

Zingerman's[®]

PARM PROJECT 2017

THE POWER OF

PARMIGIANO
REGGIANO[®]

TAKEN TO NEW HEIGHTS



YOU REALLY CAN TASTE THE DIFFERENCE![™]

IF YOU COULD BRING ONLY ONE CHEESE TO A DESERTED ISLAND, WHICH ONE WOULD IT BE?

It's a standard question, one that I've been asked in interviews dozens of times over the years. My answer for ages has been simple and straightforward. "Parmigiano Reggiano." But now, seemingly overnight, I find myself faced with a difficult decision. Because what I, and so many others, have long treated as a singular entity, has been remade in my mind as a beautifully, multi-faceted, multiple-choice marvel. The old singular answer is now insufficient—after a year of travel, tasting, research and writing (I know, it's a tough job, but someone has to do it), we have four or five different, very carefully selected Parmigiano Reggiano cheeses en route to Ann Arbor. By the time you read this, the cheese will likely have arrived. Which means that what was once a quick and straightforward response has now become much more complex. If someone asks me now what cheese I'd bring to their mythical desert island, I'd have to ask more questions: What island? What time of year? What else will we be eating? What wine will be served? All of that and more now needs to be sorted and cycled for me to get the answer. The piece that follows should help to give more context, answer these questions, and help you gain access to exceptionally good cheese! Faced with a choice of five really great Parmigiano Reggiano options...I'll just take all five! It would give me something delicious to do while whiling away the time. Each of these cheeses would be delicious on a desert island. At dinner. On its own. On pasta. In salad. With aged Balsamic vinegar. With honey. Or for that matter, for dessert. All are excellent. Life at Zingerman's is good again. I feel very fortunate to have found them.

THE BASICS: BUILDING OFF A VERY HIGH BASELINE

One thing that's not changing a bit with these new beliefs, is that ALL Parmigiano Reggiano remains a very good cheese. Thanks to the good work of the Consorzio Parmigiano-Reggiano, founded in 1934, the baseline for this marvelous cheese is very high. The Consorzio—and every farmer and cheesemaker who's a part of it—have long been committed to making and purveying a top-quality product. While there are plenty of cheeses that attempt to position themselves as comparable—Grana Padano being the biggest name, as well as assorted other replicas made all around the world—Parmigiano Reggiano remains at the top of the quality heap. All the cheese that bears the P-R name must meet very high standards. 339 dairies are authorized to make the cheese, using milk from over 3000 farms and over a quarter million cows. Over 50,000 people work to make it all happen. The entire process is regulated. The cheese must, by law, be produced in the designated districts of Parma, Reggio-Emilia, Modena, a small part of Mantua and another small slice of Bologna. The feed for the animals must come mostly from the farms themselves; a small amount can be brought in, but still has to have been grown in the region. The milk must come only from the region and is never pasteurized. Each producer uses partially skimmed evening milk, combined the next day with whole milk from the following morning. Unlike most cheeses in the world today, starter is never purchased—every dairy makes its own (which works like the sourdough starter for bread). No additives are ever allowed. Just raw milk, salt, starter and calves' rennet are used. All the cheeses are made in carefully spec'ed copper kettles. Every cheese dairy is closely inspected and every single cheese is checked by the Consorzio experts before it can be given the prestigious Parmigiano Reggiano "firebrand" and have its side panels show off the now famous "pin dots" that spell out its name. (Cheeses that don't make the grade can be sold but never with the Parmigiano Reggiano name.) As a result, you will probably never taste a "bad" piece of Parmigiano Reggiano. If you're ever stuck in a supermarket and want to make sure the cheese you're buying is good, any Parmigiano Reggiano you find is a safe choice.



"I'd start out by asking myself, politely but firmly: What the heck took you so long to realize that there was more to Parmigiano Reggiano?"



WHY WOULD YOU WANT SO MANY CHEESES TO CHOOSE FROM?

That said, why would we go to so much trouble when we could just stick with the standard issue option?

