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**ASPEN COCKTAIL CLUB PACKS A PUNCH!
EASY APRÈS-SKI ■ FLOUR POWER ■ SOUP NIGHT
25 COLORADO PRODUCTS WE THINK YOU'LL LOVE**

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Punch & Cheese = Party With Ease

Easy entertaining after a day in the snow

Confession: I might just be the world's laziest cook. Despite this, my idea of entertaining doesn't involve dumping a bag of Doritos in a bowl, popping the lid on some bean dip and calling it a day. Not, as Seinfeld would say, that there's anything wrong with that.

I've always believed that if you use great ingredients, you don't need to mess with them. Even if your idea of a good time is devoting a week to prepping for a dinner party, I think we can all agree that entertaining should be fun, rather than aneurysm-inducing.

An après-ski party is a stress-free way to show off your culinary and bartending skills, while allowing you time to mingle and relax. Don't believe me? Here's how a bowl of booze and a cheese plate will make your next party rock.

Feeling punchy

If you want to serve something seasonal, festive and (generally) budget-friendly, pre-batched drinks are the answer. They eliminate the need to play bartender, make cleanup a snap and prevent certain party-goers from getting too loose with the free-pour (you know who they are).

Plus, Colorado's spirits scene has exploded in recent years as a growing number of micro-distillers have taken a cue from the state's craft beer industry and launched top-shelf liquors. Palisade's award-winning Peach Street Distillers is known for the locally sourced fruit used in their peach and pear brandies and eau de vie line. Breckenridge Distillery, claiming to be "the world's highest" at 9,600 feet, is accumulating awards for its bourbon, bitters,

*By Laurel Millen
Photographs
by Chris Council
and Emily Chaplin*





liqueur and vodka made with local snowmelt. Closer to the Roaring Fork Valley, companies like the Hotchkiss-based Peak Spirits and Woody Creek Distillers use Colorado produce and, often, Colorado grain to craft terroir-centric spirits.

In short, punch is the perfect excuse to explore these new libations.

After my collegiate years stripped me of any desire to imbibe batched drinks I hadn't given punch much thought until I attended the punch seminar that Jim Meehan, Aspen Chefs Club mixology consultant and owner of New York's PDT cocktail bar, hosted at last June's Food & Wine Classic. I instantly overcame my aversion with a single sip of his three-ingredient, bourbon-based Gold Rush punch.

Contrary to what the name evokes, a punch shouldn't be a sickly sweet concoction. Like any cocktail, it should have balanced flavors and fit the occasion and menu. "Just remember: We taste with our eyes first," says Meehan. "Less is more when it comes to ingredients."

With that in mind, I asked three of Aspen's top mixologists—Anthony Bohlinger, Joshua Peter Smith and Jimmy Yeager, who this fall launched the Aspen Cocktail Club (see sidebar, page 28)—to develop and pair punches made from award-winning Colorado spirits to sweet and savory cheese plates of my creation.

Creating a great cheese plate

I find cheese plates to be the ultimate party accessory, because they're easy to assemble and never fail to impress. Most people also find choosing cheeses intimidating, and I enjoy convincing them otherwise. The key to a successful cheese plate is to keep things simple, and to try to taste before you purchase (City Market and Whole Foods both offer samples on request).

When I'm putting together a savory cheese plate, I like rustic, strong-flavored cheeses. Think Alpine styles like Comté or Beaufort; soft, oozy, washed rinds like Epoisses or Rush Creek Reserve; and something aged to finish, such as a 2-year Gouda. Served alongside good salami, country-style pâté, a crumple of silky prosciutto or chunks of sausage, your cheese plate can easily become a meal.

On the side, provide a small dish of grainy mustard, with marinated olives, cornichons or other pickled vegetables and a hearty rye or pumpernickel bread. Alternatively, toasted nuts and fresh or dry fruit and a crusty baguette make for a lighter, more refined plate.

On the sweeter side, cheese is frequently served as a dessert course, accompanied by jam, perhaps a chunk of honeycomb,

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and nuts and fresh or dried fruit. Add some toasted slices of walnut bread or crackers, and you have a sophisticated alternative to a traditional dessert.

At this time of year, chutney or fruit butter fits well on a sweet cheese plate. You can also try preserved summer fruits like cherries, peaches or plums. Berries, cherries and figs are particularly lovely with blue, fresh (un-aged) or soft-ripened cheeses; try peaches, dates, apples or pears with a mild washed-rind cheese like *Delice du Jura* or aged Cheddar.

Ideally, you should plate cheeses clockwise, increasing in intensity (this will prevent a strong cheese from overpowering the palate; since you don't want to hover over your guests, try placing cheese cards on your offerings so people know what they're eating).

