

Formaggi ITALIANI

Eating Italian cheese is a completely new experience if you're used to cheddar or those rich, creamy soft rind styles. Italian cheeses can be soft and creamy too, but can also be smelly like old socks, or hard and dry with a delicious salty tang. Each region and in fact each town has its own favourites, with hundreds of different cheeses made in artisan 'fattorie'. Some of the larger, better-known cheeses like parmigiano reggiano or grana padano are produced by giant 'consorzi' (cheesemakers' associations) in commercial quantities, yet of equally good quality.

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Pictured, clockwise from top
Umbriaco di Amara, Blu di Moncenisio, Blu di Zibibbo Basaja, diavoletti, La Tur, grated parmigiano reggiano

LEARN MORE ABOUT ITALIAN CHEESES!
Come along to our Italian cheese workshop on Monday 1 March at Formaggi Ocello, one of Sydney's best cheese shops. For full details see our Eventi section on pages 60 and 61.

Cheese is one of nature's most honest foods – no preservatives and no added colours. We can't say 'no additives', because some cheeses do have things added to them like peppercorns and chilli. (I'm not talking about those supermarket cheeses with added fruit and nuts. For real cheese connoisseurs, they are the bottom rung of the ladder.)

Cheese is made by curdling milk (which may have been skimmed, pasteurised, or acidified) with the addition of rennet, an acidic substance rich in enzymes, extracted from the stomachs of young cattle, goats, or lambs, or from plant-based, fungal or bacterial material. The curds are then broken in order to separate them from the whey, and are sometimes heated before being placed in moulds and pressed, or just turned over, and finally, salted. Ageing completes the process.

Made from the milk of cows, sheep, goats or buffalo, raw or pasteurised, sometimes mixed, cheese can be light (made from skimmed milk), half fat (from partially skimmed milk), or whole (made from whole milk). Types of cheese can be classified according to the length of ageing: fresh cheese (ricotta, mozzarella) and those aged for a few days are rich in water and, at equal weight, have less fat, and salt, and fewer calories. When aged between one and six months, semi-aged cheese (asiago montasio, taleggio, fontina and gorgonzola) has casein (protein in the cheese) that is partially weakened by bacteria and micro-organisms, and the cheese is more easily digested. These cheeses also have a lower water content than fresh cheeses but are proportionately higher in fat and protein. Parmesan cheese (grana padano and parmigiano reggiano) and some pecorino cheeses fall into the category of aged cheese; beyond six months of ageing, the curds dry and become hard and grainy. High in protein, this type of cheese is easily digestible because the casein has almost completely broken down.

Cheeses can be categorised by texture: soft (taleggio), semi-hard (fontina, asiago), and hard (parmesan and pecorino cheese). Lastly, according to the temperature at which the curds are heated, cheese can be designated cooked, semi-cooked or raw.

When cooking with cheese, always choose high-quality products. It's best to select from among the many varieties of Italian cheeses that have obtained the 'DOP' or Protected Designation of Origin status, and use them at room temperature, never directly from the refrigerator. Over a flame, the casein tends to coagulate into hard, rubbery blocks, separating from the water and fat. For recipes requiring high temperatures and long cooking times, it is better to use aged cheeses, which are low in casein. Continually stir your cheese mixtures when cooking in a saucepan to prevent the cheese from sticking to the bottom. Once ready, do not reheat them, because the curds may reform hard blocks and separate. Be careful with salt: it should be added with attention to the natural saltiness of the cheese. Finally, when adding sauce to pasta, add the grated cheese first, and then cover with the warm sauce, which will melt the cheese, and top with an extra dash of grated cheese.



Above, left
Umbriaco di
Amarone



Above, right
Butter heart
porcini provolino

Stored in a cool, dark place or in the cool section of the refrigerator, aged cheeses generally last for seven to ten days, protected with a sheet of aluminium foil or a cloth. Fresh cheeses, if still in their packages or submerged in their natural liquid (the liquid of mozzarella can be substituted with a solution of water and salt, with one tablespoon of salt per two cups), last for two to three days. With the exception of cheeses for grating and fresh cheeses, almost all cheeses may be frozen, in slices.

ASIAGO

Region: Veneto

Style: Traditional hard

Made from unpasteurised cows' milk, it can be produced in two ways: the first is a lightly pressed cheese made from whole milk and matured for 20-30 days; the second is a mature cheese made with skimmed milk. Aging slowly, this slightly sharp cheese has a granular interior full of small holes. Matured over two years, it becomes intensely flavoured and is ideal for grating.

BURRATA

Regions: Puglia, Campania, and Basilicata

Style: A spun or pulled fresh cheese

Traditionally, burrata is a specialty of southern Italy made from buffalo's milk, but today it is more often made from cow's milk. It is hard to find in Australia but well worth the hunt.

