

THE KING *of cheeses*

Chris Allsop flies out to Emilia Romagna to tour a Parmigiano Reggiano dairy and understand the provenance and processes that create this world-famous cheese

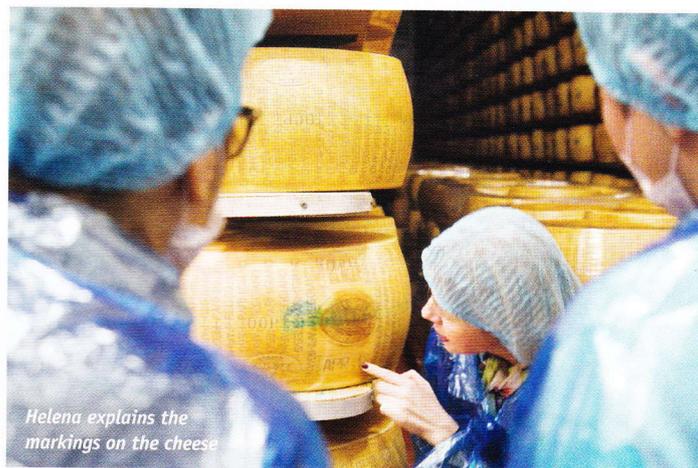
When I have French groups, they have many excellent cheeses, but they do not have Parmigiano Reggiano." Our guide, Helena, puts her fingers together and gestures aggressively. "They have to accept."

Only five minutes into the tour of the Santo Stefano Dairy – one of around 330 dairies in a strictly delineated section of the agricultural heartland that is the Emilia Romagna province – I hadn't (perhaps naively) expected the rivalry between the great cheese nations to bubble up so quickly. But it's hard to argue with Helena – perfectly made up beneath the blue plastic hygiene hat and smock that we're all wearing – as, while France has many world-beating cheeses, it doesn't have anything to rival the fruity, multi-purpose, hard-aged magnificence of Parmigiano Reggiano.

This mainstay of the western fridge cheese compartment has remained almost unchanged since the 12th century, when it was first created by Benedictine monks as a winter foodstuff. Today, it's a treasured cornerstone of Italian cuisine, its punchy, complex flavour as suited to being eaten in raw crystalline chunks as it is to being melted into a sauce.

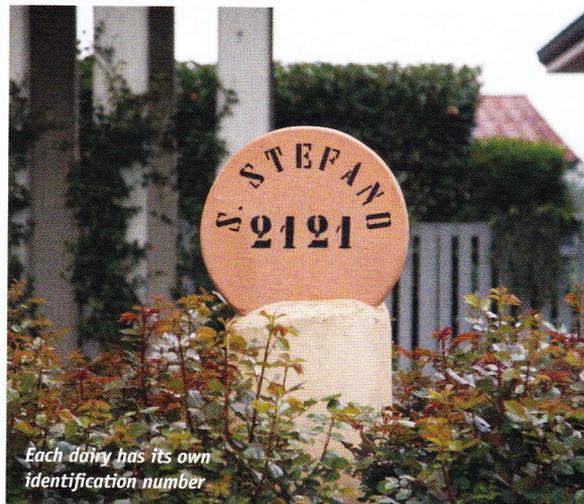
TRADITION AND REPUTATION

Since 1928, the Consorzio del Formaggio Parmigiano-Reggiano – a trade union to which all Parmigiano Reggiano producers belong – has set about ensuring that the tides of capitalism don't erode the traditions or reputation of this cheese. An EU PDO mark protects the name and production process that also dictates that the cheeses have to be made within the geographical confines of the provinces of Parma, Mantua (to the east of the Po River), Reggio Emilia, Modena and Bologna (to the west of the Reno River).

