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Young mixed-milk Bianchina already a winner

By **Janet Fletcher** Published 4:19 pm, Friday, May 17, 2013



Nicolau Farms' Bianchina can be aged at home for an even creamier texture and stronger aroma.



A new mixed-milk cheese from Nicolau Farms, Bianchina ("the little white one") has already secured a prestigious spot in the Williams-Sonoma catalog. How exhilarating to taste a cheese that finds its footing right out of the gate.

Fourth-generation dairyman **Walter Nicolau** raises mostly Alpine goats on his Modesto farm, but he bought two Jersey cows this past winter to stretch his goat's milk.

"This was my first attempt to make soft-ripened cheese," says Nicolau, a largely self-taught cheesemaker. "I've been afraid to work with mold, and

with mixed milk because you hear horror stories about the proper ratio."

I'm not sure what scary scenarios could emerge from mixing cow's and goat's milk, but Nicolau need not have worried. He settled on 60 percent cow's milk to 40 percent goat's milk for the bloomy-rind Bianchina, a 2-pound wheel that he releases at about 15 days.

In that brief time, it develops a damp rind and more aroma than I anticipate in such a young cheese. I noted hints of lemon and mushroom mingled with an intriguing herbaceous scent that reminded me of celery and parsley.

The pale paste had the dense texture of cream cheese and a cultured-milk tang, the result of a long, slow fermentation. Nicolau attributes the creaminess to the rich Jersey milk, so high in butterfat that it tastes almost like half-and-half.

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The salt is pronounced - maybe too much so for some tasters - but that didn't dampen my pleasure. If I were the cheese maker - and, thank heavens, I'm not - I would work on getting the rind to cling to the paste instead of pulling away.

Nicolau can't make Bianchina fast enough, but he has held back a few wheels for his own enjoyment. Matured for 45 to 60 days, the cheese is "phenomenal," he says.

If you want to try aging a wheel at home, buy a whole cheese, wrap it in breathable cheese paper and keep it in a cardboard box in the refrigerator for another month or so. No guarantees - I haven't tried this myself - but Bianchina should just get creamier and more aromatic. If you smell even a whiff of ammonia, you have gone too far.

Look for Bianchina at Haight Street Market, Rainbow Grocery, Other Avenues and Little Vine in San Francisco; Pasta Shop in Oakland; Cheese Board in Berkeley; Petaluma Market; Oliver's Market (multiple locations);

and Oxbow Cheese Merchant in Napa.

Pour an unoaked, crisp white wine with this delicate cheese.

Next up: Tomme des Pyrenees.

Janet Fletcher teaches cheese-appreciation classes and is the author of "Cheese & Beer," "Cheese & Wine" and "The Cheese Course." Visit www.janetfletcher.com for a class schedule, or contact her at fletcher@foodwriter.com.

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