



Pecorino Romano

Pecorino Romano traces its roots back to ancient Rome. Pecora means “sheep” in Italian and thus lends its name to this cheese made from 100% sheep’s (ewe’s) milk. The Latium area of Rome—the left bank area of the Tiber River—is seen as the birthplace of the cheese and thus the label -” Romano”. The legions of Caesar often dined on a diet of fava beans and Pecorino-Romano. Its long-term stability made it an ideal staple for the well-traveled Roman army. Today Tuscany, Lazio and Sardinia are the chief producing areas of this cheese. Sardinia now claims over 97% of the Italian production. The Locattelli Brand/Ambriola Company is the leading Italian producer and exporter of Pecorino-Romano cheese and the American sales leader for the pre-grated variety.

This cheese is usually aged 5-8 months and shaped into wheels weighing around 45-77 lbs. Usually it has a mottled black rind, embossed with the sheep’s head logo, but sometimes it has a natural yellowish rind. One interesting note is that few cheeses can be deemed to be vegetarian since their production depends on rennet (enzymes squeezed from the stomach and intestines of slaughtered animals). Lamb rennet is used to create the curds that eventually become a wheel of Pecorino-Romano. Since it is made from lamb rennet and sheep’s milk it is more easily digested by those who are lactose intolerant.

There are other popular variations such as Caprino Romano—made from goat’s milk and Vacchino Romano—made from cow’s milk but their production and sales are dwarfed by sales of Pecorino Romano cheese. To protect the integrity and tradition of the product and the public from buying fakes, the DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata) prints

Let’s talk cheese. Specifically, Italian grana or cheeses used by many for grating. First, I apologize if I’m not naming your favorite, but I’m concentrating on the 2 most popular Italian grating cheeses (as judged by pounds sold). These sales figures tell us that the Italian central and southern regions prefer Pecorino Romano slightly over the Parmigiano Reggiano, the “King of Cheese” preferred by the rest of Italy. Join me as we enjoy a bite of each.

a sheep’s head logo somewhere on the cheese container (grated) or on the rind itself of a cheese wheel.

Parmigiano-Reggiano

Let’s now journey North to Parma. Here we find the licensed daily production of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese centered in the Parma, Reggio-Emilia areas and to a lesser degree in Modena, Bologna and Mantua. A total of only 350 of the 3000 Italian dairies can produce this cows’ milk cheese. Strict regulations dictate that the cows can be fed—only hay from the region/ no corn or silage. Tradition dictates that the evening milk must sit so that the cream can be skimmed off the next morning by the cheesemaker who mixes this skimmed milk with the morning’s first milking. The natural bacteria in the milk from the cows’ regulated diet react with the rennet and whey in copper vats where the mixture is slowly stirred as heat is applied. Huge balls of curd are then created and squeezed of excess water and put into forms under the watchful guidance of a master cheesemaker. A typical wheel of Parmigiano-Reggiano



weighs around 84 lbs., is 9 inches high and 16-18 inches around. Typically, the cheese is aged for around 2 years but varieties like—“stravecchio” aged for 3 years and “stravecchiones”—aged 4 years or more, are highly prized. The “del Consozio del Formaggio Parmigiano Reggiano” regulates the 350 producers and protects the integrity of the cheese on the world-wide market. It has a golden ring that is embossed

with stencils pressed into the cheese rind during the molding process. The stencil continuously repeats that it is Parmigiano-Reggiano and adds a production date, the dairy, and the cheesemaker. It is inspected and once ok’d given a heat-branded stamp onto the rind stating that it is the “King of Cheese”—Parmigiano-Reggiano. These DOC marks again protect the public from imitations and recognize that true cheesemaking is an art. Within the European Union of nations, strict compliance with the name is mandatory. Larry Olmstead in his book Real Food-Fake Food stated “...Parmigiano-Reggiano is allowed to contain only three very simple ingredients: milk (produced in the Parma/Reggio region and less than 20 hours from cow to cheese), salt, and rennet (a natural enzyme from calf intestine). Three other ingredients, Cellulose Powder, Potassium Sorbate, and Cheese Cultures are not allowed and will not be found in Parmigiano-Reggiano. They are completely illegal in its production. If these ingredients are in your cheese it is not the real deal...” Here lies the opportunity to educate oneself and read the label on grated “Parmesan” cheeses. They often contain vegetable, yeast, mold or mushroom rennet and/or the ingredients listed above. Make your own judgement if such ingredients are a bad thing. They’re just not in the real thing. In the hustle and bustle of today’s world, we find ourselves often using pre-grated cheese. To the connoisseur, grated cheese happens only one way. You get a fresh wedge cut from the wheel and then immediately grate it and use it. So, treat yourself. When and if you can, avoid the mass-produced, pretend cheese and visit an Italian import or cheese store. Go get a chunk of one of the cheeses described here or your favorite. Just remember, real Italian craft cheese can be costly but the aroma in the store is free.