1 Different Flavors for Different Palates

It only makes sense to offer a range of options just as we do olive oils, or as any good wine shop would have an array of Cabernets, etc. So we set out to source a wide-ranging palette of Parmigiano Reggiano cheeses that can meet every situation and every set of taste buds.

2 Different Flavors for Different Situations

In the same way that we've learned over the years to pair different olive oils with different dishes (lighter oils like ROI from Liguria for dishes like lemon sole, and bigger oils like Poggio Lamentano from Tuscany to pair with steaks, bean dishes or fresh tuna), the same thing is true with Parmigiano Reggiano! You can use a lighter softer, sweeter cheese like Valserena after dinner, or a bigger flavored cheese like Borgotaro to put atop a pasta tossed with a meat ragu, or the wonderful cheese from Roncadella atop a plate of traditional Bolognese tortelloni. You might shave slices of the Parmigiano Reggiano onto a lovely fall salad with apples, walnuts and endive. Or put some of the organic cheese from La Villa out after dinner with a glass of Moscato wine. There's a Parmigiano for every plate.

3 Different Flavors = More Fun

Assuming you, like me, are all about eating great food and enjoying wonderful flavors, this idea of having an array of options is so much more interesting than having only one option. I'm already thinking about how we can construct Parmigiano Reggiano sampler platters for our catering crew to serve up. Or how anyone can come in to buy three or four smaller pieces of cheese from different dairies and then go home and set up a family evening of good eating and education. To taste cheese from four different ages, or different elevations, or the milk of different breeds. Or how much fun it will be to pair up the different Parmigiano Reggiano cheeses with varietal honeys! Or how much young customers will grow up appreciating their options and having their personal favorite among our offerings.

4 Reggiano Roots Run Deep

I'm also looking forward to getting to know all these great new producers. To go back and revisit them after we've had a chance to sell their cheese for a while; to have a few of them come here to Ann Arbor to visit us. To help show them what we can do to honor their cheese and to introduce it to American consumers. Our definition of local has long been that we have a relationship with the people we're buying from and those we're selling to. I look forward to building these relationships for many years to come.

5 Get in The Parm Club



Now that we have access to all this great cheese, we'll be able to put together a year's worth of Parmigiano Reggiano into a club as we have our coffee cake, our cheese, or our bread. When you buy a Parm Club membership for a gift (or for yourself), we'll be able to send you a different cheese each month—maybe from a different dairy, maybe a different age from the same dairy? Or a different month of production? The idea is that you can string together six, nine or twelve months of wonder. New flavors to enjoy every month! I can pretty much guarantee that any food lover you know (unless they don't eat dairy) will absolutely love this gift. If they eat as much Parmigiano Reggiano as I do, you might have to double it up—at our house we go through a about a pound a week, and there are only two of us!

While most wine lovers will go to great lengths to consider wine pairings, hardly anyone has taken time to do the same with Parmigiano. Of course, with the old Parmigiano paradigm—where one cheese "fits" all—they didn't have that option.

THE CHEESES

THE CRÈME DE LA CRÈME; THE BEST OF THE BEST

Right now, we have five different offerings in house. At times, we might have more; at other times, less. But our drive, our commitment, our new belief is that we serve you best by having a nice range of top notch, terrific tasting cheeses from different dairies, of different ages, different milk sources, and of course, different flavors. Try them all together to really appreciate the contrast. Or taste them at the counter before you buy in order. Or if you're feeling generous, order up a few pieces and send them to a parm loving friend. Unless they've lived in the home region of Italy, you'll make their day. I know my own Parm consumption has increased dramatically since we started getting these exceptional cheeses!

At the end of my write up about each of the five dairies whose cheese we have on hand, I've included tasting notes from a friend in Italy who was kind enough to go to each dairy and re-taste for us. To be clear, Andrea Bezzechi is not just a friend. He's a formal taster for the regular assessment of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese. And because he grew up in the region, he has a lifetime of formal and informal experience doing this. He takes an expert's view on each of the cheeses. I was happy to see that our selections all scored high in his tastings. No small achievement from someone who's probably professionally assessed many thousands of cheeses over the years!

