

Grana Padano Cheese

By Jacqueline Ross Lieberman

To enjoy Grana Padano, one need only take a bite. Start with a piece aged at least 16 months. The first thing you will notice about this hard cow's cheese from northern Italy is its sweet, not-too-salty, slightly nutty flavor. It is milder than Italy's more well-known grana cheese, Parmigiano-Reggiano, because it is lower in fat.

The second thing you will notice is a distinctive crunch. The younger cheese is tasty, but it will have a less developed flavor and lack the crumbly, crunchy texture of an 18- to 30-month-old Grana. As the cheese ages, amino acids in the milk develop into protein granules.

Whether this is how granas got their name is debatable. Some say the word "grana" comes from the cheeses' characteristic grainy texture; others say it is because of the grain-sized curds they are made from.

Padano means "of the Po." Almost all of Italy's Grana Padano is made in the Po River Valley north of the river, with a few exceptions to the south, which is where Parmigiano-Reggiano is made. This valley is ideal for milk production and therefore for production of one of Italy's great cheeses.

Cheese With A History

Grana Padano is a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) product, so each wheel is guaranteed to have been made according to traditional methods in the region it was traditionally made. It is a guarantee of quality and

authenticity, backed by the Consorzio Tutela Grana Padano (Consortium for the Protection of Grana Padano Cheese). The Consorzio inspects each wheel before stamping it with the identifying Grana Padano markings.

"It is one of the great classic Italian prod-

With a 1,000-year history and a reasonable price, Grana Padano is the world's most widely consumed PDO cheese.

ucts," says K. Dun Gifford, president of Oldways Preservation Trust, Boston, MA, a nonprofit "food issues think tank" promoting traditional, sustainable foods and healthful eating. "It is protected as to how it is made, so there's not any cheating on it. There will not be any dumbing-down of it that some of these products have seen over the years."

Grana Padano may have been Italy's first cow's milk cheese. Before it, cheese in Italy was made from goat's or sheep's milk. In 1,000 A.D., Cistercian monks from France and Switzerland introduced cattle to the Po River Valley. A sudden abundance of milk combined with a lack of refrigeration led to making Grana Padano.

"The monks discovered that if they created a rind, it was a good way to use the milk without refrigeration," says Paolo Grandjacquet, Consorzio spokesperson.

Since then, the cows are milked twice a day and cream is skimmed from the top. The resulting low-fat milk is formed and aged up to 30 months to make Grana Padano.

"The method has not changed for 1,000 years," says Lou Di Palo, co-owner of the specialty shop Di Palo's Fine Foods in New York's Little Italy. "One thing they noticed —

this cheese could withstand the test of time. It could last through years, even through temperature changes." Di Palo, says Grana Padano is always refrigerated today.

The cows are raised as they always were, eating only forage and mixtures of cereals and forage, in line with strict principles laid down in the production regulations adopted by the Consorzio. The only differences are updated facilities and a few minor changes to maintain modern health and hygiene standards. The result is a cheese that tastes much as it did when monks first made it all those years ago.

Although his family-run shop carries over 300 varieties of cheese, Di Palo would not dream of leaving out Grana Padano. "Grana Padano is so important to the history of Italy. If something lasts for 1,000 years, it has to be something special."

New Markings

Recently, the Consorzio changed its markings to make the cheese more easily identifiable and added a date. The newer wheels of have the signature lozenge marking closer together than in the past so customers buying even a small piece of cheese can see they are getting true Grana Padano.

"There are a lot of grana cheeses that are not made in Italy," says Di Palo. "The Consorzio of Grana Padano now has made it so that on every piece of cheese, you will see the markings of Grana Padano."

The date on the wheel lets retailers know the year and month the cheese was made. Having the age stamped on the cheese lets retailers know what is inside — whether it is a younger, more pliable cheese with less flavor and crunch or an aged cheese that is worth more.

Retailers can sell the younger cheeses as is, letting customers know it is a milder and softer cheese than an aged, or age it, as more and more retailers have begun to do.

"It is a good asset for the retailer," says Di Palo, who says the date stamp helps him maintain consistency and quality. He keeps the cheese in his store's aging room until it reaches its peak.

Educating Customers

"People want to know what Grana



New markings (on left) will assure consumers receive true Grana Padano