Burrata has a buttery texture in the centre created by fresh cream and shredded pieces of mozzarella called stracciatella. The outside of the cheese is made from stretched rectangular sheets of mozzarella which has air blown into it to make a small pocket, giving the exterior a soft, springy texture. The pocket is then tied with a blade of grass and has the shape of a pear, but for export the grass is often omitted in favour of packing the cheese in a plastic bag with its own liquid. When cut, the cream oozes out, displaying three different textures and flavours all at once – the sweetness of the cream, the slightly acidic shredded mozzarella, and the more complex and cheesy outer layer. Burrata is highly perishable and should be eaten as soon as possible after purchase. It will keep for only a few days in the refrigerator.

CACIOCAVALLO

Regions: Southern Italy

Style: Traditional, stretched curd

A cow's milk cheese, this gourd-shaped cheese is tied at the thin end with a cord and is hung up to mature. After a period of three months, it can be eaten as a table cheese, or used for grating after two years. ➡➡



Left
Treccia –
mozzarella
pulled into a
plait

CAPRINO

Region: Northern regions of Piemonte, Trentino-Alto Adige and Liguria, and southern regions of Calabria, Abruzzo and Molise

Style: Fresh or aged

The name of this cheese comes from *capra*, the Italian word for goat, and when made the traditional way, whole or skimmed goat's milk is used. Modern production also uses cow's milk, or a combination of the milk of cows and goats. Caprino is made in two main styles – fresh and seasoned.

Caprino fresco is the fresh version. The cheese is aged for just three or four days and has a soft creamy texture. It's usually formed into a round or cylindrical shape and is often sold wrapped in paper or immersed in olive oil (especially when shipped) for preservation.

Caprino stagionato is aged for 20 to 40 days or longer, giving the cheese a tangy, salty flavour; the aging time depends on the region. The cheese is shaped into a small square, or into the shape of a marshmallow, and the thin rind is usually yellow or reddish in colour.

FONTINA

Region: Val d'Aosta

Style: Semi-soft through to aged

Fontina is made from cow's milk from Val d'Aosta, where it has been made since the 12th century. It has a milk-fat content of around 45% which makes it a good cheese for cooking. The original fontina – for there are several copies – is fairly pungent and quite intense. Normally made from unpasteurised milk from a single milking, young fontina has a soft texture and makes perfect fonduta, a traditional dish made with whipped eggs and cream. The mature style is slightly harder and has a somewhat nutty flavour with a touch of herbaceousness.

GORGONZOLA

Region: Lombardia

Style: Soft rind

Found wrapped in foil to retain the moisture, gorgonzola is made in the region around the town of the same name. It has been made the same way since the 9th century and has a distinctive smell – like dirty old socks!

A traditional, creamy blue cheese with greenish-blue penicillin mould, it is one of those cheeses you either love or loathe – there's no halfway point.

It has a sharp, spicy flavour and is made with unpasteurised or pasteurised milk to which the mould is added. Gorgonzola ripens in three to six months, and the colour can range from white (*dolce*) to straw-yellow (*piquant*), with a flavour that ranges from mild to sharp, depending on age.

GRANA PADANO

Region: Lombardia

Style: Hard

Similar to parmigiano reggiano, this cheese is cheaper to buy and therefore better to use for cooking – no one will ever know!

Made from unpasteurised milk, it has a smooth, hard, thick rind and is known as a parmesan along with other cheeses of the same kind from Lombardia, Piemonte, Trentino and Veneto. Grana padano has a pale, yellow interior which is hard, grainy and crumbly, and its taste should be fresh, fruity and sweet.

MASCARPONE

Region: Lombardia

Style: Fresh

This is one of the most misunderstood Italian cheeses in Australia, as many people are unsure whether it is a cheese or a cream. It is made from light cream (25% butterfat) which has been thickened by the addition of tartaric acid to produce a rich, creamy product which is spreadable. Dating back to the 16th century, this is another cheese with a long history, and some say the name originates from the Spanish *mas que bueno* (Spanish for 'better than good') from the time when the Spaniards ruled Italy.

Mascarpone can be used alone or sweetened with sugar added. It is most famous as an ingredient in tiramisù, the Italian coffee-flavoured dessert.

MONTASIO

Region: Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Veneto

Style: Hard

Montasio is made in three different grades: young, seasoned and mature. It makes a delightful snack called frico – crispy cheese chips that can be eaten with cured meats and vegetables.

Developed in the 13th century in the monastery of Maggio, the monks originally used sheep's milk to make the cheese. Today, it's made from unpasteurised cow's milk and is creamy with a yellow-brown rind which is smooth at first. As it matures, the rind hardens and the interior becomes granular and even brittle. The body is firm with small holes, and the flavour is rich and fruity.

MOZZARELLA

Region: Originally Campania but now throughout southern Italy

Style: Fresh

Mozzarella is a mild, white fresh cheese, made by dipping the curd in hot whey then stretching and kneading it to the desired consistency. At one time, it was made only from the milk of water buffalo, but today the majority is made from cow's milk and is called *fior di latte*. Commercial mozzarella, which can be found in low-fat and non-fat forms in supermarkets, is factory produced. It has a semi-soft, elastic texture but is not as delicately flavored as its fresher counterpart. It's also drier, which makes this style of mozzarella best used for cooking; it's a popular cheese for pizza because of its excellent melting qualities. Fresh mozzarella has a much softer texture and a sweet, delicate flavour, and is usually packaged in whey or water. Mozzarella di bufala (often called buffalo mozzarella) is the most prized of the fresh mozzarelle. Bocconcini are mozzarella made into small balls which are sometimes marinated in olive oil and herbs.

