confectioner's sugar
$\frac{1}{4}$	cup lavender flowers

- Rub a light layer of vegetable oil onto the bottom and sides of an 8 x 8 baking pan. Line the pan with plastic wrap — the oil will help the wrap stick to the pan — and set aside.
- Place cream cheese, lemon zest, vanilla,

lavender essential oil and sea salt in a bowl attached to a stand mixer and beat for a minute or two until thoroughly blended. Set aside.

- In a glass bowl set over simmering water or on top of a double boiler, melt the white chocolate, stirring constantly so that it melts evenly. Turn the mixer back on and pour the melted white chocolate into the cream cheese mixture. With the mixer still running, add the confectioner's sugar and blend until smooth.
- Spread the fudge into the prepared pan and smooth out using an offset spatula. Sprinkle with the lavender flowers and chill in the refrigerator overnight. Remove the fudge from the pan by lifting the plastic wrap. Cut fudge into 1-inch pieces. Serve chilled. Yields approximately 20 pieces of fudge.

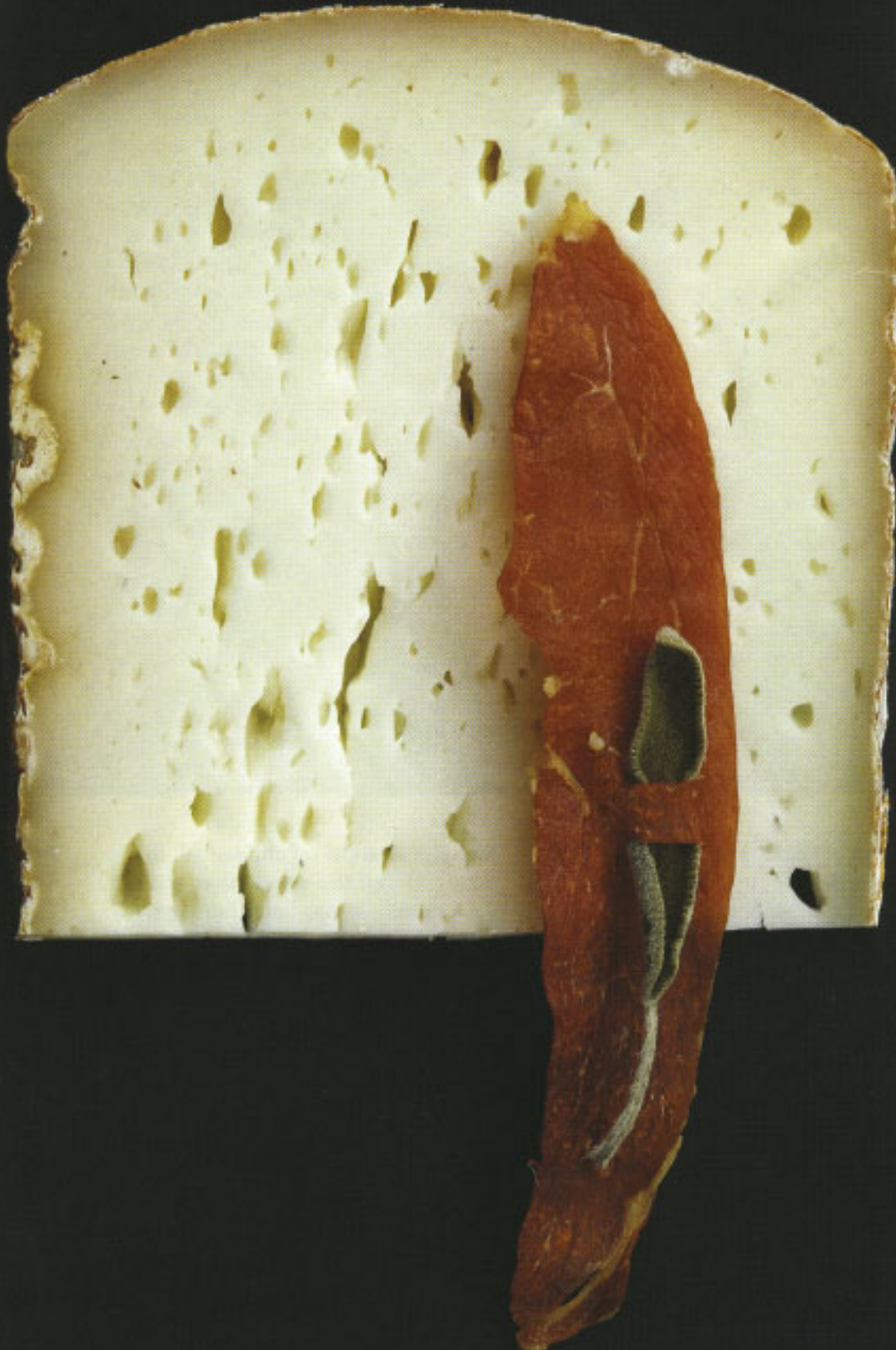
### Always Respect The Cheese

- Respect the cheese. Cheese is the result of the hard work of at least two species, if not more. It's a finished product; any ornamentation should first be respectful of that. If the condiment is all you can taste in your pairing, you've trounced the cheese and should be summarily punished.
- Consider context: the who, what and where of the experience. This helps gauge the approach and how daring one should be. If you're serving pairings to guests who

have limited experience with cheese, don't approach your work like performance art, experimental and confrontational. Work like an impressionist, in soft flavors and good light. When pairing, always consider your guests.

- Texture is so often neglected when examining how we experience flavor, which is surprising considering how much influence it has. We cannot separate texture from flavor. Consider texture when deciding how to pair a cheese and condiment.