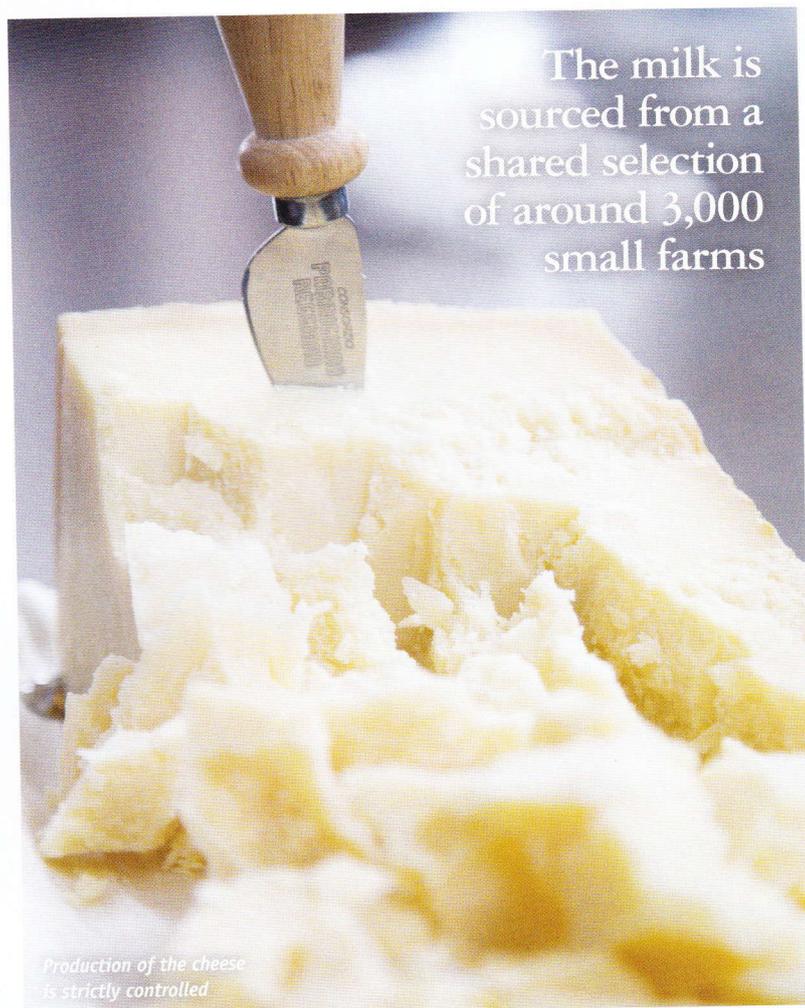


Helena explains the markings on the cheese

"You can see it from space." Helena points towards the blank ceiling of the dairy's corridor. She's talking about the geographical region, of course; its contours are apparently visible from the window of the International Space Station. Though actually you could also see the cheese itself in space, as since 2005 Parmigiano Reggiano has been included as part of the official diet for astronauts in orbit.



Each dairy has its own identification number



The milk is sourced from a shared selection of around 3,000 small farms

Production of the cheese is strictly controlled

But back to terra firma. We follow Helena into the dairy proper, the air becoming heavy and humid. Santo Stefano, a family-run concern with three generations somehow not murdering each other as they share a workplace, is a slightly larger version of the average Parmigiano Reggiano dairy. It's certainly modern – no farmer and barn set-up this – with stainless steel tables, computerised equipment, and uniform white wellies for the workers going about their business. For all the modernity, I'm glad to see that the *spino*, the long stick used to break the curd into granules, has only adapted a little from its traditional shape and continues to look like an obscure gladiatorial poking stick.

KEEN RIVALRY

Despite the consortium and everyone pulling together to put out last year's record 3.7 million wheels for an overall turnover of €2.4 billion euros, there's apparently a keen rivalry between the dairies to put out the kingliest of the Parmigiano Reggiano available. Making for a level playing field is the milk, sourced from a shared selection of around 3,000 small farms, the herds all fed on the diverse, magical PDO pastures that produce milk that has that special something.

So strict is the PDO, that the cows are not allowed to be fed on 'silage, fermented fodder, or grain based on animal products' as these feeds could contain preservatives (super strictly prohibited) that might possibly make their way in to the finished cheese. The raw milk is delivered to the cheese factories, with 520 litres of milk used in the production of each enormous 38-kilo wheel of cheese (staggeringly, Parmigiano Reggiano production uses over 15 per cent of Italy's total milk production).



1 The milk is steamed in shallow, copper lined vats. The cream is taken away to make butter and the remainder slowly separates into curds and whey after the addition of animal rennet and a microbe-rich starter.



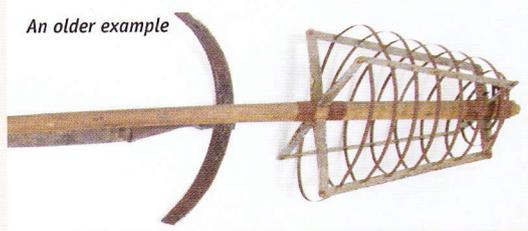
2 The *spino* is introduced to keep the curd grains small while they cook, before they are allowed to settle and coagulate at the bottom of the vat.

