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CHASING THE PERFECT CHEESE IN PARMA

By Nikita Philip

WHEN you think of Italy, you are instantly transported to a world with a beautiful, lush countryside, gluttonous plates of pasta and risotto, great coffee and warm hospitality.

But there's one other thing Italy is famous for - cheese.

The Italian region of Emilia-Romagna is home to one of the world's most expensive cheese - Parmigiano Reggiano - the "real" parmesan cheese.

TTN recently had the opportunity to visit the parmesan cheese capital and learn more about how it's made and its importance in Italian history. It's early spring and a bit more chilly than usual, but that's a pleasant welcome for someone coming from the Middle East.

As we make our way from the Bologna airport to Parma, where the world famous Parmigiano Reggiano cheese is made, our host takes us through our itinerary for the next two days. And yes, it's filled with cheese.

At first glance, Parma looks like a city right out of a painting with old structures dotted amidst brightly coloured modern buildings. Parma is not a big city filled with iconic tourist attractions drawing visitors from all over the world. It's a small town where life slows down and people enjoy the moment.

The streets are filled with the real people who live there, just going about their days. The sounds of jovial chatter and bicycles speeding up against each other fill the air. As I walk through the charming lanes, past the many cafes and restaurants, one thing becomes evident - the love for food, and cheese.

What's in a Parmigiano cheese?

Making Parmigiano Reggiano is a lengthy and tedious process, and one which requires expert craftsmanship.

On a cloudy Saturday morning, we find ourselves outside Latteria Sociale Santo Stefano, one of the Parmigiano Reggiano dairies in Parma. A middle-aged lady greets us at the waiting area and instructs us to put on protective clothing before our guided tour so as to not contaminate the working space in the factory.

Inside, men wrapped in white aprons, head caps and gum boots are labouring away in front of huge copper cauldrons, preoccupied with different aspects of cheesemaking. Our guide takes us through the process, which is as intricate as it is elaborate: Unpasteurised milk is delivered to the factory twice a day, and come from cows who are fed a very strict diet of local forage consisting of herbs.

The milk from the night before (from which the cream is removed) is mixed with the day's fresh (full-fat) milk, along with whey and rennet (an enzyme often used in cheese-making which gives the milk a yoghurt-like texture), in the cauldrons until it coagulates to form curd. The dairyman then breaks up the curd into tiny grains using a large, whisk-like tool called spino.

At this point, the cooking takes place, reaching



Wheels of fortune... Parmigiano Reggiano, when made right, can fetch up to \$1,000

a temperature of 55 degrees Celsius. At the end of this process, the grains fall to the bottom of the vessel and merge together, creating one big mass that is then pulled out by the dairyman.

Once it cools, it is placed in a mould and wrapped in a stencil that engraves the logo of Parmigiano Reggiano as well the date of production and the Denominazione di Origine Protetta ("Protected Designation of Origin") or DOP label. Wheels bearing a DOP label means that the cheese can only be produced in Parma and a few other provinces in the Emilia-Romagna region. Each wheel is also given an id - on a plaque made from milk protein - which contains information about where it was produced and when. The stencil is removed the next morning and the cheese is left to dry further for three to four days before giving it a brine bath (saltwater bath). Brining helps to form the cheese rind, which acts as a barrier for the cheese. It is then left to mature for a minimum period of 12 months in large maturation rooms inside the dairy.

The average maturation period is two years, but some wheels are aged longer to develop a stronger depth of flavour. Also, a longer ageing period bumps up the price, our guide informs us. "A well-aged wheel of Parmigiano Reggiano can cost over \$1,000," she says.

MAKING THE CUT

We then move on to the maturation room that holds about 25,000 wheels of Parmigiano Reggiano, stacked on rows of towering shelves. It is here that the cheese must pass the test. After 12 months of maturation, experts from the Consortium of Parmigiano Reggiano - an association entrusted with protecting the cheese - check each wheel by tapping it with a hammer-like tool and listening for any inconsistencies in sound. If it's approved, it gets a final firebrand of quality. What about the ones that don't make the cut? If the inconsistencies are minor, the cheese is judged a second-quality cheese, which must be labelled "mezzano" - medium quality - and can't be aged further. For wheels that don't even make it past the mezzano bar, their rinds and stamps are scraped off completely, erasing forever any

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association with Parmigiano.

