



The Heat Is On

With a raclette maker and friends,
melted cheese becomes a party

Written by Connie Fairbanks
Photography by Brendan Lekan





WHEN THE FIRST FROST hits the ground here in Chicago, that's the signal: it's time for me to host a raclette party. The planning is simple—dust off the raclette grill, buy a specialty melting cheese, cook some potatoes, gather a few accompaniments, and call a bunch of friends. That's essentially all there is to creating raclette (rah-KLEHT), whose name derives from the French verb *racler*, “to scrape.” (When capitalized, “Raclette” also refers to a type of cheese used for melting.) Like fondue, only simpler, traditional raclette makes cheese the centerpiece of the meal, and guests serve themselves. Each person melts his own portion of cheese on an individual tray of a simple raclette burner and then scrapes it over his potatoes, adding a few seasoned condiments, if desired. It's such an easy way to entertain that I almost feel like I'm cheating.

Raclette tradition originated in the canton of Valais in Switzerland's Rhône valley and is practiced every year from late fall to early spring in Switzerland and France. I've watched its popularity grow steadily in the States. My love affair with it began in the mid-'80s at a restaurant in Kansas City's Country Club Plaza shopping district. Between Thanksgiving and New Year's, my friends and I would melt raclette cheese over a Sterno flame, relax for a couple of hours surrounded by candles, and forget about the rest of the world. So comforted by this ritual, I bought my first raclette maker for home use, a Sterno variety for six people. It should be noted that a raclette *melter*, rather than the grill type, is more traditional (see “hot stuff”, at right), but I prefer the self-serve trays of the grill.

Through the years, I've adapted this custom to my personal tastes: I use French Raclette cheese (it's more pungent, and I also enjoy its rind) and serve it with boiled, red-skinned potatoes, some pickled onions and cornichons (little French sour pickles), plus sea salt, freshly ground

pepper, and nutmeg for optional seasonings. Alongside, I arrange sliced ham and crusty bread, and I pour a crisp pinot gris or a versatile Riesling. After a near reprise of the Chicago fire in my condo, I replaced my original raclette maker with an electric one; either kind does a fine job of melting cheese. (If you live in tiny apartment, a raclette grill can be a compact substitute for a stove.)

My Swiss and French colleagues have a similar take on serving raclette, though with some border differences. Guy Savoy, of Restaurant Guy Savoy in Paris, prefers cheese from Valais, as does Jean-Robert de Cavel, a chef from Cincinnati. Martial Noguier, chef at Café des Architectes in Chicago, melts French raclette cheese, while my friend Gaele likes charcuterie with raclette. Another Swiss friend, Mary, has never heard of French Raclette cheese; she uses only Gruyère.

Morbier, Reblochon, Comté, and Beaufort are also very good melting cheeses. But closer to home, there are excellent domestic cheeses to consider too, such as Roth Käse, a milder raclette cheese from Wisconsin, and from the northern part of Michigan, wheels of award-winning Leelanau, an aged variety. No doubt your cheesemonger can *scrape* together some good American selections too. **■**

Connie Fairbanks is an actor, cookbook author, and home chef in Chicago. She dedicated a chapter in her cookbook, *Scratch That Seasonal Menus and Perfect Pairings*, to a raclette menu.



Far left: Scraping cheese over potatoes. Left: Warming individual raclette trays.



HOT STUFF

A traditional raclette melter lets you recreate the original Swiss raclette experience. The cheese is anchored in the unit, which has an electric heating element that you control to melt the cheese until it is bubbly and can be scraped off.

PRICE: \$289 (**culture** readers get a \$20 discount at the website)
WHERE TO BUY: raclettecorner.com

Size up your raclette needs, then choose between small, medium, or deluxe units. Raclette makers also come in grill-style models and more traditional raclette melters.

Boska Holland offers a compact electric raclette maker built with two levels, enabling simultaneous melting and grilling. The handy spatula and small pans are part of the package.

PRICE: \$44.99
WHERE TO BUY: amazon.com



ASSEMBLING ACCOMPANIMENTS

For Swiss-Style Raclette: Cooked asparagus and mushrooms, chopped tomato, baby corn, thinly sliced red onion, black olives, and viande grison (a thinly sliced dry beef from Grison). A spice mixture of cardamom, coriander, paprika, curry, and black pepper is traditional, as is Fendant wine.

For French-Style Raclette: Roasted and quartered apples or Peruvian purple potatoes, cooked fingerling potatoes, prosciutto, truffles, and a Beaujolais wine.

COWGIRL CREAMERY



WE SHIP ARTISAN CHEESE!

Handcrafted & Selected by the Cowgirls

VISIT OUR CHEESE SHOPS

WASHINGTON DC • SAN FRANCISCO • POINT REYES

COWGIRLCREAMERY.COM

866.433.7834



Meticulously Handcrafted
 Pure Goat Milk
 Cheeses

4310 Fremont Drive • Sonoma, CA 95476
 Ph: (707)-996-4477 • Fax: (707)-996-1816
www.laurachenel.com