



The Cheese Course | Janet Fletcher

German Chiantino washed with Italian red wine

The granddaughter of a master cheesemaker, Birgit Bernhard grew up in Southern Germany, in the mountainous dairying region known as the Allgau. "I know the cheesemakers," she says. "We grew up together."

After more than 15 years in the United States working for the makers of Cambozola, Bernhard decided to start a business of her own, introducing Allgau cheeses to America. Given the prominence of French, Italian, Spanish and Swiss cheeses in the United States, it's surprising to me that we see so few German cheeses.

Chiantino, a washed-rind cow's milk cheese, is one of several Bernhard now imports. Created by a cooperative dairy in the Allgau less than 20 years ago, it is washed repeatedly with brine and Italian red wine, hence the cheese's name. Although Germany does not share a border with Italy — there's a sliver of Austria in between — the Allgau is less than 50 miles from Italy and the two cultures have long intermingled. Bernhard says that other Germans consider people from the Allgau to be more like northern Italians than Germans. "We take that as a compliment," she says.

Made with pasteurized milk and aged about four months, wheels of Chiantino

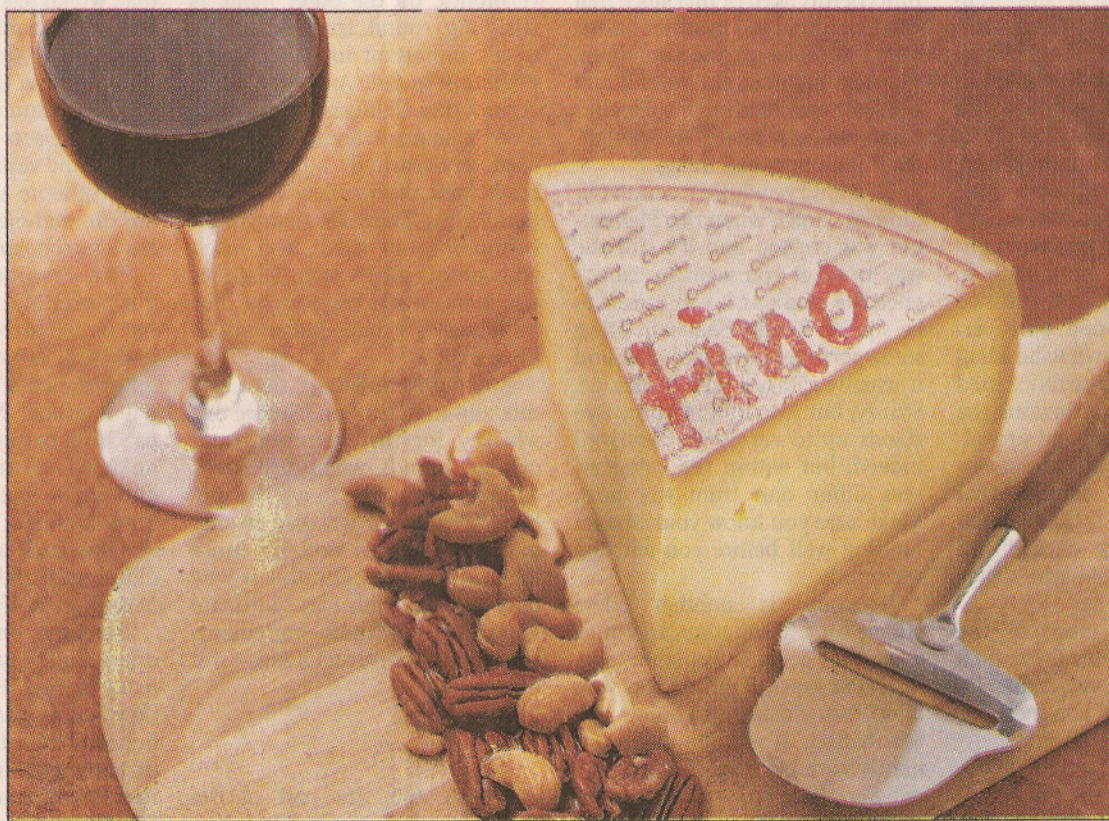
weigh close to 15 pounds and are about 2½ inches tall. The cheese has a thin golden rind that doesn't show much evidence of contact with red wine. Inside, the paste is butter colored to golden, firm and dense, with only the occasional small eye. Bring a piece up to your nose and see if you aren't reminded of roasted peanuts and garlic. The mouthfeel is especially pleasing, smooth and creamy like Gruyere, but moister, with none of the sandiness that Gruyere can have. The salt is apparent, but I wouldn't call it excessive.

I drank the lovely 2005 Buena Vista Carneros Pinot Noir with it, a classic Pinot with sweet fruit and medium intensity. The match was pleasant, but a beer might be an even better choice. Bernhard suggests a Marzen or lager.

Look for Chiantino at Mollie Stone's, Sigona's, some Whole Foods, and Rainbow Grocery and Cheese Plus in San Francisco.

Next up: Sweet Grass Dairy's Thomasville Tomme, an aged cow's milk cheese from Georgia.

E-mail Janet Fletcher at jfletcher@sfgchronicle.com.



A pasteurized cow's milk cheese, Chiantino is washed numerous times with brine and Chianti.