SECRETS OF THE SPINO

The *spino* is used to break the curd into granules, and the basic design has changed very little.



A modern spino



An older example

In the production room, with shallow, copper-lined vats steaming with warm milk ①, we watch the cheese take shape. The milk, naturally skimmed from sitting in the vat (the cream is packaged off to make butter), slowly separates into curds and whey with the addition of animal rennet and a microbe-rich starter taken from the previous day's production. Vigorous poking with

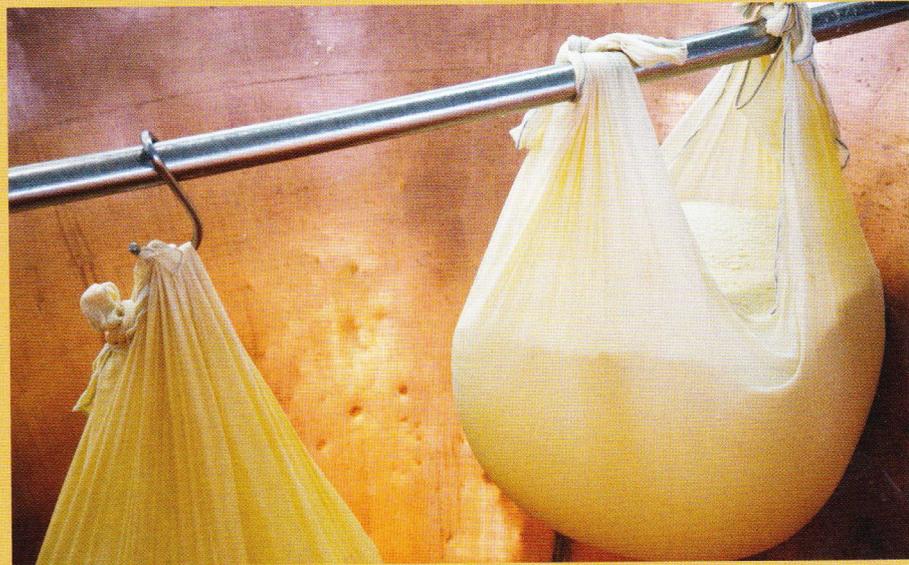
the *spino* ② keeps the curd grains small while they cook, before they settle and coagulate into a huge lump of curd at the bottom of the bell-shaped vat. With a long wooden paddle, it seems the smallest man in the dairy is then tasked with levering up this giant aspirin tablet of solid milk, which is then split in two to create 'twin' cheeses ③. These are suspended in cheesecloth to drain ④. If there isn't enough milk to make twins, an M is inscribed on the single cheese produced denoting it, in true Italian fashion, as a 'Male'.

Wiping our collective brows at the effort involved, we walk out – beneath a Latin inscription that reads 'in work is the true rest of life' – and through to where the still soft cheeses are contained within moulds. There's another group in here, so while we wait Helena asks conspiratorially for gossip on Meghan and Harry. We eventually go in to find the cheeses tightly wrapped in plastic collars ⑤; this is also the stage at which their stylish plastic cummerbunds – that imprint authenticity and tracking info onto the cheese exterior – are put on. The cheeses are then sunk into a brine mixture that adds flavour and antibacterial properties, before being transferred to the ageing room ⑥.

TRUSTED PROCESS

In the ageing room, the amount of weight held by the vertigo-inducing shelving is staggering. The smell as you enter is powerful, richly savoury, not quite what you get when you snap apart a fruity piece of Parmigiano Reggiano, but reminiscent of it. The cheese is aged on these shelves for 12 months minimum (only then can it be deemed 'Parmigiano Reggiano') and so reliable and trusted a process is this that banks will accept a producer's stored cheese as collateral for loans. ➤

Below: The inscription reads 'In work is rest'; the cummerbund is printed with information attesting to the authenticity of the cheese; the handmade testing hammer awaits its moment



3 When the curd has settled, the nascent cheese must then be gently lifted out of the vat and separated into two 'twin' cheeses.

4 The twin cheeses are then suspended in cheesecloth to drain off any excess liquid. If there is not enough to make twin cheeses the single cheese is inscribed with an 'M', to denote that it is a 'male'.

