

The Cheese Course | Janet Fletcher

Hirtenkäse fans party when the cows come home

In Germany's Allgäuer Alps, near the Austrian border, the cowherds still follow the timeless practice of leading their herds up the mountains in spring to graze on fresh pasture, then back down in the fall to take winter refuge in valley barns. Unless it falls on a Sunday, Sept. 18 marks the official start of the *Almabtrieb*, or descent, a day celebrated with a festival that draws locals and tourists alike. Farmers drape their cows with flowers, with the lead cow from each farm given a more elaborate bouquet. Spectators line the route to watch the cows traipse down, a reminder of the economic importance of cheesemaking in these mountainous regions.

If you can't be there to cheer on the cows, you can still taste the cheese. Hirtenkäse, literally "herdsman's cheese," is an aged cow's milk cheese that has been made in the Allgäu for centuries from the pooled milk of small farms. The version

we are seeing locally is produced at a dairy that collects its milk daily from 250 farms, with an average of only 12 cows each. The milk is pasteurized before the cheesemakers proceed with the culturing, curd cooking, molding and pressing required for an age-worthy cheese.

Introduced to the Bay Area less than two years ago by Birgit Bernhard, an enthusiastic German woman whose grandfather was a master cheesemaker in the region, Hirtenkäse has found an audience. Mollie Stone's Markets, Berkeley Bowl, the Pasta Shop in Berkeley and Oakland, Cheese Plus and Lucca Delicatessen in San Francisco, Roberts Market in Woodside, and some Andronico's and Draeger's stores are among the merchants who have brought on this cheese.

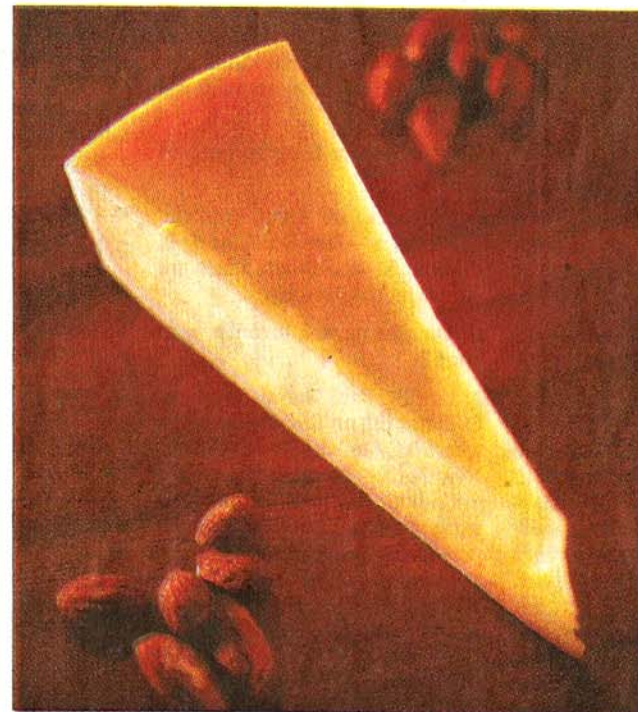
In texture and flavor, the 14-pound cheese resembles a cross between Parmigiano-Reggiano and aged Gouda, with a firm golden interior and aromas of butter-

scotch and orange peel. The wheels sent here are at least 8 months old, but Bay Area Whole Foods stores are selling Premium Reserve Hirtenkäse, matured for at least a year and identified by a black label.

Even at eight months, the cheese has developed some of the crunchy protein crystals found in Parmigiano-Reggiano. But additional aging makes the cheese creamier, not harder and dryer. It has a waxy texture — it even smells waxy — but it isn't crumbly like Parmigiano-Reggiano or firm enough to grate. The flavor is concentrated, with the cooked-milk sweetness of a caramel. I want a nutty, slightly sweet wine with it, such as an oloroso sherry or a Madeira.

Next up: Leonora, a goat's milk cheese from Northern Spain.

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A firm, golden interior and butterscotch and orange peel aromas make Hirtenkäse a good match for oloroso Sherry or Madeira.

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