PARMIGIANO REGGIANO

Region: Emilia-Romagna

Style: Hard

This traditional, unpasteurised, hard cheese – the 'king of cheeses' – is made from skimmed cow's milk in a similar way to grana padano. Most famously drum-shaped with a hard, yellow to pale orange rind, it will have the Consorzio's stamp impressed in the skin showing its authenticity. The aroma is sweet and fruity and the taste is savoury, slightly salty and unmistakably piquant. Primarily a grating cheese, parmigiano reggiano is a great topping for soups, pasta dishes, veal, chicken or salads. If you have it grated in the shop, ask for the rind if it is not offered to you, as you can use it when making soups.

PECORINO

Region: Sardegna, Sicilia, Lazio plus the province of Grosseto in Toscana

Style: Semi-hard

Pecora means sheep, and thus pecorino is the name given to all Italian cheeses made from sheep's milk. Pecorino from Lazio is known as romano, while sardo and siciliano are from Sardegna and Sicilia respectively. It is a traditional, hard, drum-shaped cheese with a smooth, hard rind that varies in colour from pale straw to dark brown. Made between November and late June, it can take 12 months to mature, during which time it develops its characteristic salty flavour with a fruity tang that becomes steadily more robust. Pecorino pepato is a Sicilian variety spiced with peppercorns, which give it a sharper bite.

PROVOLA AND PROVOLONE

Region: Made all over Italy

Style: Semi-hard

A fairly recent addition to the Italian pantry, this cheese was first introduced in the 19th century but rapidly spread all over the country, such is its popularity. Made from cow's milk, it appears in various guises, the most common of which is a large sausage shape, and delicatessens sometimes have large gourd-shaped examples – generally made for show – hanging on display. Provolone cheese can be of various types: provolone dolce (mild) is aged for two to three months until it is supple and smooth with a thin waxed rind; provolone piccante is aged for six months to two years and is darker with small holes and a spicy flavour; and finally provolone affumicata, which, as its name suggests, is smoked. The smaller size, or provola, comes in plain and smoked varieties.

RICOTTA

Region: Originally Lazio but now all over Italy

Style: Fresh

Here's a cheese that isn't a cheese because it is made from the leftovers of whey from other cheeses. Early on, cheesemakers developed this method in order to prevent wastage. Ricotta means 'reboiled', and that's what's

done with the runoff cow's milk whey, which is heated to 75°C. Citric acid is added to encourage destabilisation and separation, and the temperature is quickly raised to 85°C. When the proteins (lactalbumin) from the whey separate, rise and coagulate, they are skimmed off and put in a wicker basket or colander to drain for two days, after which the cheese is ready for sale. Ricotta should be pure white and wet but not sticky, and should be firm, keeping its shape when cut and then crumbling into smaller delicate, moist pieces.

SCAMORZA

Region: Puglia

Style: Stretched curd

Closely related to mozzarella, scamorza is a smooth, shiny cow's milk cheese, traditionally made in a money-bag shape. It is sold young and makes a tasty addition to toasted sandwiches as it has a low melting point. The smoked version, scamorza affumicata, is more popular than the plain cheese and is often used in pasta dishes. It is also good on pizza.

TALEGGIO

Region: Lombardia

Style: Soft rind

This very delicate cheese comes from Lombardia, the home of gorgonzola. While the cheese is known for its pungent smell, the taste more than makes up for the odour. It is buttery and semi-soft, so don't leave it out of the fridge too long. Made from cow's milk, it's usually packed in a square shape; larger cheeses are wrapped in paper and foil, while the smaller ones, which are quite often better quality, are contained in soft wooden punnets. The crust is pinkish-grey and the inside is white, supple, fruity and very, very strong-smelling. ■

The specialty Italian cheeses photographed for this article were provided by Australia on a Plate, a major specialty cheese supplier to high-end restaurants and gourmet retailers in Sydney. (www.aoop.com.au)

The cheeses include:

Blu di Zibbibo Basajo – an aromatic cheese rubbed with raisins and soaked for a time in zibbibo wine.

Blu di Moncenisio – dense and spicy, normally served at the end of the meal with dessert wine.

La Tur – a delicate and creamy cheese, made from a blend of pasteurised sheep, goat and cow's milk using a formula that lets no component dominate.

Ubrico di Amarone – a cheese washed in amarone wine and left to mature in the vats for 40 days to ensure a heady infusion.

Diavoletti (Little Devils) – a small provolone shaped smoked cheese with a chilli-filled olive in the centre.

Butter Heart and Butter Heart Porcini (Burrino) – baby provolone containing a prominent centre of naturally produced butter, simply flavoured with salt or porcini mushrooms.



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