Ari



VALSERENA

An elegant farm Parm from the plains

This cheese is special on pretty much every level you can think of. Located in the lowlands of the Po River Valley, Valserena is the oldest Parmigiano dairy in the Parma district. It's one of the few farmstead Parmigiano Reggiano cheeses still made—all the milk comes exclusively from the Serra family's herd. They raise the animals, grow the feed, milk the animals and make the cheese right on the farm. Their herd is made up exclusively of the rare Sola Bruna (brown) cows. This old breed makes up less than 1/2 of 1 percent of the country's dairy cows. (Another tiny minority are the white cow, the Vacca Bianca Modenese, and another still are the Reggiana, or red cows, or Vache Rosse). The vast majority of the herds are Friesians, which were imported from the Netherlands. They produce milk at a much higher rate, but the quality of the milk never matches what comes from the older breeds.

The Sola Bruna are beautiful animals. Graceful, gentle, with furry ears and friendly faces, they're known for producing smaller quantities of milk, but the milk they give is particularly rich in butter fat. Valserena is one of four dairies that solely use the milk from the breed. As a result, the Serras have a special bas relief stamp that's pressed into the top side of each wheel showing the seal of the Consorzio di Sola Bruna. It is, so to speak, a Consorzio within a Consorzio; the Sola Bruna folks abide diligently by the standards set by the larger Consorzio Parmigiano-Reggiano, but then, on top of all that, they have their own strict guidelines which all of its members commit to. First and foremost being that all the milk used for the cheeses must be only from Brown cows.

The land at Valserena also has an exceptionally long and rich history. Currently run by the 5th generation, the family has been farming the land since the 18th century—the Serra and Balduino families, both of Genoese origin, signed the papers to purchase it in 1879. The family has been breeding cows in the same location ever since. In the old days, the land was sharecropped and there were hundreds of peasants with smallholdings and small herds contributing to cheese made at the farm's dairy. Some of the families working the land at that time still reside on the family lands to this day. Today, the Serras have about 225 cows being milked, from which they make a modest 12 to 14 wheels of cheese a day.

Located down on the flat lands of the province of Parma, the fields of the farm spread out from either side of the road. The Serra's land is all on what Italians refer to as the *pianura bassa*, "the low plains." If you pull off the road and turn into the stately old two-story estate house's old central courtyard you can park, and then make your way to the right side of the compound into the Serra's small cheese shop. And there, by tasting the cheese, you'll know that you've arrived someplace special. If they're not busy and you say you're from Zingerman's, someone might be willing to walk you across the courtyard to see their office. Why, you might wonder, would you want to do that? Most cheese dairy offices are just a collection of metal file cabinets and lab equipment. But the Valserena office is every bit as storied and elegant as the cheese itself. The room looks more like a lovely old, small, off-the-beaten path, country museum. Drawers are full of old, hand drawn water diagrams from the region; essentially the equivalent of "blueprints" for how to channel irrigation and rainwater from field to field. Water management, after all, was one of the keys to successful survival in centuries past, and in some ways still today—the plans date to the work of 13th century monks who lived in two monasteries that were once on the land.

The elegance of the old-world file cabinets and the quaintness of their contents don't change the cheese at all, but they do add depth to what is already a great cheese success story. The brown Swiss cow first started to appear in the region around 1870, but got more attention when they became a favorite of Professor Antonio Bizzozzero in 1892. The family became big proponents of Bizzozzero's plan to cross breed brown Swiss with local herds, and they are mentioned by Dr. Giovanni Menapace

in his book, *Agricoltura Parmense* (i.e., Parma Agriculture) written in 1937, as being among those who followed in the teachings of Professor Bizzozzero. Antonietta and Giovanni Serra have records of their ancestor starting to go to Switzerland, the home of the Brown Swiss cows, to buy bulls to bring back for breeding in the tail end of the 19th century. The result was the now storied Sola di Bruna that makes up the Serras' herd.