## HAM AND SAGE CHIPS PAIRED WITH TOMME DE CHÈVRE BETHMALE

Ham and Sage Chips are a high-impact condiment that's quick and easy to make. They're visually and texturally intriguing and a fun addition to a cheeseboard. The chips are salty and intense, so 2-3 chips per person is a sufficient serving. You can scale this recipe accordingly to meet your serving needs — you'll need a ½ piece of ham and one sage leaf per chip. Tomme de Chèvre Bethmale with Ham and Sage Chips are fabulous with a medium-bodied, herbaceous red wine-like Carménère.

Thinly sliced Jambon de Bayonne  
(available via D'Artagnan) or prosciutto  
Fresh sage

- Pre-heat the oven to 350 F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper or a silicone baking sheet. Place a wire rack (a cooling rack will work just fine) on top of the parchment or silicone. Cut each slice of ham in half. Using a paring knife, make two horizontal ½-inch cuts a ½-inch apart from the center of the piece of ham. Thread a piece of whole sage through the cuts. Place the ham with threaded sage on the wire rack, repeating until you have the desired amount of chips. Bake for approximately 10 minutes, until ham is crisp. Cool completely and store, gently layered between paper towels, in an airtight container for up to three days. The chips are delicate — give them plenty of space in the storage container to prevent breakage.

### PAIRING TOMME DE CHÈVRE

I really enjoy Tomme de Chèvre Bethmale precisely because it's not a style one thinks of when considering French goat cheese. This supple, firm, lightly washed rind gem from the Pyrénées is the perfect debunker for the goat cheese skeptic.

Ham and sage chips pair well with Tomme de Chèvre Bethmale by coaxing out the smoky meatiness of the cheese and adding a salty, crunchy counterpoint to the silkiness of the paste. The sage emphasizes some of the savory, herbal notes of the cheese and also adds some color to the plate.



