

The Cheese Club

Cheese Notes Offer 05/04

boschetto al tartufo bianchetto*

cow and sheep's milk, fresh, with white truffle

Tuscany, Italy

In *Pleasures of the Italian Table* Burton Anderson says that “truffles are not just a food to be dug up like potatoes...but treasures to unearth with ritual respect and to cherish...like fine gems.” Found in Tuscany, Romagna and Piedmont (home of the most coveted Alba truffles), white truffles have an affinity with cheese, which is evident in the beautiful balance of flavours found in the Boschetto al Tartufo Bianchetto.

Boschetto al Tartufo Bianchetto is produced by Il Forteto, an agricultural commune situated on 650 acres in the Muggelano valley just outside Florence. Established only in the early 1980's, it now supports over fifty families, with one of its primary goals being to provide a working environment for disadvantaged and disabled city children. Il Forteto is largely self sufficient, and is run on organic and biodynamic principles. Its cheese production has steadily grown over the past twenty years and it now produces twenty per cent of all Tuscan DOP Pecorino.

Upon unwrapping the Boschetto al Tartufo Bianchetto, the powerful and pungent aroma of truffles is unmistakable! It is made from a careful blend of sheep and cow's milk. A fresh cheese, it has a quite delicate and sweet pate. Shavings of the prized white truffle give this mild and tender cheese its rich and pronounced truffle flavour. This is a cheese to enjoy on its own and savour.

*Please note we have a limited amount of this cheese.

brillo pecorino di vino

sheep's milk, semi-hard, wine washed

Tuscany, Italy

Also from the Il Forteto agricultural cooperative comes this wine washed Pecorino. The Tuscan word *brillo* means 'high and merry', or 'tipsy', which this cheese certainly is after spending a month bathing in a terracotta pitcher filled with wine!

Pecorino, or sheep's milk cheese, has been produced since Etruscan times in Italy and dates back almost two thousand years to a time when shepherding was the principle means of livelihood for many. Preserving cheese in wine is also not a new process. It was a well-known practice in Roman times. But this archaic style of cheese making, recently revived, is no longer primarily about

preserving cheese. It is rather about changing the character of the original cheese and creating a cheese that is subtly different from the original.

Making a good wine cheese is a careful process –the cheese itself to begin with must be a good cheese, as must the wine. To create Brillo Pecorino di Vino, the cheese is initially matured for four months. It is then washed, dried and cured for a further month in wine filled terracotta pitchers. A combination of two wines is used - Il Ruffino from Chianti and a local red from Mugello.

The skill and experience of the cheese maker is vital in judging the curing time of the cheese in the wine, as this will vary depending on such things as temperature and humidity that affect the rate of absorption.

Rich wine aromas are immediately evident, and permeate the pate of the cheese without overpowering it. The cheese retains the typical savoury flavours of a mature Pecorino, but is softer and sweeter than the original.

fontina DOP

cow's milk, cooked curd, hard

Val d'Aosta, Italy

Fontina is a genuine mountain cheese, made since ancient times in the spectacular mountainous Val D'Aosta region of Northern Italy. Documentation for its production dates as far back as 1270. The exact origin of the name is disputed – it is either from the pastures of Fontin or from the village of Fontina. Fontina has been recognised by DOC since 1955, and the genuine twenty kilogram wheels of cheese are all imprinted with a symbol of a mountain enclosed in a circle.

A true Fontina can only be made from fresh milk between May and late September when the red spotted Valdostana cows graze the high alpine pastures. Cheeses are hand-made in small batches and ripening is strictly controlled. A minimum of four months maturation is required in a natural environment such as caves or abandoned copper mine shafts, dug deep into the mountains, where humidity and temperature are constant.

A mature Fontina cheese has a thin, terracotta rind and semi-soft, supple texture. Fontina makes an excellent table cheese with its the delicate texture and sweet floral flavours. It is as a cooking cheese, however, that Fontina is truly exceptional because of its low melting temperature and rich, nutty, condensed flavours. Fontina becomes soft and incredibly buttery when gently heated and is the main ingredient for fonduta, the Italian fondue (see below for a traditional recipe).

piave

cow's milk, cooked curd hard

Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Italy

A close cousin to the better known Montasio, Piave is made in the Gorizia region of north-west of Venice, from milk collected in dairy farms located only in the Province of Belluno. Made on the banks of the Val di Carni, through which the River Piave, that gives the cheese its name, flows. Cattle graze on the native *cicoria* or chicory, which gives Piave its distinctive taste. The prevailing

breed in the region is the Brown Mountain Cow – a rustic and hardy breed bred in the mountains both for its milk and meat.