CLASSIC SOFT CHEESES

Italian cheeses aren't just designed for the grating. Here are a few of the country's classic softer options...

GORGONZOLA PDO

Thought to be the first blue cheese, Gorgonzola, so the romantic myth goes, is the result of professional delinquency. A cheesemaking youth left out some curd while engaging in romantic shenanigans. When he returned, the curd had developed some blue mould, which he added to the morning milk to cover his tracks. When the milk turned into something oozy, tangy, and rather delicious, he repeated the method. A handful of artisan cheesemakers continue to make it with unpasteurised milk and the traditional "two-day curd" method – essentially repeating the delinquency of the boy.

TALEGGIO PDO

Another Lombardian cheese, Taleggio is a fat, semi-soft flagstone covered with a peachy sun-blush of mould and inscribed with the arcane markings of the consortium that produces it. Dating at least as far back as the 10th century, its name derives from the Val Taleggio in the province of Bergamo, where it is traditionally ripened in natural caves. This rather fruity, creamy cheese is very versatile, but also wonderful in slices with figs.

MOZZARELLA DI BUFALA PDO

Water buffalo were introduced to Campania in the 7th century, but it wasn't until about the 18th century that the production of the now world-famous stretchy cheese became widespread in the province. To create these wonderful elastic balls of cheese, the curd is hand stretched and spun into balls in a process known as *pasta filata*. The handspun product traps whey within the layers of curd, creating a wonderfully moist cheese. While standard cow's milk, with its fairly clean flavour, offers more textural interest, the buffalo milk mozzarella offers something more engaging and sweeter with hints of new leather and an earthy aroma.

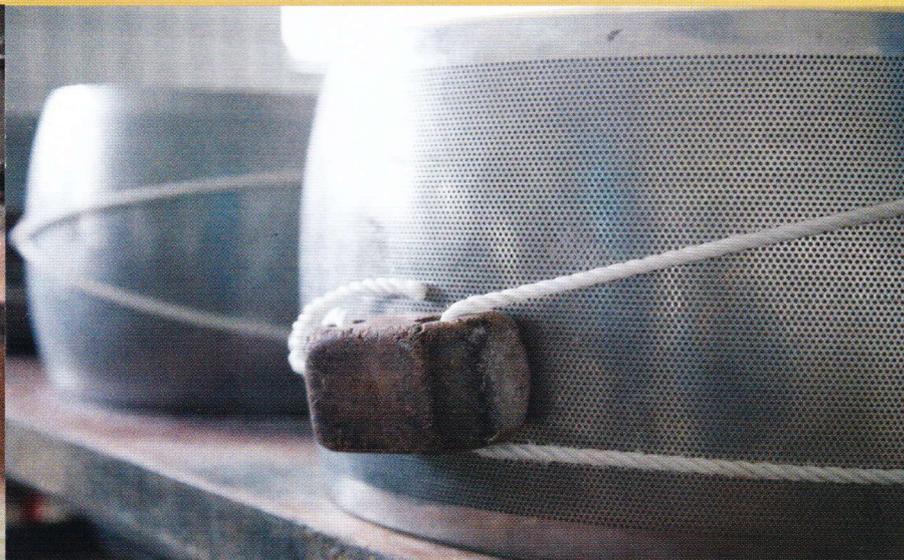
Maintaining this product confidence is a matter of the utmost concern, so after a year of ageing the inspectors from the consortium arrive to test every wheel.

Helena hands us a little double-headed hammer with a flat handle and invites us to tap a wheel. The hammer bounces readily back off the Parmigiano Reggiano drum, and we listen for where the dull tap alters, indicating an interior fault. If the cheese passes, a fire stamp on the rind is added to indicate that it's the real deal. If not, the cummerbund branding is scraped off and it is branded Mezzano and sold cheap in the domestic market (lucky Italians).

