



# Food tasting can be work of art

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What if Monet and Picasso were limited to one color from a vibrant painter's palette? Although they would most likely produce a brilliant piece, albeit monotone, think of the impression imparted by full use of color and texture. The next time you entertain, do so with an artist's mentality; infuse the palates of guests with an array of flavors and fun. Try your hand at a tastings party.

## One canvas at a time

When planning a tastings party, start small.

"I love groups of six to eight people," explains Dina Cheney, author of "Tasting Club: Gathering Together to Share and Savor Your Favorite Tastes" (DinaCheney.com and @thenewmilks).

"That way everyone in the group has a chance to participate and get to know each other while learning about their own palates."

With so many tasting choices (wine, cheese, gelato, etc.) what's the best way to go about selecting what to feature?

"I always recommend sticking with one category," Cheney said, "such as chocolate or cheese. The one exception is if two categories pair beautifully together, such as wine and cheese or wine and chocolate."

Keep in mind that focusing on one category will allow guests the opportunity to fully experience the range of flavor of the specific food or beverage selected. For example, if Cheney is conducting a chocolate tasting, even if wine is served at the event, it's not the focus, but simply an accent to a range of chocolate varieties — dark, milk, semi-sweet, Ghirardelli versus Perugina.

## **Blind art: A matter of taste**

There are several fun ways to go about hosting a tasting. Offer guests a visceral experience by offering a blind taste test. For those seeking a casual and childlike feel, literally blindfold guests for each round of tastings. Withholding sight will heighten sense of taste.

For a more elegant atmosphere, ditch the blindfolds and simply conceal and label tastings as "selections No. 1, 2" — and so on. Either way, after guests have tasted all samples, the host reveals their true identities — from havarti and Gruyere to Brie and colby.

"I like my tastings blind, with only the host possessing the key so they know what everyone is tasting and can reveal the products' identities afterwards," Cheney said.

To help keep track of tasting items, Cheney suggests utilizing a "tasting grid" (available in her book) for specific tastings. Each guest can track his/her guesses as to what they think they're sampling.

It's also wise to offer guests palette cleansers. Cheney suggests providing crackers and water to do the trick.

## **Vino veritas and toast (and crackers)**

A longtime tasting favorite is wine, and you need not reside in the Napa or Sonoma valleys. Stephanie DeMasi, partner/general manager of Juslyn Vineyards and founder of Flywine (FlyWine.com), has hosted a fair share of wine tastings (she also happens to reside in wine country).

"I'm flex on the layout of wine tastings, but I make the suggestion to hosts that the most successful tastings have been covered dish events," DeMasi said. "I find it helps them to be less caught up on timing courses, cleaning in between, and guests tend to be more open about which wine they prefer."

DeMasi suggests starting with white wine and then transitioning to red.

"When dealing with reds, I often go vertical (meaning drinking a wine from several vintages to see how it ages) usually beginning with the oldest. I do this," DeMasi explains, "because old wine risks falling apart during a long tasting."

If a wine tasting doesn't include a meal, DeMasi recommends serving two to five types of cheese and crackers.

## **Art interpreting life ... in the kitchen**

Wine, cheese and chocolate are but the tip of the tasting iceberg.

"I love honey, cheese, apples, balsamic vinegar, olive oil, cured meats, tea and beer, with probably cured meats, balsamic vinegar and olive oil being the most unique," Cheney said.

Another way to format a tasting event is to ask each guest to bring an item. If, for example, olive oil is the signature tasting item, have guests each bring a different flavor and/or brand — garlic, basil, Filippo Berio or Colavita.

"I started a tasting group with an 'International Chip — You Bring the Dip Challenge,' " DeMasi said. "I purchased chips from all over the world (on Amazon) with unusual flavor profiles including smoked salmon with crème fraiche, lobster bake and minced pork, from places like India and Malaysia, Japan and Egypt. Guests brought dips ranging from hummus and caviar to traditional sour creams and bean dips, and even chocolate mousse."

No matter what's on the menu, do your homework. Research what supplies will be needed and if there are any special tasting requirements. OliveOilTimes.com offers a wealth of information on olive oil tastings, such as the methodology of the tasting itself: Begin by having each guest cover a small glass or cup containing a tablespoon or two of the oil with their hand, then swirl, sniff and sip.

"Go with six items per tasting," adds Cheney, "any more than that and you can get palate fatigue."

## **Seek the masters**

If time or expertise is lacking, there are business and catering companies that specialize in tastings.

"I think the most important thing is to look for someone who is a true expert in their field," Cheney said. "So, with wine, go with a master sommelier if you can. You also want someone intelligent with a dynamic personality, since they will be conducting the event."

Keep in mind that prices will vary depending on the size of the group and the category of tasting selected.

"For instance, wine is more expensive than apples, which are probably the cheapest category concept," Cheney said.