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PAIRING CHEESE AND WINE has become a new passion for Sue Okvay (left) and Tracy Hiller, who operate the Cedar Valley Cheese Store. The retail outlet has been open since 2006, but only added wine to its offerings last November. A cheese hat-topped bottle of white wine has proven to be a popular choice during the Green Bay Packers' playoff drive.

Photos by Mark Jaeger

Selection of Wisconsin wines gives customers one-stop shopping option

Like peanut butter and jelly, or perhaps gin and tonic, few things go as well together as wine and cheese.

That was the rationale used by Tracy Hiller and Sue Okvay when they added wine to the selection of items sold at the Cedar Valley Cheese
Store on Highway 57 in the Town of Fredonia late this fall.

The retail outlet, which specializes in cheeses made on site as well as from dairies around the state, opened in 2006.

When the notion was pitched to officials from the Town of Fredonia, the store owners said they wanted to offer "one-stop shopping" for customers buying gifts or planning a party.

"Shortly after we opened, we began hearing from customers asking if we would ever consider adding a selection of wine," Hiller said.

"We got all sorts of ideas of what we would like to do with the store, and offering wine was one of them. It is just a natural," Okvay added.

Some of those dreams can become reality now that the store has more than doubled its retail space, to about 3,000 square feet.

The store contacted a couple wine vendors, asking for recommendations on popular Wisconsin-made wines.

“Because our focus is on Wisconsin cheese, it was natural to want to feature local wines, too,” Hiller said.

The store’s wine list has grown to 35 varieties, and that roster is growing as customers request specific labels and vendors make
recommendations. The biggest winemakers featured at the store are Wollersheim from Prairie du Sac and Cedar Creek from Cedarburg.
So far, the reception has been strong.

“We did really well during Christmas selling favorite wines by the case. The baskets with wines and cheese were also a big hit that sold out quickly,” Okvay said

“We are hoping the selection of wine will eventually draw more people to the store, especially when the weather gets nicer and people are driving past at vacation time.”

Neither Hiller nor Okvay is passionate about wines, confessing general preferences for sweet Cocovine and dry reisling, respectively.

But they said they are learning more about the varieties, and especially how they are best paired with cheeses.

“In talking with experts, we’ve learned that the best pairings of wine and cheese play off each other,” Okvay said.

“One of the first things we learned is that you want to keep your paired wine and cheese in balance. A strongly flavored cheese should be matched with a full-bodied wine, which is actually the opposite of what I would have thought.”

Using that rule of thumb, the store staff recommends pairing a baby Swiss cheese with a subtle Chardonnay or white Zinfandel. A hearty cheddar or colby would go better with Cabarnet Sauvignon or a red Zinfandel, according to the store owners.

A detailed listing is available for virtually any cheese, matching them with complementary wines and foods.

Customers can make up their own minds when the store hosts Saturday samplings, with pairings available to taste.

“Often someone will come in the store on Saturday with no intention of buying wine. Then they sample the pairing, see how well they go together, and walk out with some wine and cheese,” Hiller said.

Expert advice is always available at the store if a customer has a favorite cheese but doesn’t know what wine would bring out its full flavor.
“We all go to the samplings and I’ve learned a lot,” Okvay said.

The wine selection may not be the last change at the store. The owners said they are already toying with several other possibilities, including the addition of soups and sandwiches.

“One thing we definitely won’t be doing is selling wine by the glass. We have no intention of becoming a bar,” Hiller said.

The store is a small part of the Cedar Valley Cheese brand, which has been making cheese since 1947.

Relying on milk collected from area dairy farmers, the cheese factory specializes in mozzarella and provolone. Those cheeses are used extensively by food makers in the U.S., Mexico and Canada.

The store’s winter hours are from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturdays through Thursdays, and 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Fridays.