## WHIPPED-PEA MOUSSE PAIRED WITH SELLES-SUR-CHER

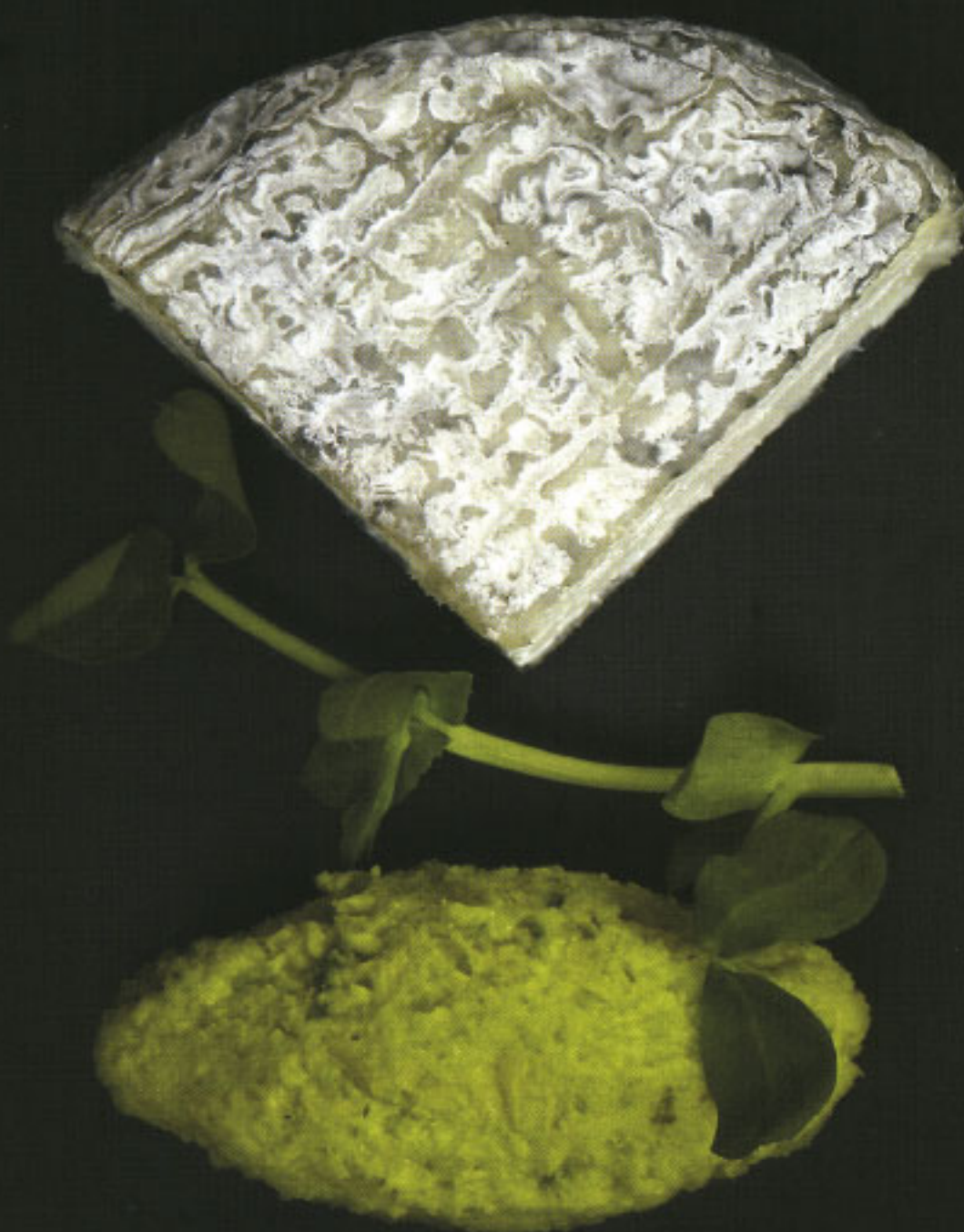
The fresh, bright flavors of peas and lemon make this mousse an especially cheerful pairing for younger goat cheeses. Be sure not to overcook the peas — they are delicate and their color will remain nice and bright with gentle cooking. This recipe forgoes the traditional addition of gelatin through the use of an extra amount of whipped cream. The combination of Selles-sur-Cher and Whipped-Pea Mousse pairs well with a crisp, high-acid Sauvignon Blanc — such as Sancerre — which highlights the bright flavors while cutting through the creaminess of the mousse.

