

*Fork & Bottle announces a challenge ...  
pairings with Pozo Tomme ...  
and my four-hour foray at the fromagerie.*

The topic for the June/July “issue” of Casa Festiva was prompted by “The Great Cheese Pairing Project” proposed by Jack and Joanne at their Fork and Bottle website. They asked web food writers and bloggers to pick an artisan cheese, preferably local, and explore how well various pairing elements went with it. Well, needless to say, they could count me in, and I knew immediately that my fromage du choix would be Rinconada Dairy’s Pozo Tomme sheep’s milk from Santa Margarita. Little did I know that this project would also lead to a morning spent as a sous-fromagère and learning that “artisan” must certainly be an obscure French term for “finding muscles you didn’t know you had.”



*Wheels of Pozo Tommes at Rinconada Dairy*

#### **About Rinconada Dairy ...**

For Christine Maguire of Rinconada Dairy in Santa Margarita, the decision to get closer to her food source has led to an award-winning career.

Several years ago, Maguire and her husband, Jim, “decided to try and raise as much of our own food as possible,” she explained. They started an extensive garden, had their own chickens and eggs, etc., “and then someone gave me a goat. I started milking it and making cheese and yoghurt and found out I really liked doing it.”

She started looking at the possibility of making sheep’s milk cheese, especially when she realized that “there were lots of wonderful goat cheese makers in this country, but not so many sheep cheeses.” In 1998, she bought her first few sheep, started milking them with an apparatus rigged up in the carport, and began making cheese. As Maguire continued to experiment with recipes, she realized that “I want to make raw milk cheeses -- which in this country have to be aged at least 60 days -- so that made me have to go towards the semi-hard or hard cheeses.”

The Maguires and their ever-increasing sheep herd quickly outgrew their 1.5-acre Garden Farms property, so in 1999, they moved to a 52-acre ranch outside Santa Margarita. Three years ago, it became the official home of Rinconada Dairy, only the second licensed sheep’s milk dairy in California. The Maguires’ first commercially available cheese was “Pozo Tomme,” which was soon followed with “La Panza,” and “Chaparral,” which is made with both sheep’s and goats’ milk.

#### **Pairings with Pozo Tomme ...**

Pozo Tomme is 100% sheep’s milk, made with raw milk and aged a minimum of 60 days, though McGuire believes it starts hitting its peak at 90-120 days. Sheep’s milk cheese is generally fuller than that made from cow’s milk, but doesn’t have that distinct tang of goat’s milk cheese.

On its own, Pozo Tomme has a creamy mouthfeel, with a soft nutty texture, and a slightly grassy tang that’s very pleasant. Like other sheep’s milk cheeses such as Manchego and Pecorino Romano, it’s an approachable cheese that’s very versatile.

Pozo Tomme is available locally at Monterey Street Wine Company in San Luis Obispo and Di Raimondo’s Italian Market in Paso Robles.

The pairings below are rated according to Fork and Bottle’s guidelines.

#### **Great Pairings:**

*2004 Chateau de la Chaize Brouilly* – an earthy Gamay with that slight “barnyard in a good way” nose and earthy, strawberry notes throughout. (Brouilly is one of the named Beaujolais “Cru” villages, and Chateau de la Chaize one of the area’s most important estates). Really brings out the earthiness and tang in the PT, then when you go back to the wine, the cheese brings out more of the fruit highlights in the Gamay.

*2006 Baileyana Chardonnay* – has the green apple component so typical of the Edna Valley, tart structure and great balance. The butter elements of the wine and the PT go together perfectly, and the acidity of the wine is enough to gently cleanse the palate. You can also go back and forth very easily between the wine and the cheese.

*Pasolivo Olive Oil* – rich and grassy. The oil brings out the boldness of the PT, while the cheese gives a nice mellowness to the oil.

*Casa Festiva’s Pappardelle with Spring Peas* – spring peas and spring cheese come together in this dish that features a reduced cheese sauce made with about a cup of PT, 3 T extra virgin olive oil, 1 cup dry white wine, and 3 T crème fraiche (such as Kendall Farms); served with 2005 Morgan Highland Chardonnay – a great balance of butter and greenness!

*Sierra Nevada Pale Ale* – the beer really punctuated the cheese’s nuttiness.

#### **Good Pairings:**

*The Girl and the Fig’s* dried fig compote – sweet, but not too sweet with nice texture. Just a touch of this on the PT highlights the nuttiness of the cheese.

*2004 Edward Sellers Grenache* – an elegant wine with ripe dark berries and lean tannins; a very dynamic pairing with the cheese.

#### **Neutral:**

*Firestone-Walker Double Barrel Pale Ale* – an okay pairing, but neither really stands out.

#### **Not So Good:**

*2005 Baileyana Firepeak Pinot Noir* – great nose with plum, strawberry, cassis; exotic spice and slight hint of earth; well balanced. Unfortunately this beautiful wine wasn’t a good match with the PT. It was okay when going from the wine to the cheese, but going back really knocked out the cheese with too much briar.

*Crema di Peperoni* – a sweet red pepper sauce from Italy. A similar product might work really well, but this particular one was too salty with the PT.

