



*News & Press • November 21, 2002*

**SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE**  
**NOVEMBER 21, 2002**  
**BY JANET FLETCHER**



**MIDNIGHT MOON SHINES: CYPRESS GROVE'S FIRST AGED GOAT CHEESE IS AN IVORY BEAUTY**

— The twice-yearly Fancy Food Show in San Francisco and New York allows specialty food manufacturers to debut a new item and get instant feedback. This summer, Mary Keehn got the feedback that every producer dreams of when her Midnight Moon cheese was named the trade fair's outstanding new product.

As proprietor of Cypress Grove Chevre, producer of the acclaimed Humboldt Fog, Keehn already knew cheesemaking success. But the reception for Midnight Moon was particularly sweet because the cheese has been so long in the making.

Four years ago, Keehn began working with a Dutch dairy -- she won't say which -- to create an aged goat's milk cheese. She knew she couldn't make it in her own McKinleyville (Humboldt County) dairy because she didn't have the aging room, and because the bacteria might contaminate her other cheeses.

She also knew that few, if any, domestic producers had the expertise to develop what she had in mind -- an aged cheese with a firm paste (interior) derived from cooking the curd. Cooked-curd goat cheeses are notoriously challenging because goat's milk proteins are so fragile. That's why most goat's milk cheeses are soft and spreadable.

In Holland, Keehn found a dairy with a track record in making the kind of cheese she envisioned. Last spring, she released their first effort. Midnight Moon is made from pasteurized goat's milk and aged at least one year. The wheels weigh 9 to 11 pounds and are finished in black wax.

Inside, the pale ivory cheese is firm, dense and smooth, with a slight graininess reminiscent of Gruyere. The flavor is also Gruyerelike -- nutty and brown-buttery, with prominent caramel notes. Many tasters would probably not recognize it as goat cheese.

It would be lovely after dinner with fall apples, but Keehn also recommends it as a cooking cheese. Try it in potato gratin, on a grilled cheese sandwich, or thinly sliced in a buttered baguette.

What to pour: As a cheese to nibble before dinner, Midnight Moon would pair well with a glass of dry sherry to echo its nuttiness. At the end of a meal, try it with a not-too-serious, fruit-forward red wine, such as a medium-intensity Zinfandel or Rhone-style blend. I enjoyed it with Marietta Old Vine Red, Lot Number Thirty, a blend of predominantly Zinfandel and Carignane, with a little Grenache, Gamay and Syrah.

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