In honesty, beautiful as the estate and the cows are, I don't think I'd want to live there. In summer, temperatures regularly go over 100°F and the humidity can make Michigan feel like Arizona. Because the soil is so soft, farmers can't afford to let the animals graze the land. In fact, the animals never leave the barn. "If you let the animals out on a rainy day, literally in one day they can destroy the grass altogether," Karl Heinz Berthold, a long-time friend and colleague and one of the most respected experts on traditional cheese I've ever met, explained. To preserve the soil's integrity and farmer's ability to plant it effectively, the crops are harvested and then brought to the animals in the barn! Rather than the cows going out into the field, the Parma producers bring the field to the cow. While this adds enormously to the cost of making Parmigiano Reggiano, it's the only sustainable way to maintain the soil and still be able to raise cows.

The actual cheesemaker at Valserena is Lal Madan, who came to the region originally from India. He and his team do a superb job with the cheese. They incorporate a slightly higher percentage of fat into their Parmigiano, giving it a richer flavor and creamier texture. They intentionally work to have relatively low salt levels—it's a bit riskier for the producer since lower salt increases risk of problems, but of great benefit to us as cheese eaters because the lower salt puts the creaminess of the cheese way out front. Having tasted Valserena cheese over twenty-five times in the last year, I will say that it's consistently excellent. In the last year, of 1600 cheeses they produced, only a single wheel received a substandard grade from the Consorzio's strict judges!

