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In cheese, the vanquished French were unbeatable

By Eric Akis December 1, 2008

Brie and Camembert are two the most popular cheeses you'll see on holiday cheese boards. Photograph by : Adrian Lam

Brie and Camembert are two of the most popular cheeses you'll see adorning holiday cheese trays. Their history is as rich as their taste.

In Richard Widcombe's The Cheese Book, he says both are semi-soft, surface-ripened cheeses made from cow's milk that have a "bloomy" edible outer crust. After a few weeks of careful aging, brie and Camembert develop a creamy, buttery centre that's hard to resist.

Widcombe writes that, like roquefort and Stilton, brie is a cheese that claims to be "king of cheeses." In 1815 it was awarded that title at the Congress of Vienna, held after the Napoleonic Wars to discuss the reorganization of European states. To lighten the mood after a ceremonial dinner, a cheese competition was held. French statesman Talleyrand presented a brie de Meaux and it was the clear winner.

Brie de Meaux is considered the classic French brie and dates back to at least the 8th century. Meaux is a city in the Brie region of France east of Paris. According to the book ***French Cheeses***, it is an artisanal cheese, moulded by hand and subject to Appellation d'origine controlee (AOC) regulations, which dictate, among other things, the size of the cheese, fat content and how hot the milk can be during production.

There are several types of brie produced in the Brie region and the tastes vary, but Widcombe's mouth-watering, general description says that well-made brie has a creamy, honey-like flavour with a hint of mushrooms, is very rich, ripe and fruity, and is both subtle and tangy.

Camembert originates from the Normandy region of France. Legend has it that Marie Harel, a farmer in the village of Camembert, invented the cheese around 1790. The Oxford Companion to Food says that it might not have been known as Camembert until the 19th century, when Napoleon III was presented a disc of the cheese, asked where it came from, and ruled that it be known by that name.

Much of French Camembert production, as with brie, has become industrialized, resulting in mounds of the cheese being made without the depth of flavour of the handmade product. To distinguish between the two, in the 1980s Camembert produced following strict guidelines was awarded AOC designation and the title Camembert de Normandie. Widcombe describes a well-made Camembert as delicately mild with a rich, delicious and creamy tang.

Brie- and Camembert-style cheeses are produced in other parts of the world, including Canada. Some are mass-produced and nondescript, while others are made with great care in small batches in places such as Quebec and this province, where some producers have been recognized for their work. For example, earlier this year, the Camembert from B.C.'s Natural Pastures Cheese Company won a gold medal at the World Cheese Championships.

Camembert and brie are similar in many ways, but the main difference, beyond the all-important flavour of the milk, which can differ depending on what the cows graze on, is in the size of the cheese. Brie is usually

made in larger rounds, which retailers often cut into wedges, while Camembert is made in smaller discs, about 11 centimetres in diameter, and is sold that way.

When ripe and at its best, the pristine white, surface bloom that brie and Camembert have when young will become minutely dotted with red-brown pigmentation, will have a light smell of mould and when cut, will have loose, straw-yellow interior paste that is bulging out of its crust. If underripe, the cheese will have a more solid, white chalky centre. If overripe, the cheese will have overpowering, penetrating smell, the paste will run — not ooze — out of the cheese, and/or its crust will be shrunken, tough and darkened.

Serve brie and Camembert at room temperature, taking the cheese out of the fridge at least 90 minutes before serving. I like to accompany the cheese with crackers or sliced baguette, nuts, and dried and/or fresh fruit. I also sometimes serve the cheese with wine jelly, such as the one below.

Eric Akis is the author of the best-selling Everyone Can Cook book series. His columns appear in the Life section Wednesday and Sunday.

### Beaujolais Wine Jelly

When invited to a holiday party, consider giving the host a jar of this jelly with a piece of brie or Camembert.

Preparation time: 15 minutes

Cooking time: 10 minutes

3 cups granulated sugar

2 cups Beaujolais or gamay noir red wine

1 (85 mL) pouch liquid Certo

Fill a boiling-water canner or large pot with water and bring to a boil. Sterilize 9 125-millilitre jars for 10 minutes. Remove the jars and boil the snap-top jar lids for 5 minutes.

While you wait for the water to boil for the jars, place the sugar and wine in a pot and bring to a boil, stirring occasionally to dissolve the sugar. Remove from the heat and stir in the Certo. Continue stirring for 3 minutes, to ensure the Certo is well distributed.

Pour this mixture into the sterilized jars, leaving a 1/4-inch headspace at the top. Wipe the rims clean; centre the lids. Apply the jars' screw bands until fingertip tight. Process the sealed jars in boiling water 10 minutes. Remove and cool at room temperature. Check the seal; a properly sealed lid curves downward. Label and date the jars. Store the jars in a cool, dark place; refrigerate after opening. The jelly can take up to 24 hours to set.

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***Highlights: French Cheeses***