

ON THE TRAIL OF
QUESABIRRIA TACOS

PAIR TIKI DRINKS
WITH CHEESE, MINDFULLY

FALL FOR THE
FRENCH APÉRO

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The *Entertaining*

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ARTFUL HOUR

For a taste of French life, savor the apéro

GOUGÈRES

IN FRANCE, THE
ART OF GOOD LIVING IS
A QUINTESSENTIAL PART OF THE
COUNTRY'S CULTURAL FIBER. TAKING TIME
TO SAVOR FOOD AND DRINK—PREFERABLY
IN GOOD COMPANY—IS NOT A VIRTUE FOR
THE FRENCH, BUT A WAY OF LIFE. ONE OF THE
BEST EXAMPLES OF THIS IS THEIR BELOVED
APÉRO, A TRADITION THAT GOES BACK TO
ANCIENT TIMES WHEN THE GREEKS AND
ROMANS WERE HAPPILY RAISING
GLASSES BEFORE THE START
OF A MEAL.

Short for *apéritif*, which refers to the actual drink, the *apéro* is the ultimate way to escape the daily hustle and bustle and shift into relaxation mode. In essence, it's not so much about what's on the table, but about the social aspect of coming together with loved ones and relishing the moment. Nevertheless, there are some tips to keep in mind if you're looking to recreate that authentically French *apéro* experience at home.

Let's start with the choice of tipple. An *apéro* should whet the appetite—not spoil it. Opt for light and refreshing drinks such as white wine, rosé, or sparkling wines. Red wines can be a bit too robust and are best served with meals. Typical French *apéritifs* include the Kir (dry white wine mixed with *crème de cassis*), Lillet, Suze, and Pastis.

The same idea applies to the choice of fare. This isn't meant to be a full meal, so a few carefully chosen foods will suffice. While *l'heure de l'apéro* (*apéro* hour) does not require special cooking skills (a bowl of quality chips, roasted nuts or pretzels are common offerings), it's an excellent excuse to stop by your local delicatessen or gourmet food store on the way home from work to pick up a selection of decadent delights. Think artisanal charcuterie, crisp vegetables with hummus, sourdough baguette with dips (*tapenade*, pesto, or even just good extra virgin olive oil sprinkled with *fleur de sel* and pepper), deviled eggs, marinated olives, and the utterly French classic of pink radishes with salted butter. Adding a wheel of Camembert or a wedge of crumbly Roquefort might sound tempting, but bear in mind that in France, *fromage* isn't part of the *apéro* repertoire—it's served as a separate course, before dessert.

That's not to say, however, that cheese doesn't find its way into all kinds of *apéro*-appropriate finger foods. If you're in the mood to make your *apéro* really stand out, head into the kitchen and whip up some French classics that look impressive but are easy to make. Take the *cake salé*, for example. This savory French cake (also a favorite at picnics and summer lunches) can be jazzed up with just about any type of cheese, seasonal vegetables, and fresh herbs. *Madeleines* also have that wonderful versatility. The tender, shell-shaped cakes made famous by 19th-century author Marcel Proust in his masterpiece, *In Search of Lost Time*, aren't just meant to be sweet! And if you really want to take things up a notch, try your hand at making *gougères*. Though these irresistibly light and delicate cheese puffs from Burgundy are usually made with Comté, any hard cheese will work just fine. You can also add strips of sun-dried tomatoes or finely chopped crispy bacon to the batter. They can even be filled with cream cheese or tangy whipped *chèvre*.

It's that element of ease (no need to spend hours in the kitchen) combined with a generous dose of conviviality that makes hosting an *apéro* so attractive. No wonder we'll gladly borrow this delicious tradition from our friends in France! **c**



CAKE SALÉ WITH GOAT CHEESE, ZUCCHINI, AND GREEN OLIVES

ROQUEFORT, HAM, AND WALNUT MADELEINES



BEVERAGE PAIRINGS

Gougères

Though most hard cheeses will work well in gougères, opt for a young Comté with floral notes, a mild lactic tang, and nutty aromas. The cheese's complex flavors will be a match made in gourmet heaven when paired with vin jaune. Similar to sherry, this amber-colored wine from the Jura is aged in oak barrels for a period of six years. The result is a sophisticated wine redolent of roasted hazelnuts and aromatic dried fruits.

Alternatively, try a crisp Chablis from northern Burgundy. Its bright minerality, hints of honey, and saline notes will pair well with the fruitiness of a younger Comté.

Roquefort, Ham, and Walnut Madeleines

The bold, earthy flavors and smoky notes of Roquefort really shine through in this recipe. Pair the madeleines with a Coteaux du Layon from the Loire Valley. Made with late-harvest (botrytized) chenin blanc grapes, this robust wine is velvety and unctuous yet still has enough refreshing acidity to balance the intensity of the cheese.