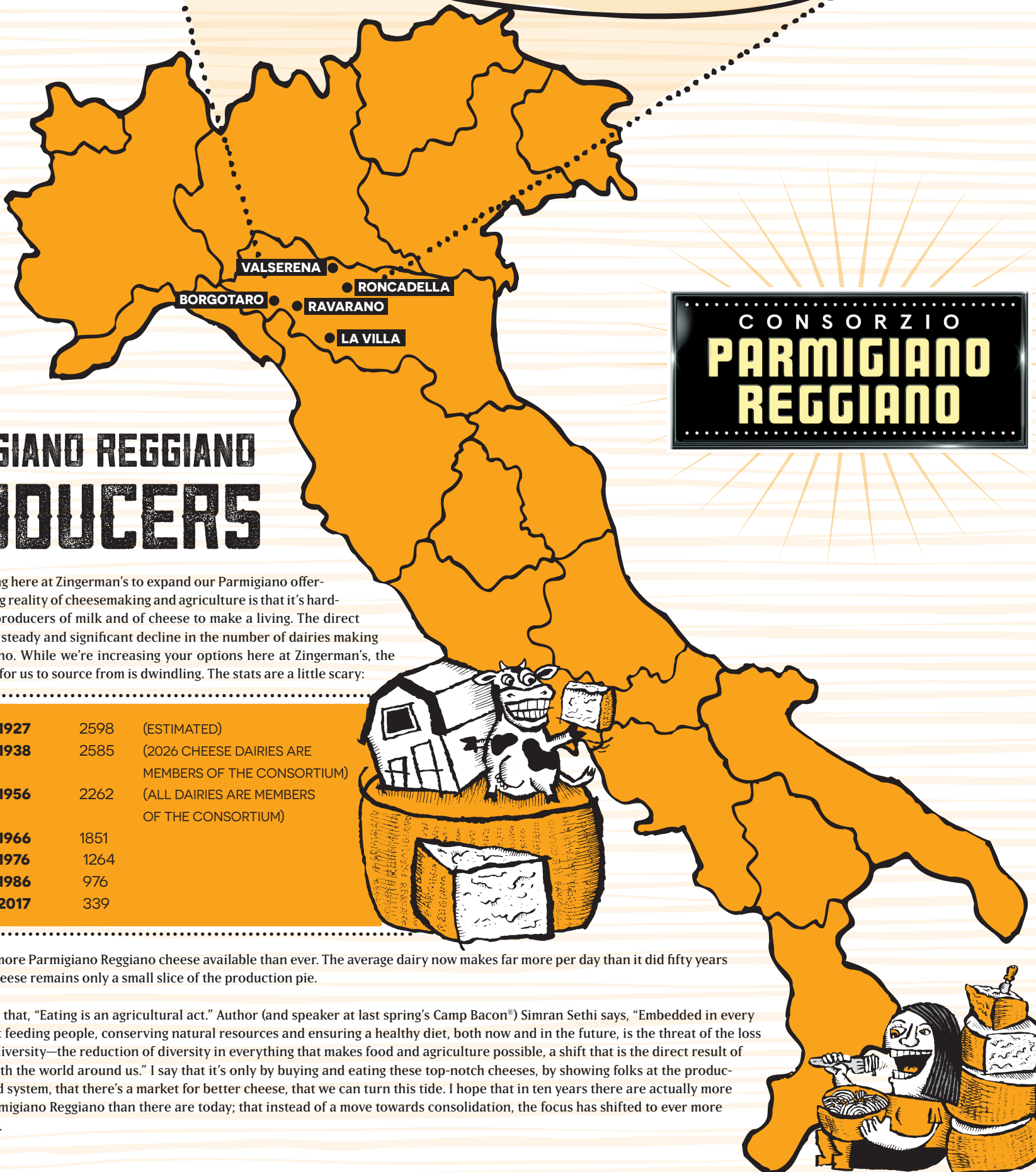
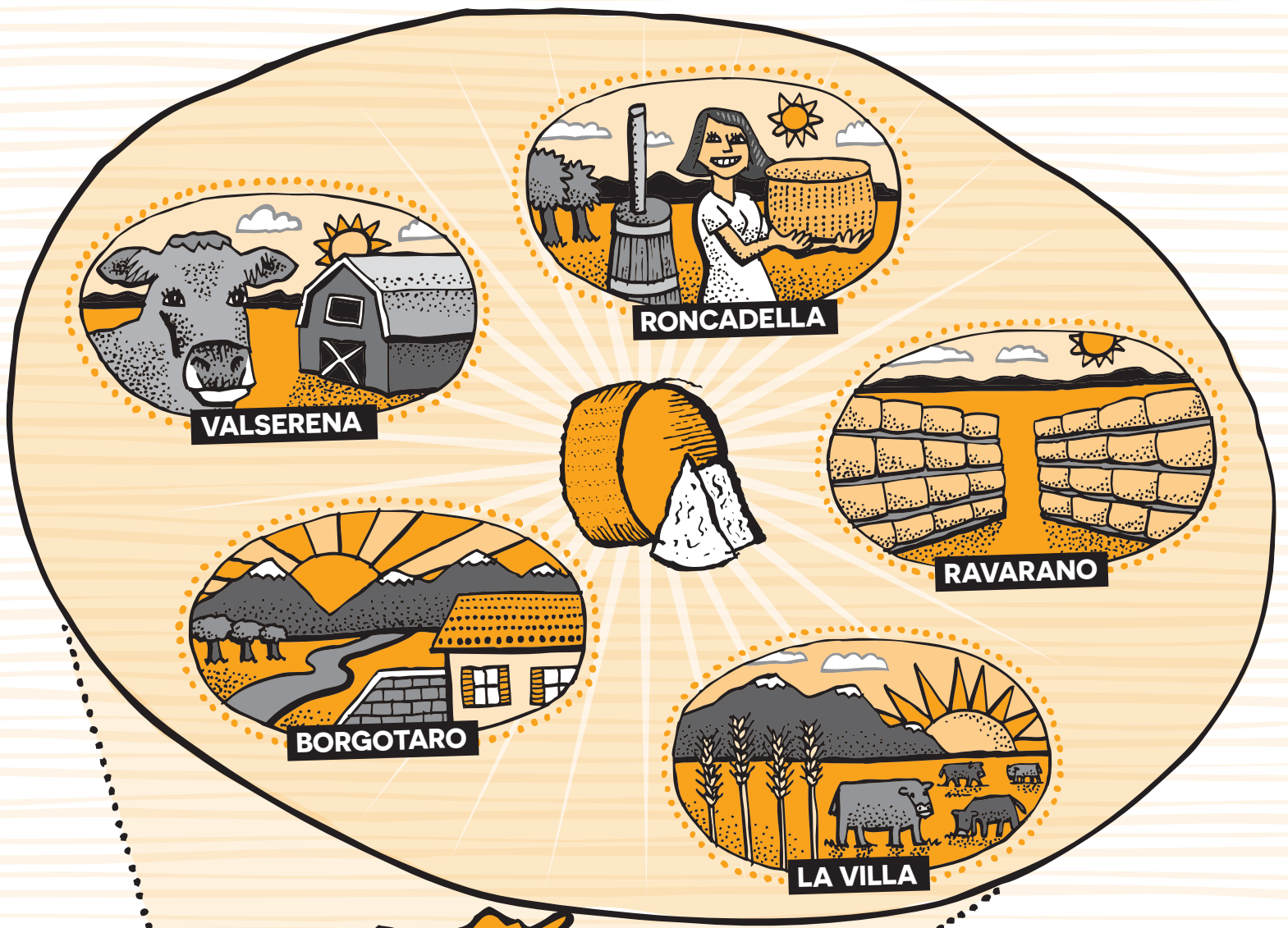
The Valserena cheese is also unusual for its size. The family produces 41 kilo wheels—a few pounds heavier than the more typical Parmigiano Reggiano cheese. "They can do this because they control the whole process," Karl explained. "The bigger wheels take longer to age but they are willing to wait in order to get better tasting cheese." The results are excellent. There's a bit more depth to the flavor, a vibrant maturity that helps make eating it such a pleasure.