The cooperative method of cheese production used in the production of Piave was first established in Belluno in the late eighteenth century. It was the result of the initiative of a local parish priest in order to better manage the resources of the area, which had been hit by a serious economic slump. The establishment of such cooperatives allowed for greater economies of scale and made a strong contribution to local dairy traditions. They also had a vital role in the preservation of cheese making techniques, many of which would otherwise have been lost in the upheavals and the pressure for modernisation that occurred during and after the Second World War.

A member of the cooked-curd family of cheeses, the wheels of Piave for this Cheese Club Offer have been maturing in our Cheeseroom since the beginning of the year and are beginning to exhibit some wonderful aged characteristics. Easily recognisable due to the word Piave being stamped vertically around the rind, the cheeses display many of the sweet, fruity characteristics of a Parmigiano Reggiano, along with more complex and earthy flavours due to its natural rind and careful maturation. Mature Piave has wonderful tropical fruit and nut flavours. With its incredibly long finish, Piave is a rare treat. Serve with the spicy fruit flavours of the Mostardo d’Uva.

parmigiano reggiano DOP

cow's milk, hard

Emilia-Romagna Italy

Parmigiano Reggiano has been called “the complete cheese, the true aristocrat” (Luigi Carnacinao). One of Italy’s most famous exports, it has been produced the same way for at least eight hundred years. It is produced throughout the provinces of Modena, Reggio, Emilia and Parma, and in designated regions of Bologna and Mantua.

The strict standards to which it can be made were first set down in 1934 by the Consorzio del Formaggio Parmigiano Reggiano. Parmigiano Reggiano can only be made in its *zona tipica*, ensuring that the milk comes from cattle fed on the zone’s fresh grass, rather than on silage or fodder from other locations. The milk for the cheeses is from two separate milkings, morning and evening, and when the two milkings are combined most of the naturally accumulated fat is skimmed off. The milk is then heated slowly in huge copper cauldrons over open fires and the curd is cut into very fine particles and lifted into a large piece of cloth with a wooden paddle and gently pressed to expel the remaining whey. The wheels are stencilled with the words Parmigiano Reggiano, the code number of the dairy at which it was made, the Consorzio mark and the date of production (this practice began in 1964).

The cheeses are regularly turned in their moulds until they are placed in huge brine baths for about three weeks. The salt creates a rind for the cheese essential for its proper and lengthy maturation. The cheeses are given brief exposure to the sun and then taken to the *cascina* (climate controlled warehouse) and placed on wooden shelves where they are regularly brushed

and turned. Unusually, the majority of Parmigiano Reggiano is still made by small local producers, with the average dairy making eight wheels a day.

Wheels of Parmigiano Reggiano are required under DOP to weigh at least 33 kg with a maximum weight of 44 kg. Parmigiano Reggiano must be aged for at least 14 months, and many cheeses are aged for 2 years or more, such as the wheel we have for this Cheese Club Offer that is almost three years old. Parmigiano Reggiano Vecchio is aged between 1 and 24 months, and Parmigiano Reggiano Stravecchio is aged between 24 and 36 months. It is often recommended in Italy for pregnant women, the elderly and children owing to its high nutritional value, easy digestibility and richness in calcium and phosphorus.

Parmigiano Reggiano should be sold soon after the cheese is cut and not handled at all on the cut face as this encourages mould growth, giving the cheese an unpleasant mouldy taste. The colour should be golden and, like a cliff face, flaky but moist. The flavour can be entirely fruity and sweet, sometimes pineappley, with a consistent granular crunch from the calcium crystals that form as the cheese ages. The flavour is long and often caramelly from the cooking of the curd resulting in caramelised milk sugars. Most commonly used in cooking, it is an excellent table cheese, and is often eaten as an aperitif with a glass of crisp white wine.

bontazola

cow's milk , blue mould

Lombardy, Italy

According to one folk tale Gorgonzola was discovered when the curds from the evening and the following morning's milkings were mixed and then forgotten during the festivities following the herdsmen's return from the summer grazing pastures. Another related version tells of an unknown innkeeper from Lombardy, who had been dishing up mouldy 'stracchino' (a soft Italian Cheese) to passers-by. The unusual flavour was embraced by the locals and so, it is believed, a cheese was born. We'll never know how reliable these tales are, but we do know that Gorgonzola dates back to at least 879AD and is certainly one of the oldest named cheeses.