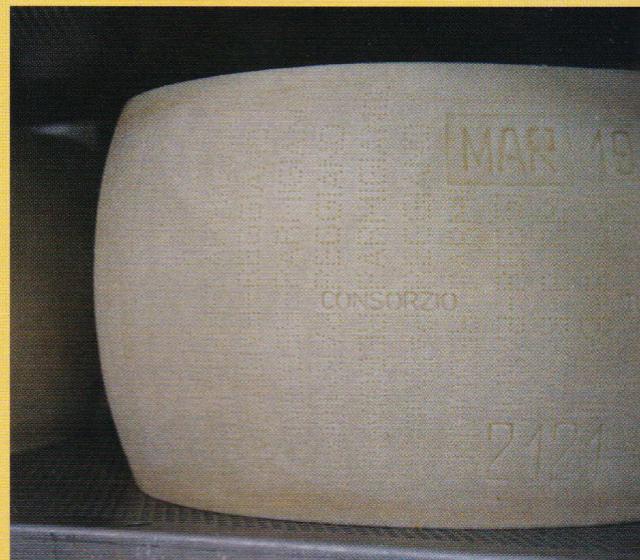
Our tour ends with a tasting flight of Parmigiano Reggiano aged 12, 24, and 36 months (as a comparison, an average mature cheddar is aged nine months). The 12-month-old is more pliable and milkier in flavour, as you'd expect, while the 24 – what we tend to find in our supermarkets – has rich pineapple notes. The third, looking more like mineral than foodstuff for that third summer it's sweated through, has a pronounced nuttiness with flavours of allspice accompanying the fruit. There's also more of a delicious crunch of tyrosine crystals, caused by degenerating proteins, in the bite.

BOOKINGS FOR TOURS

I didn't really need any convincing, but a tour of a Parmigiano Reggiano dairy brought home the quality and history of this totemic product. While the dairies are obviously rather busy pleasing the world's cheese eaters, there are some that take bookings for tours (see www.parmigianoreggiano.com for details of which allow visitors). Happily, no bookings are required to pop into your local cheese shop and buy a decadent wedge of this most royally delicious of cheeses. ■



5 The cheese is tightly bound to produce its traditional cylindrical shape. This is also the stage at which their plastic cummerbunds are attached. These are marked with information about the cheese.



6 When the cummerbund is removed, the markings on the cheese remain. Here we can see the identification of authenticity, the cheese's date, and the number of its dairy.



“If the cheese passes the hammer test, a fire stamp on the rind is added to indicate that it’s the real deal”

WHERE TO STAY AND EAT

GRAND HOTEL DE LA VILLE

Largo Piero Calamandrei, 11 – 43121 Parma
www.grandhoteldelaville.com

Located a short walk from Parma’s pretty centre, Grand Hotel de la Ville is a modern business hotel with an artistic bent. The rooms are well-sized with modish décor and comfy beds. An excellent breakfast is served in the morning with scrambled eggs of a deep yellow hue and cappuccinos delivered with a welcome promptness.

LES CAVES

Piazza a Gramsci, 1 – 43080 Sala Baganza
www.lescavesrestaurant.it

An haute cuisine restaurant that delights and surprises. Chef Maria Amalia Anedda takes local flavours and culinary traditions and applies a modern sensibility to them, resulting in dishes such as Thai-style blue lobster soup with ginger, citronella and coconut milk, or Confit fillet of codfish with flattened purple potatoes, turnip tops and *salmoriglio* sauce enriched with three types of tomatoes. They have an excellent selection of biodynamic and natural wines.

ANTICA MOKA

Via Emilia Est, 1496 – 41126 Modena
www.anticamoka.it

A grand orange building with lilac shutters just off the road, Antica Moka, as the handsome gramophone downstairs indicates, draws on old-school influences for an extremely satisfying meal. Chef Annamaria Barbieri, something of a local institution herself, serves up dishes such as boiled veal cheek with mashed beetroot or leg of lamb cooked in honey and herbs.

RISTORANTE INKIOSTRO

Via San Leonardo, 124 – 43123 Parma
www.ristoranteinkioistro.it

This Michelin-star restaurant is super stylish inside, like being in a futuristic Armani warehouse, the matt greys and blacks interrupted by bright splashes of modern art. Chef Terry Giacomello’s food is equally striking – expect textural and flavouring surprises (such as his famous egg white *tagliolini* with Parmigiano Reggiano sauce and black truffle caviar).

CROCE DI MALTA

Borgo Palmia, 8 – 43121 Parma
www.crocedimaltaparma.com

There’s a wonderfully relaxed ambience in this modern neighbourhood restaurant, with the only real adornment the chalkboards describing the specials. When the weather’s good, sit outside in the tiny piazza with the Baroque façade of the church on one side. The regional speciality of *tortellini in brodo* – bobbing umami parcels of meat and cheese in a light chicken broth – is done wonderfully here.