



Leaf Wrapped Cheese By Kathy Laurie

Cheeses have probably been wrapped in leaves for centuries in order to protect them from flies and other insects. The wrappings also offer a consistently moist environment for the cheese to ripen in and the leaves offer their own flavor to the cheese.

This is a perfect technique to try early in the summer for the best leaves to use are young. They are thinner than later in the season and will have the least amount of insect and bird damage.

The staff of The Beverage People all volunteered to be my tasters. They were all in general agreement that this is a fabulous way to age and serve chèvre. It is such an easy cheese to make that we are all looking for different ways to serve it and this is an exciting alternative. One comment was “I will never serve plain chèvre again”. The presentation is fun and you don’t need a cheese cave for aging. The flavors develop beautifully in a ripening box in a standard refrigerator.

What kind of cheese should be used?

Typically, young fresh cheeses are used. My favorite cheese to make is chèvre since it is quick and easy to make and so very versatile. I’m always looking for new ways to serve it so it seemed like the perfect choice. I made 8 rounds using The Beverage People recipe. The plan was to wrap 7 and use one as the control for tasting.

What kind of leaves should be used?

The real answer is: just about any that are not poisonous! Grape leaves are large and abundant here in Sonoma County but also used successfully are fig, walnut, chestnut, and sycamore. You can use vegetable leaves, banana leaves and even seaweed! Experiment with what you have.

Preparing the leaves:

Rinse off any dust or foreign matter. If there is a tough center stem, cut it out to make the leaves more pliable. Then the leaves must be quickly blanched in lightly salted water to soften them.

Quickly chill them in an ice bath and set on paper towels to dry. They are ready to wrap around cheeses. After cooling the leaves, also try some soaked in alcohol before wrapping around the cheese. Put about ½ cup of wine, bourbon, hard cider or other favorite spirit in a zip lock bag with the leaves and soak overnight.

I also tried using lemon leaves which did not become soft with blanching so I froze them overnight and that somewhat softened them.

Wrapping the cheeses:

Use as many leaves as you need to cover the cheese round completely. Now is a great time to be creative and try new flavors. Of course, just wrapping the cheese in leaves and tying with raffia is great but also try adding some extra virgin olive oil and spices that you like.

Tie each bundle with raffia, put them in an aging box and age either in your refrigerator or cheese cave for at least two weeks to give the flavors a chance to develop.

Results:

We all agreed that the grape leaves worked very well as a wrapping but didn't really add much flavor on their own. However, we all loved the results then adding herbs and spices and even a little extra virgin olive oil. The two favorites in this category had added Mexican oregano and red pepper flakes for one and the other had added minced garlic and olive oil. Remember to always use dried herbs and spices. Never use fresh for the risk of botulism would be high.

One round was wrapped in Meyer lemon leaves and everyone loved the infused lemon flavor. We all want to also try lime and orange. Citrus leaves need to be treated differently. They don't soften when boiled but somewhat soften when frozen overnight. They are smaller so it takes many leaves to cover a cheese but the end result is worth it!

The last category was blanched grape leaves soaked in alcohol overnight. One round was wrapped in leaves soaked in Viognier and the other was wrapped in leaves soaked in Kentucky Bourbon. Both were a great success! The wine flavor definitely came through but everyone loved the bourbon flavor. One comment was "I have never tasted anything like a bourbon flavored cheese before! Yum."

All in all, everyone agreed that this is an exciting technique to keep experimenting with. What about wrapping a young cheddar? Or a Brie? What about trying fig leaves? Or hop leaves? Let us know what you have tried!

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