Bontazola is also known as Gorgonzola 'Dolce Latte', literally meaning 'sweet milk' and refers to its sweeter, creamy flavour than that of Gorgonzola Piccante. It is a modern version of Gorgonzola designed for those who prefer a milder flavoured blue. Although there are more than 80 companies who are members of The Association for the Protection of Gorgonzola, we choose to sell Bontazola made by the Mauri family, one of the few companies to still make Gorgonzola using traditional methods.

As with Gorgonzola Piccante, Bontazola must be made with milk from within the defined region. The quality of the cheese is a direct result of the use of the late autumn milk, after the cows come down from their alpine grazing during the Spring and Summer months. This whole milk is heated in huge cauldrons and milk enzymes are added with rennet and *Penicillium* spores. The cheeses are hand-salted before maturation in underground cellars. Each cheese is supported using a collar of wooden slats and after approximately four weeks

maturation they are spiked with stainless steel needles, to encourage the blue grey veins to form.

Bontazola has the characteristic sweetness of a dolce Gorgonzola with a somewhat fruity, aromatic flavour. It is pale in colour with characteristic bluey-green veins. Its texture is supple, creamy and luscious, softer than Gorgonzola Piccante, with an unforgettably sweet and earthy blue flavour. Try serving Bontazola with fresh pears and as a dessert treat

DOP or DOC?

You may have noticed that Italian cheeses are either classed as DOP, Denominazione di Origine Protetta or DOC, Denominazione di Origine Controllata. DOC is the earlier classification and was introduced in 1954 by the Italian Ministry of Agriculture and Forest Regulation to protect the trade names of Italian cheeses. DOP is a much newer classification that was introduced by the European Union. All DOC cheeses are automatically granted DOP status.

The Cheese Club Recipe

Fonduta

Ingredients:

1 pound/400g Fontina
4 egg yolks
2 cups/500ml whole milk
1/4 cup unsalted butter
Pepper
A finely shaved white truffle (optional)

Method:

Dice or finely slice the Fontina and marinate it in the milk for 4-5 hours. Once it has soaked, fill the bottom of a double boiler with water (do not overfill). Combine the butter, egg yolks, cheeses and some of the milk in the top of the double boiler. When the water boils, set it over the steam and whip energetically with a whisk. The total cooking time is about half an hour, during which the cheeses will melt, forming strings, and then thicken again (a teaspoon of flour can be whisked into the cream as it thickens to make life easier). At this precise moment remove it from the heat and serve hot with a grating of pepper or finely sliced white truffle.

As with Swiss and French fondue, dip cubes of bread into the cheese and enjoy!

It can also be used as a sauce for pasta and rice.

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things to enjoy with your Italian cheeses....

bread...

lingua di suocera (mother-in-law's tongues)

Enjoy these traditional Italian flat breads baked for us by Phillipa's bakery in Armadale. The subtle flavour of the bread makes an ideal accompaniment to the Italian cheeses in this Offer.

wine...

2003 Zardetto Prosecco Brut Sparkling DOC

NV Zardetto Prosecco Brut 'Brillio' Sparkling 200ml

Veneto, Italy

Prosecco grapes are native to the Veneto region of Italy. Designed to be drunk when young and fresh, this is a delicately soft wine, fruity with hints of apples and strawberries, and a clean finish. Enjoy this with the Piave and Parmigiano Reggiano.

2002 Cocci Grifoni Falerio del Colli Ascolani DOC

Marche, Italy

Established in 1970, the Tenuta Cocci Grifoni Estate is dedicated to the recovery and replanting of indigenous vines, the origins of which date back hundreds of years. Made from a blend of Pecorino, Passerina, Verdicchio and Trebbiano grapes, this is a delicate wine, pale straw in colour, with stone fruit aromas and a fresh finish. Try with the Fontina.

2002 Vagnoni Vernaccia di San Gimignano DOCG

Tuscany, Italy

From a small family owned vineyard outside of Siena, this wine is pale yellow in colour with a tinge of green. It has fresh apple aromas with a well balanced acidity. It is quite austere on the palate, which is typical of the Vernaccia grape variety, with a lifted finish. Enjoy with your fonduta.