Like all producers of Parmigiano Reggiano, the Serras grow most of the herd's feed on their own land. Last year they got a formal "GMO-free" certification due to their work with the crops. Not only is the breed known for great milk, but the Serras are known for taking particularly great care of their animals. It helps that Antonietta is a trained veterinarian. You can see the care in the condition of the animals. Bright eyed, clean, engaged, lively of spirit. The Serras' gentleness is rewarded with the excellence of the milk. The animals live longer and produce milk much longer than most commercial herds. And, of course, the better the milk, the better the cheese. The flavor of the cheese is a culmination of all the above factors and probably fifty more I haven't touched on. A pale straw color, very rich, buttery, soft flavor—consistently excellent. To me it reflects the place it comes from—stately, grounded, with a high level of excellence in every tiny detail! It's delicious on its own. Fantastic on a plate of just cooked stuffed pasta with butter. In the region, they say that they "drown the tortellini with butter" and then "rescue them" with copious amounts of Parmigiano Reggiano. Great with a delicate honey—acacia would be excellent. I'll close with a quote from importer and friend Carrie Blakeman who has worked with artisan food producers all over the world for years. "There is something extraordinary about the Serra's. A family that lives and breathes the land, the animals, their gifts—with sweat, trials, Pride, honor, generosity and patience. Their cheese is exceptional. Every time I taste it makes me smile."

TASTING NOTES FROM AN

Italian Expert
Valserena

The distinctive part of the perfume is characterized by nutty, hay and fruity notes, really rich and a little pungent, intriguing. The taste is a perfect balance between sweet and savory, with a light finish of spices. What I really love is the texture—it's creamy and super soluble—which is so important for different uses—as an aperitivo by itself, or grated on warm dishes.



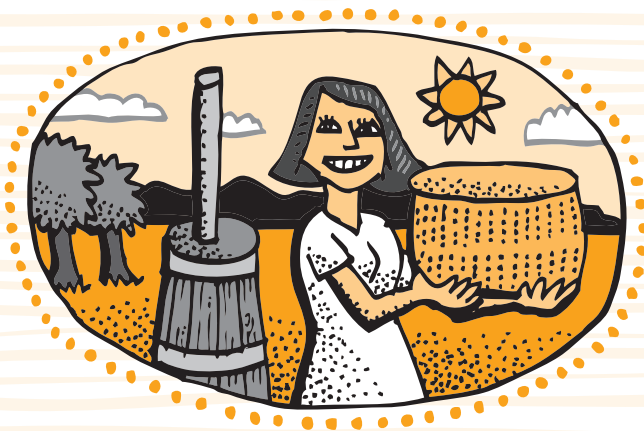
PARMIGIANO REGGIANO PRODUCERS

While we’re working here at Zingerman’s to expand our Parmigiano offerings, the challenging reality of cheesemaking and agriculture is that it’s harder and harder for producers of milk and of cheese to make a living. The direct result of which is a steady and significant decline in the number of dairies making Parmigiano Reggiano. While we’re increasing your options here at Zingerman’s, the number of options for us to source from is dwindling. The stats are a little scary:

