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Cheese course: Ooey-gooley Affidelice even better than Epoisses

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If your New Year's Eve menu includes a cheese tray, consider making room on it for Affidelice. This washed-rind cheese from Burgundy works beautifully with Champagne and has the lush quality (and the price) that say indulgence to me. The producer is Berthaut, a firm better known for Epoisses, the cow's milk cheese brushed repeatedly with marc de Bourgogne, the local grape-must brandy.

Affidelice is Epoisses' better-mannered twin. The former's aroma is less potent, more mushroom-like than barnyard, but the production method and appearance are similar for both. Berthaut uses Chablis to brush Affidelice, but I don't detect any residual wine flavor. What the Chablis does - as any wine would - is create a moist surface that lures desirable bacteria.

After a few weeks in Berthaut's aging rooms, wheels of Affidelice have an ochre surface, a sign that the bacteria have reported for duty. They will, over the next few weeks, help ripen the cheese, softening the interior and deepening the aroma.

Thanks to these surface bacteria, Affidelice and other washed-rind cheeses become almost molten over time, rather than becoming progressively harder and drier.

The 200-gram (about 7-ounce) Affidelice comes in its own little wooden box, sheathed in clear plastic wrap. A ripe one will look a little sunken, but not too much, and it should have some aroma, even through the packaging. When you cut into it, it will slump and ooze like a chocolate lava cake.

The ivory interior is supple and silky, not far from fondue. On the tongue, I notice salt first, followed by subdued mushroom notes. I expected more mouth-filling flavor, but for its style, Affidelice is tame. Don't cut the rind away; it isn't strong, but it gives the cheese a little more gusto.

Look for Affidelice at Whole Foods stores. Pouring a Burgundy, red or white, would pair the cheese with a wine from its region, but I think sparkling wine is a more harmonious choice.

Next up: Bellwether Farms fromage blanc, a fresh cheese from Sonoma County.

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