Cake Salé with Goat Cheese, Zucchini, and Green Olives

A creamy chèvre with delicate, buttery notes and a whisper of citrus will work well in this cake, but you can also try it with the zestier flavors of a ripe Chabichou du Poitou from the Poitou-Charentes region. Both options would work well with a lively Sancerre. The wine's chalky minerality and herbaceous aromas will complement the tang of the cheese as well as the grassiness of the zucchini and salinity of the olives.

RECIPES



Roquefort, Ham, and Walnut Madeleines

Madeleines—those tender, round-bellied French cakes—come in myriad flavors. Though the sweet variations are most common, savory madeleines are often served as part of the French apéro. You will need a madeleine tray, sold in many kitchen supply shops.

Makes 12

1 cup all-purpose flour
2 eggs
2 ½ teaspoons baking powder
Pinch of fleur (or other fine sea salt flakes)
Freshly cracked pepper to taste
5 tablespoons fragrant extra virgin olive oil
3 tablespoons whole milk
2 ounces Roquefort, crumbled into small pieces
2 ounces walnuts, roughly chopped
2 ounces diced cooked (boiled) ham

- ▶ In a large bowl, whisk the flour, eggs, baking powder, salt (making sure to grind it finely between your fingers), pepper, olive oil, and milk until you have a smooth batter.
- ▶ Fold in the Roquefort, walnuts, and ham. Place the batter in the refrigerator for at least 1 hour, or overnight.
- ▶ When ready to bake the madeleines, preheat the oven to 400°F and lightly brush a 12-hole madeleine tray with olive oil. Divide the batter between the holes and bake for 12 minutes until golden. Allow to cool slightly before serving.

Cake Salé with Goat Cheese, Zucchini, and Green Olives

Cake salés (savory cakes) are delicious cubed as part of an apéro, but you can also serve a slice for lunch with soup or a green salad dressed with a mustardy vinaigrette.

Serves 8-10

1 cup all-purpose flour
½ cup whole-wheat flour
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 tablespoon dried basil
Freshly cracked pepper to taste
3 eggs
½ cup white wine
4 tablespoons fragrant extra virgin olive oil
4 ounces fresh goat cheese, in small pieces
1 cup diced zucchini
2 ½ ounces small green olives, pitted

- ▶ Preheat the oven to 350°F and line a 10 x 4 ½ inch loaf pan with parchment paper.
- ▶ In a large bowl, using a rubber spatula, combine the two flours, baking powder, dried basil, and pepper.
- ▶ In a medium bowl whisk the eggs, wine, and olive oil. Add the mixture to the dry ingredients and stir gently to combine. Fold in the goat cheese, zucchini, and olives. Pour the batter into the prepared loaf pan and bake for 45 minutes. Allow to cool before serving.



Gougères

Gougères are made with a classic French pâte à choux (a delicate pastry dough also used in other light pastries such as éclairs and profiteroles). In Burgundy, the airy cheese puffs are also served at wine tastings. Any hard cheese such as Gruyère, Emmentaler, Gouda, or cheddar will work well. Eat the gougères warm as they will lose their charm (that beautiful lightness!) once cooled.

Makes 25

¾ cup water
7 tablespoons unsalted butter
Pinch of fleur de sel (or other fine sea salt flakes)
Freshly cracked pepper to taste
1 cup all-purpose flour
3 eggs
3 ½ ounces grated Comté, plus a bit extra for garnish
2 tablespoons finely chopped chives

- ▶ Preheat the oven to 425°F and line a large baking sheet with parchment paper.
- ▶ Bring the water with the butter, salt (making sure to grind it finely between your fingers), and pepper to a boil. Take the pan off the heat once the butter is melted and add the flour all at once. Using a wooden spoon, stir the mixture vigorously for about a minute. Return the pan to a low-medium heat and stir the dough vigorously for another minute, using the spoon to shape it into a ball at the end. Transfer the dough to a large bowl and let it cool for 3 minutes.
- ▶ Add the eggs in one at a time, mixing them in well with a wooden spoon. You will notice that the dough will separate after you add in each egg. Don't worry; just keep stirring vigorously and it will come back together. Once all the eggs have been incorporated and you have a smooth dough, fold in the cheese and chives.
- ▶ Using two teaspoons, drop little mounds of dough (about 1 heaping teaspoon each) onto the baking sheet. Garnish each piece with a little extra cheese. Bake the gougères for 5 minutes. Reduce the heat to 350°F and bake for an additional 25 minutes. Serve hot!