2001 Piero Mancini Cannonau di Sardegna DOC

Sardinia, Italy

From the Gallura region of Sardinia and made from the Cannonau (Grenache) grape, this wine is ruby in colour with a ripe fruit and floral bouquet. It has dry warm flavours with a well balanced finish. Try it with the Parmigiano Reggiano or even the Brillo.

2003 Rallo Nero D'Avola IGT

Sicily, Italy

From vineyards situated on the westernmost promontory of Sicily, this wine is a bright garnet colour made from the Nero d'Avola grape. It is full bodied and sophisticated, with a strong berry nose and hints of cherry and mint. Match this with Piave.

NV Dogliotti La Caudrina Moscato d'Asti

Piedmont, Italy

Winemaker Romano Dogliotti wants to sell his wine to people who find in it "the taste of their childhood, of the Sunday cake, of holy days and friendship." Made from the Moscato grape, this is an elegantly intense and fruity wine, pleasantly sweet with a light spritz. Best served chilled, it is an interesting partner to Bontazola.

good things...

marzano pear paste

Made from reduced fruit, the Marzano Pear Paste is a traditional Italian accompaniment to cheese. The sweet and succulent pear flavours go beautifully with Piave, Parmigiano Reggiano and Bontazola in particular.

beech's dried figs

In season, figs are used throughout Italy. These succulent Australian dried figs retain all of their flavour. A natural partner to cheese, they are always a favourite in the Cheeseroom here at RHCL.

The Cheese Club

Cheese Class

Italian cheeses

From eating Pecorino Toscano with freshly shelled fava beans in the countryside around Siena to watching the milky brine ooze out of a just made Mozzarella di Bufala in Salerno, cheese in Italy reflects a country divided by cuisines, cultures and climate but united by a passion for quality. Each of the Beautiful Country's 20 regions has its own specialty cheeses, and each of these cheeses is a product of the land and the people who live there.

In the North of the country, where the climate is cold, the fog legendary and the people known for their industriousness, you will find a wide variety of soft and pressed cheeses. It is here washed rinds like Lombardy's famous DOP cheese Taleggio or semi-hard cheeses like Veneto's Asiago were conceived. As you travel further down the boot, the fog lifts and the sun gets warmer. As a result, the people south of Rome invented a number of cheeses with the need for preservation foremost in their mind. Hence, the creation of stretched-curd cheeses like Provolone and fresh cheeses like Campania's Mozzarella di Bufala, which are made to be eaten immediately. Hopping across to either Sardinia or Sicily you will see a landscape dotted with sheep and not be surprised that both of the islands are famous for their large number of Pecorino or sheep's milk cheeses.

While Italy is justifiably proud of its cheesemaking history, the country has not been immune to the forces of both industrialisation and globalisation, both of which have taken their toll on traditional farmhouse cheeses. In 1991, the Italian Government-funded *Atlas of Typical Products - Cheeses* contained over 400 traditional cheeses, but just eight years later only 205 cheeses are listed in a similar book. While the authors of the latter book do not believe half of Italy's farmhouse cheeses have completely disappeared, they do contend that increased standardisation and EU legislation, which is difficult for small producers to follow, has seen a worrying decrease in traditional cheese production.

Fortunately, not all Italians have taken the loss of centuries old cheeses with a typical shrug of the shoulders. Instead, they set up Slow Food, a movement founded in 1986 when McDonalds erected its golden arches at the bottom of Rome's Spanish Steps. In an effort to save traditional cheeses, especially those made with raw milk, Slow Food has set up a number of Convivia, or project groups, with the purpose of preserving not just the cheese but the native breeds and traditions surrounding it. An example of one of these efforts is the "Adopt a Sheep" program by the Monferrato Casalese and Gavi Convivia who are attempting to protect Piedmont's Montebore cheese. For 150 euros, you can help ensure the sheep and pastures needed to make this unique cheese are preserved.

Ultimately, it is educated consumers who understand that quality, diversity and tradition are valuable commodities that will ensure Italy's long and illustrious cheesemaking tradition continues.

More information:

Slow Food - <http://www.slowfood.com>

Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity - <http://www.slowfoodfoundation.com/>