

THE PERFECT PEARING

BY DONALD RODRIGUE

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PEAR BUREAU NORTHWEST

Deep reds, rustic browns, golden yellows and rich greens are the colors of fall—and the colors of pears. Rich and warm, they bring home the closeness of family and favorite foods, entertaining and special dining. So, it's no surprise that some of the most versatile winter fruits are the plethora of pears available for eating out of hand, cooking and pairing.

While available in limited quantities all year long, the peak period for pears is between October and February, with most varieties available in December and January. Introduced by Spanish missionaries in the 1700s, the fruit has come to symbolize the Northwest; 84 percent of the nation's pear crop comes from Washington and Oregon.

Each variety of pear has its own characteristics. For example, the Bosc pear, one of the more robust



varieties, is rustic brown with flecks of yellow and a firm texture. With hints of caramel, vanilla and spice, it pairs deliciously with the hard, crumbly texture and sharp taste of Italian Parmigiano-Reggiano and Prosecco, a dry, white, sparkling wine from Veneto.

For a classic American Bosc pear combination that's simple yet sophisticated, try aged clothbound Cheddars from award-winning cheese producers Cabot Creamery Cooperative of Montpelier, Vermont, and Fiscalini Cheese Company in Modesto, California. Pair with a robust California Cabernet that brings out the Bosc's spiciness.

Working with the world-renowned Rogue Creamery located just down the street, Lillie Belle created Smokey Blue Cheese Truffles, a unique pairing of Rogue's Smokey Blue cheese and Lillie Belle Farms' chocolate. This remarkable combination of flavors—that actually works—is at its best when paired with one of the sweetest and juiciest of pear varieties, the Comice.

Comice pears are characterized by a decadent creamy texture and mild flavor. Best paired with blue cheeses, they work well with Italian Gorgonzola, a difficult cheese to find in the United States due to its perishability. However, there are good

ago, my great-grandfather started a cheese company in Italy. In 1979, I moved my family from Italy to America to start my own cheese company. From the beginning, I had only one goal—to make great Italian cheeses—and I succeeded. The result is BelGioioso cheeses. The complete line is made with the freshest milk from authentic Italian recipes. We don't cut corners when making them; that's why each BelGioioso cheese has its own personality. Through the years, our cheeses have won many prestigious awards and have set a standard of excellence in the industry."

One of the more unusual cheeses



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elegant and boastful blues

Pear and blue cheese pairings are classic combinations for winter menus in which more robust and complex flavors are desired. While simple pairings, such as mixed greens topped with thin slices of pear, walnuts and crumbled blue, are common restaurant themes and simple for home preparation, there are also more exotic—but still simple—offerings that should be added to the sophisticated gourmand's repertoire.

The award-winning artisan chocolates created by Lillie Belle Farms of Central Point, Oregon, are a great example. They are made by hand using European techniques with an American twist. Available seasonally, the firm's chocolate-covered Rogue River pears take chocolate-covered fruit to the next level, but it's a blue cheese/chocolate connection that adds a degree of uniqueness.

American versions that are truly exceptional cheeses.

From BelGioioso Cheese, located in Denmark, Wisconsin, hails CreamyGorg. An American Gorgonzola aged for 90 days, this soft, blue-green veined cheese has an earthy flavor and creamy texture that's perfect on a piece of crusty Italian bread with a slice of extra sweet Comice.

CreamyGorg is the creation of Errico Auricchio, president of BelGioioso, an Italian immigrant whose family was in the cheese business for generations. Auricchio came to the United States with the dream of making his beloved Italian cheeses in Wisconsin, where, in his opinion, the climate is perfect and the milk even better than Italy's. The national and international awards BelGioioso has won are too numerous to mention but they validate his vision of greatness.

In his own words, "Over a century

and an American original comes from Rogue Creamery: Rogue River Blue. This raw cow's milk, blue-veined cheese develops a beautiful natural rind as a result of hand-turning and tending the cheese several times a week.

The wheels are aged for up to a year in special rooms constructed to simulate the ancient caves in Roquefort, France. This aging process imparts naturally occurring molds into the cheese, which give the cheese its signature flavor and accentuate the terroir of the Rogue River Valley.

The flavors hint of sweet woody pine, wild ripened berries, hazelnuts, morels and pears. The cheese is preserved by hand-wrapping each wheel in grape leaves harvested from Carpenter Hill Vineyards in the Rogue River Valley. The leaves have been macerated in Clear Creek Pear Brandy and tied with raffia. The grape leaves and pear brandy add complexity to the ter-



roir-driven flavors and preserve its moist creamy texture.

Rogue River Blue was awarded the title of “World’s Best Blue Cheese” at the 2003 World Cheese Awards in London, England. Served with fresh pears, roasted hazelnuts and a fine sweet dessert wine, the combination is literally “World Class.”

indulgent pear trios

The buttery and herbaceous undertones of the fragrant Bartlett pear are best partnered with the mild and nutty flavor of Gouda or the delicate flavor of Mascarpone. While the former pair makes an incredible snack or appetizer, the latter screams to be the final or dessert course, particularly when the fruit is poached with honey. The mellow, fruity flavor of a Merlot will perfectly complement the Gouda/Bartlett

combination, and the drier flavor of Brut Champagne will play off the sweet creaminess of the Mascarpone.

Although Forelle and Seckel are the smallest of the pear varieties, they both pack a flavorful punch. Forelles pair well with the delicate, buttery flavor of Monterey Jack or the nutty and mellow flavor of a young Port-Salut. Match a sweet, late-harvest Riesling with the former and a dry Riesling with the latter.

The intensely sweet Seckels—often referred to as sugar or honey pears—are characterized by an enchanting aroma and a complex and spicy flavor. They are best partnered with either a Fontina or Havarti. The nutty and buttery flavor of the former offers a great contrast to the pear’s sweetness, while the mild and tangy Havarti perfectly complements the fruit. Best wine choices are the spicy and complex fla-

vor of a Pinot Noir with the Fontina/Seckel combination and light, fruity Beaujolais to accompany Seckels and Havarti.

The crimson-colored Starkrimson is a refreshing pear whose mild flavor is accented by the accompaniment of an exquisite Brie. The earthy creaminess of the cheese contrasts perfectly with the Starkrimson’s smooth and firm flesh. Pair this dynamic duo with a Reserve Chianti, whose tannic finish highlights the earthiness of the cheese and softly blends with the sweetness of the fruit.

Of course, pears are also wonderful on their own, eaten out of hand. A versatile fruit that can be used in both sweet and savory dishes, raw, baked, steamed and poached, pears offer a seasonal treat that should not be denied by sophisticated foodies. **CC**