CHEESE PAIRINGS

Cheese is wonderful on its own, but, like pairing the right grape beverage with the right food, a good condiment will elevate the flavour of a cheese. And nothing complements Parmigiano Reggiano like good, old balsamic vinegar, I'm told.

Making the perfect balsamic vinegar is an art that literally takes decades. In the Italian city of Modena, some of the best is made. We trot off to learn more about the world's oldest producer of balsamic vinegar - the Giusti family.

It was in the early 17th century that the Modena-based family ventured into the production of balsamic vinegar. Seventeen generations later, the family legacy continues.

Upon entering the Ageing Rooms - where much of the balsamic vinegar is produced - a heady aroma greets us. The large attic looks like a cellar, with barrels filled with litres of balsamic vinegar. Made from local grapes and sugur which are cooked to a concentrate, the vinegar is aged in casks. The older the cask, the better the balsamic vinegar will be, as casks release an increasing intensity of wood essences and complexity of aromas into the vinegars as they age. It takes minimum of 12 years to produce one batch of traditional balsamic vinegar.

Our tour ends with a sampling of a variety of aged vinegars, including Giusti's 100-year old balsamic vinegar (which retails for about €600 for 100ml).

After tasting a few, I find myself lured towards the sweeter options, while my fellow companions take their pick from the well-aged, sharp-flavoured ones. We walk out an hour later with our own bottles of "black gold".

How did cheese come to Parma?

While cheese is usually associated with France, the question does arise as to how it became an integral part of Parma's history. The answer to that takes us back nearly 1,000 years, to the Benedictine monks, who crafted this cheese as a way to extend the shelf-life of the large quantity of milk they were producing - a result of their agricultural and cattle rearing activities.

During the 1300s and 1400s, these monks had a monopoly on parmesan cheese and would export it to different regions of Italy, and Europe. As the cheese became more popular, so did Parma.

During the trip, I got to see (and taste) the versatility of Parmigiano Reggiano across a variety of cooking styles. [Les Caves \(located within a beautiful fortress in Parma\) fuses Italian food with French and Japanese cuisines, offering a surprising combination of flavours.](#) One such dish was a pasta made with Parmigiano cheese, paired with an umami-filled mushroom broth and shiitake mushrooms.

For the more adventurous gourmands, try the Parmigiano Reggiano ice cream (found across local restaurants). Antica Moka in Modena serves a delightful one.

If you prefer a more refined culinary experience, visit the Michelin-starred Inkistro restaurant for a modern take on Italian food, paired, of course, with Parmigiano Reggiano, but in a creative way that does not overpower the dish.

A WALK THROUGH HISTORY

For a small town, Parma is definitely rich in history. On our last day in Parma, we were taken on a walking tour to learn more about how Parma came to be. According to historians, Parma was originally founded by the Romans 2,200 years ago along the Via Emilia. It came to be when they built the Emilia Avenue to connect Milan to Rimini. During the middle ages, Parma served as an important trading hub. By the 14th century, feudal lords ruled the entire region, leaving behind a plethora of churches, castles, and other interesting structures.

Must-see places in Parma include the Romanesque Cathedral and the Baptistery, located in the Piazza Duomo (Cathedral Square), the Santa Maria Della Steccata Church, Piazza Garibaldi - Parma's cobbled hub, and the Opera House (Teatro Regio) - which was built at the behest of Maria Luigia (the second wife of Napoleon Bonaparte) and opened in 1829.

I end my exploration of Parma (and Parmigiano Reggiano) much where I began: eating. As I take a final stroll down the streets of Parma, I ruminate over the momentous three days that will become memories I will cherish to the end. ■