- ½ small lemon
- 2 Tbsp diced shallot
- 2 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 1 Tbsp white wine
- ¾ cup heavy cream, divided into ½ cup and ¼ cup
- 1 sprig of fresh tarragon
- ½ tsp sea salt
- Dash of white pepper
- Dash of ground ginger
- 1 cup frozen peas
- 1 Tbsp butter

- Remove the peel in strips from the lemon using a vegetable peeler. Set aside. Juice the lemon and set aside (you will have approximately 1 Tbsp).
- In a medium sauté pan over medium heat, cook shallots in olive oil, until translucent, 2-3 minutes. Deglaze with white wine and lemon juice and cook for another 2-3 minutes, until most of the liquid is evaporated. Add ½ cup cream, lemon peel, tarragon, salt, pepper, ground ginger and bring to a simmer. Add the frozen peas and continue to cook, stirring once or twice, until peas are soft, approximately 5 minutes. Stir in the butter and remove from heat. Remove the lemon peel and discard. Allow to cool slightly, then pulse in a food processor until smooth. Refrigerate for a half-hour.
- Whip remaining ¼ cup cream until stiff. Fold the whipped cream into the pea puree until blended, being careful not to over-mix. Adjust seasoning and serve immediately.

### PAIRING SELLES-SUR-CHER

Selles-sur-Cher is a classic beauty, resplendent in a vegetable ash rind. Creamy and vegetal with a hint of salty minerality, this cheese from the Centre region of France calls for a pairing that doesn't overshadow its subtle eminence. Whipped Pea Mousse adds visual interest while supporting the slightly sweet, lactic, limestone-y qualities of the cheese. The light, smooth texture of the mousse nicely mimics the paste of the cheese.





### PAIRING BÛCHERON

Bûcheron or Bûcherondin – a bloomy rind cheese produced across France — is a wolf in goat's clothing. Its appealing cylindrical shape and bright white petticoat belie an interior with dense paste that's slightly crumbly, with pronounced acidic tang and almond-like nuttiness. A condiment that has layers of flavor and is as visually striking as Bûcheron or Bûcherondin, is desirable.

Beets and goat cheese are a classic combination; beet "tartar" is a topsy-turvy interpretation of a classic dish and complex enough to meet the Bûcheron head-on. The sweet earthiness of the beets plays well against the nutty, almost piquant cheese, which also benefits from the brininess of the capers.



### BEET TARTAR PAIRED WITH BÛCHERON

Served with Bûcheron, this recipe is a playful take on the classic combination of goat cheese and beets. It's also a fun vegetarian (when made without Worcestershire sauce) adaption of its meat-centric inspiration. Have a *ménage à trois* by adding a light, high-acid red wine such as Burgundian Pinot Noir.

- 1 lb medium red beets (approximately 2-3 beets)
- 3 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- Sea salt
- Black pepper
- ½ cup red wine
- 3-4 sprigs of thyme
- 2 Tbsp red wine vinegar

- ½ tsp Worcestershire sauce (optional)
- 1 tsp smooth Dijon mustard
- Dash of Tabasco sauce
- ½ tsp lemon juice
- ½ small shallot, finely minced
- 1 Tbsp capers in brine, rinsed
- 2 Tbsp finely chopped dill

- Pre-heat the oven to 350 F. Wash and trim (but don't peel) the beets. Arrange the beets in a baking pan. Drizzle with 1 Tbsp olive oil, a generous pinch of sea salt and a few cracks of fresh black pepper. Pour the red wine over the beets and cover with the thyme sprigs. Wrap the pan tightly with aluminum foil and bake until a skewer easily slides into the center of the beet, approximately 1½ hours.
- When the beets are done cooking,

transfer the cooking liquid into a small saucepan. Let the beets cool enough to handle, and peel them. Once the beets are completely cool, cut the beets into a ¼-inch dice. Set aside.

- Over medium heat, reduce the cooking liquid by half (you should end up with approximately a 1/8 cup). Transfer to a mixing bowl and whisk together with red wine vinegar, Worcestershire, mustard, Tabasco and lemon juice. Slowly whisk in remaining olive oil. Toss the diced beets in dressing, then incorporate the shallots, capers and dill. Add fresh black pepper and taste, adding sea salt if needed.
- Chopped beets and dressing can be stored separately for a day or two in the refrigerator. Add the shallots, capers and dill immediately before serving.