Something else to consider: Cheese is a seasonal food. Fresh cheeses like mozzarella, chevre and ricotta were traditionally made during the spring and summer months, when dairy animals give birth and begin lactating. Aged cheeses such as Cheddar, Gruyère or Parmigiano Reggiano were historically consumed during the lean winter months as an essential form of protein and other nutrients.

As agriculture became industrialized, dairy species were domesticated and genetically selected to produce more milk, and extending the lactation cycle was adopted as a practice in industrial dairy farming. You'll still find that your favorite small-scale cheese makers only produce certain cheeses at specific times of the year. eA



Joshua Peter Smith

Slippery Slope Punch

Joshua Peter Smith, Justice Snow's

- 1/8 cup loose-leaf Earl Grey tea
- 1 cup Great Divide Colette Farmhouse Ale
- 2 1/2 cups Breckenridge Distillery Bourbon Whiskey
- 1 1/2 cups late-harvest German Riesling wine
- 3 ounces Lustau Manzanilla Sherry
- 1/3 cup Burgundy wine
- 8 whole star anise pods
- 1/3 cup fresh lemon juice
- 1/3 cup fresh orange juice
- 8 dashes Angostura Bitters
- 6 dashes Fee Brothers Black Walnut Bitters
- 3 lemons sliced into thin wheels
- 2 pounds large chunk ice

Bring 3 cups water to a boil and steep tea for 3 minutes. Strain, and cool to room temperature. Combine all ingredients and place in a punch bowl with ice.

The word **punch**

is a loanword from Hindi *panch* (meaning five) and the drink was originally made with five ingredients: alcohol, sugar, lemon, water and tea or spice. However, it has evolved over the years to cover many different types of drinks with greatly varying flavors, ingredients and levels of potency.

Today, classically, a punch will contain some version of the original five ingredients with a form of bitter or tart as a substitute for the lemon, some variation of dilution for the water and something herbal or spice driven. eA





Anthony Bohlinger



Jimmy Yeager

Rock Orchard Punch

Anthony Bohlinger, Chefs Club by Food & Wine

- 2 cups CapRock Gin
- 8 cups unsweetened apple cider
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cups chamomile simple syrup (recipe follows)
- 1 ounce Bittered Sling Orange & Juniper Extract (can substitute equal amounts of Angostura and orange bitters)
- 1 bottle ginger beer (optional)
- 1 orange, thinly sliced into wheels
- 1 lemon, thinly sliced into wheels
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 2 large sage leaves
- 1 teaspoon peeled, freshly grated ginger
- Ice

Combine all ingredients in a punch bowl and fill with ice. Use a ladle to serve into cups and garnish with an orange wheel and a sage leaf.

For the Chamomile Syrup

- 1 cup water
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 4 teaspoons loose-leaf chamomile tea

Combine water, sugar and tea in a small saucepan. Bring to a boil until sugar dissolves, and steep over low heat for 20 minutes. Remove from heat, strain and refrigerate in a clean jar with a tight-fitting lid for up to 2 weeks.

Figs in “Disa-pear” Punch

Jimmy Yeager and his Aspen Cocktail Club mixologists, Jimmy’s

- 1 bottle Woody Creek Distillers Vodka
- $\frac{2}{4}$ cups Peach Street Distillers Pear Brandy
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups fig-infused simple syrup, or to taste (recipe follows, or may substitute with fig jam)
- 1 ounce either Dale DeGroff’s Aromatic Pimento Bitters or Colorado-based Dram Apothecary Honey Chamomile Bitters
- 3 cups chamomile tea
- Block ice

Combine all ingredients in a punch bowl and add block ice. Serve immediately.

For the Fig Simple Syrup

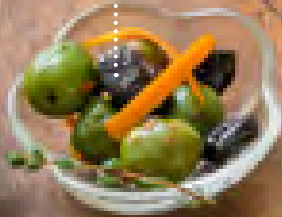
- 1 cup dried figs, chopped
- 2 cups water
- 1 cup sugar

In a small saucepan, simmer chopped figs in 2 cups of water. The longer you simmer them, the more concentrated the flavor will be. When desired strength is achieved (add more water if necessary), add 1 cup sugar to water and stir until dissolved. Remove from heat.