*2003 Rancho Arroyo Grande Zinfandel* – lean with briar, a great food Zin. Both the wine and the PT can hold their own, but the pairing is a bit mano a mano.

#### **My Four-Hour Foray at the Fromagerie ...**

When Fork and Bottle announced their cheese idea a couple of months ago, I called some local cheese shops to see if they still had any Pozo Tomme. No, they’d been sold out for months, and everyone was eagerly awaiting the new spring batch, so I called Christine Maguire at Rinconada Dairy to explain what I was up to and to see when the first wheels would be hitting the market. Because Christine crafts her cheeses from raw, un-pasteurized milk, she must first age them for a minimum of 60 days before releasing them to the public. That meant that the first Pozo Tommes would be available on May 25; I scored a quarter wheel on May 26.



During that initial conversation, Christine – whom I’ve known for a couple years – also made an interesting offer: would I want to come by and actually help her make the cheese? Though my schedule didn’t allow me to take her up on it immediately, on May 28, I drove the scenic, mostly rural half-hour from my house to Rinconada Dairy and reported for duty.

With phrases such as fromage, curds and whey, and affinage, cheesemaking sounds like a gentle art best viewed through a romantically foggy lens. While a lot of it is blissfully relaxing, a lot of it isn’t, and I will never again balk at the price of artisan cheese. For starters, you have to wear a really silly outfit: shower cap, long apron, and knee-high rubber dairy boots. (Thankfully the only picture that exists of me in this garb was actually taken through a foggy lens because it was during the stage when the milk was being heated, so the room was really hot and humid.)

Perhaps my first clue that this wasn’t going to be a walk in the park should have been when Christine told me that “cheesemaking is 20 percent cheesemaking and 80 percent cleaning up.” As the “sous” to her “fromagère,” that meant I was going to be doing a lot of said cleaning. Obviously, since you’re dealing with a food product that is essentially made with specific molds, as in bacterium, you need to eliminate other possible contaminants, so I donned elbow-length rubber gloves – a fabulous addition to my already lovely outfit – and began washing away.

As I scrubbed, Christine added rennet to the big vat of fresh sheep’s milk that she and her husband Jim had brought in just hours before, and hooked up what was essentially a big stirrer to the vat’s rotor. As the stainless steel paddle gently stirred away, the golden whey began to separate into the white curds, and I was really quite surprised how much of the rich liquid whey comes off. We pulled at least six big buckets of it – which the Maguires feed to their pigs and farm cats – but there was still a goodly amount that went down the drain. When all was said and done, the volume of what was left in the vat was about half of where it started.

The next step was to “cut the curds,” essentially cutting something the consistency of tofu into whatever size curds you want for your cheese. A lot of this process is done by attachments put onto the rotor mechanism of the vat, but eventually it becomes a hands-on process. You lean over the steaming vat, gently rummage around to find the ones that didn’t get small enough, and tenderly cut them to size. All the while, the curds are steadily firming up, “simply because they want to be cheese,” said Christine.

With the curds doing their part, we needed to get them into the cheese molds by pressing a nylon cloth into the round molds, then reaching into the vat with a scoop and filling each mold, which with the Pozo Tommes takes about three to four scoops per mold. When the molds are filled with every last bit of the curds that you’ve scraped out of the vat, you pull the top of the cloth over the curds, put on the lid, and place weights on top.

When all was said and done, Christine and I had spent almost three hours forming just ten rounds of Pozo Tomme, but there was still more to be done. All the cheeses already formed in the past weeks had to be brushed in order to get an even “bloom” on the rinds, and turned over so that the moisture settled evenly throughout the cheese and didn’t balloon out the bottom of the rounds.

I was assigned the room with only Pozo Tommes in it -- an easier gig than the one Christine had since her two other cheese varieties, La Panza and Chaparral, need to also be rinsed in brine -- but it still meant dealing with seven shelves of cheese, at least 200 tomme. I set to work on the top shelf: picking up a round of cheese, brushing the top, brushing the sides, turning it over, brushing the bottom, and putting it back on the shelf ... picking up a round of cheese, brushing the top, brushing the sides, turning it over, brushing the bottom, and putting it back on the shelf ... picking up a round of cheese, brushing the top, brushing the sides, turning it over, brushing the bottom, and putting it back on the shelf ...

It wasn’t long before the process became meditative. Okay, so my left arm was starting to feel the burn a tad, but here were all these beautiful cheeses! Even though they’d all been made in the same process, each one was different, with its own unique shape, height, rind pattern, and colors. By the time I had finished brushing and turning each one, an hour had slipped away without my even knowing it.

Though the fresh Tommes we’d made that morning would still have to be dealt with later in the afternoon, my shift as a cheesemaker had come to an end, and I would admit I didn’t waste any time getting out of my shower cap, apron, and boots. Christine and I grabbed some water and spent a bit of downtime looking at her sheep herd before I got into the car and started home. About the time my lower back started to cramp up just a touch, a golden eagle soared overhead and took my mind off the pain that was starting to creep into muscles I didn’t know I had. However, I already knew that I would take Christine up on her offer to come back and help make the La Panza and Chaparral.

When I got home, there was really only one thing I wanted for lunch – a decadently big wedge of Pozo Tomme, rind and all.