- The deep influence of aesthetics on how we perceive taste is widely recognized. We eat with our eyes is a cliché because it's so true. Make beautiful pairings that don't obscure the cheese. Let the natural beauty of the cheese shine. Consider color, contrast, variation, and proportion when plating and pairing.

### Three Principles For Great Pairings

There are three basic principles I use most often when

creating cheese and condiment pairings.

- The most basic is the concept of mimicry. That is, experiencing a flavor or texture note in a chosen cheese and then offering a pairing that mimics one note, or both.
- A slightly more complex approach is to make a contrasting pairing. I use the phrase "more complex" because this type of pairing is ambitious in that it requires a second leap of thought, a journey from point A (cheese experience) to point B (I'd like to add this experience).



### PAIRING CROTTIN

If a goat and a honeybee engaged in a cross-species romance, the Crottin or Crottin de Chavignol, from the Centre region, would likely be the result. There's a versatility to Crottin because of its size — it can be served whole as an individual portion or many for a group. Crottin has a manna-like quality: with a fudge-like texture, oozing creamline, and notes of honey and stone fruits, it is enveloping in its complexity. Apricot Curd emphasizes the silkiness of the creamline, cuts through the richness of the center paste, and adds a tannic backbone to the pairing.



### APRICOT CURD PAIRED WITH CROTTIN

Tart, velvety apricot curd is an excellent pairing for younger goat cheeses because it mirrors the tang and creaminess of this style of classic chèvre. Chenin Blanc — the signature white wine grape of the Loire Valley — is an ideal wine to cook with for this recipe, though any neutral white wine will do. Cook the apricots with their pits, as they impart a nutty, foundational flavor to the curd. Good eggs from happy chickens will make a big difference in this recipe — the fresher the better. Grass-fed butter from happy cows is also recommended. This recipe yields three cups of curd so you'll have plenty

left over to share with friends. The curd and cheese mix well with Chenin Blanc or an Apricot Lambic through mimicry of flavor.

- 1 lb fresh apricots, pitted and quartered (save pits)
- ½ cup white wine, dry
- 1 cup sugar
- 6 egg yolks, lightly beaten
- Juice from 1 lemon (approximately 2 Tbsp)
- 1 vanilla bean, split and paste removed
- 4 oz unsalted chilled butter, cubed

• Cook apricots, pits and white wine in a medium saucepan over medium heat

until very soft, about 15 minutes. Remove apricot mixture from heat, discard pits and mash with a potato masher. Transfer and press through a fine mesh sieve with a spatula or wooden spoon.

• In a glass bowl set over simmering water or on top of a double boiler, cook apricot mixture, sugar, egg yolks, lemon juice and vanilla bean paste over medium heat, whisking constantly, until mixture thickens and coats the back of a spoon, about 15 minutes. Remove from heat and add chilled butter, one cube at a time, whisking constantly until completely incorporated. Spoon curd into jars and allow to cool. Tightly seal jars and refrigerate, up to three weeks.

- The third principle is the most nebulous but perhaps the most satisfying when it succeeds: the condiment that coaxes. This is an approach that draws something out of the cheese, resulting in a "third taste." It requires a thorough understanding of the cheese, a delicate hand, and a leap of faith. When these types of pairings are slightly miscast, they still teach us something useful about flavor, and help us get to know the cheese on a deeper level. When they're spot on, they're truly transformative.

Above all else, creating and discovering pairings should be exciting, keeping us engaged in the familiar by creating something "new" and clearing the way for an unexpected experience. Pairings can amuse, surprise, provoke, intrigue and seduce. They make us dive that much deeper into the world of cheese, and for that reason alone they are a journey worth making. CC

*Tia Keenan is a cheese specialist, chef, and writer based in New York City. Keenan is the 2015 Goat Cheeses of France Ambassador. She is currently working on a book about cheese plates and pairings, to be published by Rizzoli in fall 2016.*