Pearl Street
Pickled Onions
and pickled High
Desert Peppers
from Boulder's
MM Local



Marinated olives with orange
peel, fresh thyme, crushed
garlic and chile flakes



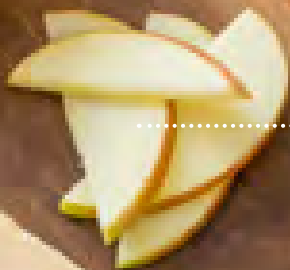
Belford, from James
Ranch Artisan Cheese
in Durango; it's a
buttery, Dutch-style
cow's milk cheese
with hints of grass
and a tangy finish



Semi-soft, tangy goat
cheese with citrus notes
called Cabra Blanca,
by Basalt's Avalanche
Cheese Company



Western Slope
apples



Marcona
almonds



Strawberry Peak, a
cow/sheep mixed
milk cheese from
Utah's Snowy
Mountain Sheep
Creamery. It's
redolent of toast
and cream, with
hints of mushroom



Signature prosciutto and sopressata
from Creminelli Fine Meats in Salt
Lake City. Their charcuterie is made
from heritage hogs raised on family
farms in Utah and Iowa



savory cheese board

Fruit and nut bread

Sour Cherry Almond
Amaretto Jam from
Denver's Puff's Preserves

Semi-firm, buttery
and slightly sharp cow's
milk cheese called Dark
Canyon Edam, from
Rockhill Creamery in
Richmond, Utah

Shepherd's Halo from
Larkspur's Fruition
Farms, an earthy
sheep's milk cheese
with hints of cream
and a satiny paste

Toasted
walnuts

Honeycomb from
Grampa's Honey
in Alamosa adds
some sweetness
to the plate

The classic Midnight
Blue goat cheese
from Avalanche
Cheese Company in
Basalt offers hints
of blueberry and
earth, with a slightly
effervescent finish

sweet cheese board

DIY BLOCK Ice

We find it best to make a large block of ice to use in the punch bowl. Not only is it aesthetically pleasing but it also controls the dilution best. Regular cube ice will melt and dilute fairly quickly and the punch will lose its character after a short while. A large block of ice can be easily made by taking a plastic container and using it as a mold in your freezer. Allow at least a full day and night to freeze, depending on size. Block ice can also be purchased at most markets and rough-cut to size with an ice pick.

ALSO: For those who want crystal-clear ice that can be made at home, here is a method that works very well. Buy (or use, if you already have one) a small insulated ice chest. Fill it with five to eight inches of water and set it in your freezer with the lid off. The water will freeze directionally from the top to the bottom as the sides and bottom are insulated. When the water is completely frozen, remove it from the freezer and allow it to melt a bit so it can easily be removed from the chest. The top 80 percent of the block will be clear and all the “cloudy” ice will be a layer on the bottom. The bottom can be melted off with an iron or in a skillet on very low heat. Do not apply heat if the block is still freezer cold as it will crack. It’s worth the effort as it adds a “wow!” effect to the punch.

— Jimmy Yeager

Here's where to get cozy with a cocktail this winter

Aspen Cocktail Club: This collaborative Thursday-night event is the brainchild of Chefs Club by Food & Wine Executive Beverage Director Anthony Bohlinger. “My inspiration was to create an organization focused on cocktail culture and history and interesting, small-production spirits,” he says, “where locals and visitors alike could share my enthusiasm and love for mixed drinks.”

Bohlinger enlisted two fellow Aspen mixologists, Jimmy Yeager of Jimmy’s and Joshua Peter Smith of Justice Snow’s, to help him transform the event into the grown-up version of a pub crawl. Every Thursday at 6 p.m., cocktail lovers gather in the courtyard outside of Chefs Club and amble to all three sister bars. Each stop features two specialty cocktails, priced at \$8 and focused on a theme such as pisco, or whiskey-based drinks. Participants can expect to go home with recipes, tricks of the trade and some great anecdotes. [Facebook.com/AspenCocktailClub](https://www.facebook.com/AspenCocktailClub)

CapRock Farm Bar: Hotchkiss’s Peak Spirits opened this sweet little spot in The Source, Denver’s new indoor market, in September. The Farm Bar features farmstead gin, vodka, eau de vie, bitters and white (un-aged) whiskey tastings, along with cocktails made with North Fork Valley and Front Range produce. To nibble, there’s specialty cheese, and house-made charcuterie and bread from neighboring Mondo Food and Babette’s Bakery. [Facebook.com/CapRockFarmBar](https://www.facebook.com/CapRockFarmBar)

Après-Ski Cocktail Classic: The second annual edition of this fête will take place March 13–16 in Snowmass Village. Dedicated to the “best of the best in après-ski culture,” this, ahem, spirited extravaganza includes mountaintop parties, hot toddies, seminars, fireside chats, a Grand Tasting Village and the “first Great Après-Ski Pub Crawl” (save room for the fondue and raclette). [ApresSkiCocktailClassic.com](https://www.apresSkiCocktailClassic.com) 