

## Trou du Cru, a petite Valentine treat

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I have been admiring the little 2-ounce Trou du Cru at cheese counters for years. They look adorable, like little caramel-colored pastries in muffin cups, and just the right size for two.

With Valentine's Day on the horizon, it seemed like a good time to invest in this mini-Epoisses - for that's exactly what it is - and decide whether it merits its high price.

Fromagerie Berthaut, Trou du Cru's creator, is among the most esteemed producers of Epoisses, the fragrant Burgundian cow's milk cheese. In the early 1980s, Berthaut devised Trou du Cru, a petite Epoisses matured for only four weeks. Like Epoisses, Trou du Cru is hand washed with brine as it ages to encourage the bacterial bloom on the rind, the source of the strong aroma; the final wash includes marc de Bourgogne, the local grape-must brandy.

It is difficult to maintain these little cheeses in prime form after they leave the dairy. If conditions are wrong, they dry out or get slimy. Because they are so small, they ripen quickly. The first example I purchased didn't look over the hill, but the aroma told another story: It reeked of ammonia, like a bag of smelling salts. What a waste.

Weeks later, at Oxbow Cheese Merchant in Napa, I found more little nubbins of Trou du Cru, each one covered by an inverted plastic cup to preserve humidity. The specimen I brought home was impeccable, with the barny, garlicky, meaty smells that I expect from Epoisses. The rind was pristine, and the ivory interior in fine condition - semisoft, even a little squishy, and not too salty. This little guy packed a lot of power; to tone it down, I spread it on bread.

Eight dollars doesn't seem like an extravagance for a cheese that will satisfy two on a special evening, but do the math. That's \$64 a pound. But rationality takes a backseat to desire sometimes, and if Valentine's Day isn't one of those times, what is?

The cheese overwhelms most still wines. Sparkling wine can work, but a little glass of Poire Williams or kirsch is spot on.

Look for Trou du Cru at Say Cheese and Rainbow Grocery in San Francisco, the Pasta Shop in Oakland, the Cheese Board in Berkeley, Draeger's in Menlo Park, Oxbow Cheese Merchant in Napa and at many Whole Foods stores.

**Next up:** Devil's Gulch, a new seasonal cheese from Cowgirl Creamery

There's been a lot of talk about the recall. Here are the facts for our customers.

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**Janet Fletcher is the author of "Cheese & Wine: A Guide to Selecting, Pairing, and Enjoying" and "The Cheese Course," both from Chronicle Books.**

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