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## Quattro Pepe sweet 'n' spicy

The Cheese Course

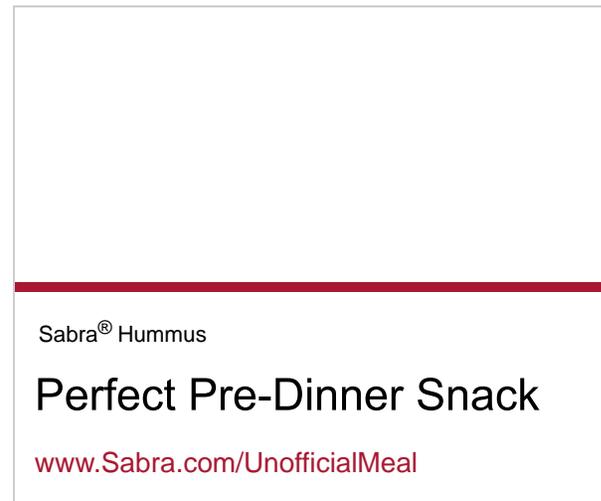
By **Janet Fletcher** Published 4:36 pm, Friday, November 30, 2012



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Peppercorns in Nicolau Farms Quattro Pepe give it a floral scent.

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A fourth-generation dairy farmer in Stanislaus County, **Walter Nicolau** started his own enterprise a dozen years ago with one goat. He was 20 years old.

Today he milks about 150 mostly Alpine goats on his Modesto farm and produces 15 cheeses, including several flavored fresh chevres.

Like many novice cheese makers, Nicolau started modestly, with rindless fresh chevre, but has worked up to more challenging recipes.

Two years ago, he debuted an aged peppercorn-studded goat wheel firm enough to shave into winter salads. **Christened Quattro Pepe** ("four peppercorns"), the Gouda-style cheese offers a pale ivory interior dotted with black, white, green and pink peppercorns. It reminds me of Capricorns from Oregon's Tumalo Farms, although Quattro Pepe is a smaller wheel and not quite as polished.

Nicolau uses a technique known as curd washing, a common procedure in Gouda production. By draining whey from the curd and replacing it with water, the cheese maker minimizes the lactose available for bacteria to eat. As a result, the finished wheel has less lactic acid and a more mellow taste.

Quattro Pepe is a farmstead cheese, meaning that Nicolau uses only his own milk and makes the cheese on his farm. He buys some sheep's milk from a neighbor to make an aged mixed-milk wheel called Misto Stagionato, which I have not tasted. This summer, an Italian cheese maker spent a week on the farm, teaching Nicolau some traditional Italian recipes,

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so we may be seeing some robiolas and pecorino-like cheeses from him in the future.

Made with pasteurized milk and matured for about three months, the wheels of Quattro Pepe sold in the Bay Area weigh about 3 1/2 pounds. The exterior has a polymer coating to prevent mold from growing, so you'll want to trim the rind away.

The smooth interior is semi-firm to firm, neither creamy nor quite dry enough to grate. The peppercorns produce a robust floral scent. There are a lot of them for a table cheese, so I picked many of them out and just enjoyed the spicy flavor they left behind.

A malty abbey-style ale, such as Brother David's Double from Anderson Valley Brewing, would complement this cheese's sweetness and stand up to its spice.

Look for Nicolau Farms Quattro Pepe at Rainbow Grocery and Whole Foods Noe Valley in San Francisco, some Mollie Stone's stores, Good Earth in Fairfax, Pasta Shop in Berkeley and **Sunshine Foods** in St. Helena.

**Next up:** Persille du Beaujolais, a cow's milk blue cheese from France.

**Janet Fletcher** teaches cheese-appreciation classes and is the author of "Cheese & Wine: A Guide to Selecting, Pairing, and Enjoying" and "The Cheese Course," both from Chronicle Books. Go to [www.janetfletcher.com](http://www.janetfletcher.com) for a class schedule, or contact her at [fletcher@foodwriter.com](mailto:fletcher@foodwriter.com).

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