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**SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE
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BY JANET FLETCHER**



SAVOR THE HERBS IN A PURPLE HAZE — I would never have thought that lavender and fennel pollen would be seasonings that resonate with Americans, but Mary Keehn guessed otherwise. The endlessly creative owner of Cypress Grove Chevre in Arcata (Humboldt County) - maker of the popular Humboldt Fog - decided to bet on those two flavors about five years ago, when she created a new fresh goat cheese she dubbed Purple Haze.

Minced lavender and golden fennel pollen, the latter collected in Italy from wild fennel flowers, are dusted on the outside of each 5-ounce disk of cheese before it is packaged. Keehn tells me with some astonishment that Purple Haze now outsells her plain chevre.

The cheese's origins were serendipitous. According to Keehn, a gentleman approached her at a trade show several years ago, looking for advice on how to market his fennel pollen. At the time, the trendy Tuscan seasoning was being promoted by a handful of food writers as a compatible spice for roast pork. Half joking, he suggested that she might try putting it in some cheese.

"I think he was desperate to find a home for this fennel pollen," says Keehn now, but she took the idea to heart. She went home, got out all her herbs and spices and began trying to find a complementary seasoning. "The fennel pollen didn't work by itself," says Keehn, "but lavender brightened it up so much."

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Made with pasteurized goat's milk that is curdled slowly with minimal rennet, the cheese is only about 10 days old when it is shipped. It is shrink-wrapped in heavy plastic, which is difficult to remove without damaging the coating and the cheese's shape. Keehn acknowledges the problem but hasn't found a solution; she advises cutting the wrap with scissors to remove it with the least struggle.

The cheese is snow white, creamy and fine textured, with no rind. It isn't dense or gummy, as fresh chevre can be, and the seasonings are not overdone. I improvised a bruschetta with it, spreading it on toast, with tomatoes and wilted cucumbers. On another occasion, I put it in a ramekin with some olive oil on top and warmed it in the oven until it was soft, yielding an even more seductive spread. Keehn tells me that Brio Bakery in Arcata makes a sandwich on focaccia with Purple Haze, avocado and grilled onions.

The Mediterranean seasonings in this goat cheese make me think of Provence, and Provence makes me think of rosé. Any dry rosé, French or not, would complement Purple Haze. The new release from Frog's Leap, the 2007 La Grenouille Napa Valley Rouganté Pink is appealingly fresh and bright and brisk.

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