YEAR 1927	2598	(ESTIMATED)
YEAR 1938	2585	(2026 CHEESE DAIRIES ARE MEMBERS OF THE CONSORTIUM)
YEAR 1956	2262	(ALL DAIRIES ARE MEMBERS OF THE CONSORTIUM)
YEAR 1966	1851	
YEAR 1976	1264	
YEAR 1986	976	
YEAR 2017	339	

Mind you, there is more Parmigiano Reggiano cheese available than ever. The average dairy now makes far more per day than it did fifty years ago. But the best cheese remains only a small slice of the production pie.

Wendell Berry says that, “Eating is an agricultural act.” Author (and speaker at last spring’s Camp Bacon®) Simran Sethi says, “Embedded in every conversation about feeding people, conserving natural resources and ensuring a healthy diet, both now and in the future, is the threat of the loss of agricultural biodiversity—the reduction of diversity in everything that makes food and agriculture possible, a shift that is the direct result of our relationship with the world around us.” I say that it’s only by buying and eating these top-notch cheeses, by showing folks at the production end of the food system, that there’s a market for better cheese, that we can turn this tide. I hope that in ten years there are actually more dairies making Parmigiano Reggiano than there are today; that instead of a move towards consolidation, the focus has shifted to ever more exceptional quality.



RONCADELLA

*Wonderful work by the region's only
woman cheesemaker*

About half an hour drive to the east of the town of Reggio-Emilia, or about an hour to the south of Valserena, the caseificio at Roncadella is one of my favorites for two really good reasons. First and foremost, the flavor is fantastic. Not as delicate as the Valserena, but superb without being too strong. For me, the Roncadella Parmigiano Reggiano really hits a beautiful bullseye—sweet, but not too sweet; salty but not too much so; pronounced and profound, but not heavy-handed. The Roncadella co-op is the only Parmigiano Reggiano dairy with a woman master cheesemaker! Marisa Verzelloni makes some marvelous cheese. (Just so you're saying it right as you read, Italians pronounce the "s" in Marisa more as a "z.")

Like most of what we have here, Roncadella is an "insider's cheese." It's located off the main road—you'd have to know where you were going to find it. "It's in a sub-village of a village that makes up part of the outskirts of Reggio-Emilia," Karl-Heinz Berthold told us. It's a very small co-operative, and unlike most of the dairies in the region, they don't sell to bigger consolidators or distributors. There's no marketing department or ad agency to spread the word. Nearly all the cheese they make is sold exclusively through their own little retail shop, or directly to a select group of other premium retailers and restaurants. At their shop, they sell nothing but their own cheese—and generally all of it is the same age, 24 months, which is what Marisa believes is best, and their butter. That's it. And yet, the shop and cheese keep drawing people. Lousy location, extremely limited product selection, no real options of offerings. When I put it that way, it sounds like a Soviet Russian supermarket. And yet, the energy in the shop is alive, sales are very strong—they sell everything they make even though they seemingly do everything "wrong" by modern standards—and the place is very popular with Parmigiano Reggiano aficionados.

One local expert told me he goes there to buy cheese to use at most of his cheese-focused events. "I've bought cheese there many times over the years," he said, "and I never got a piece of cheese at Roncadella that wasn't good." Further proof? "There is a shop, a family who for generations—his father and grandfather—they run a deli in Parma, and they only pick the best. If you go to their shop, they have other Parmigiano Reggiano for sale at 14.90 Euros per kilo. But they have also Roncadella cheese, and it sells for one euro more. And people buy it. In this region, remember, you could never get away with that if their cheese wasn't really excellent." Another friend in the region said, "If you come on Christmas eve, when everyone in the area wants to have only the best cheese for their family, there is always a line at their shop that goes out the door. 20 or 30 people might be waiting. Other shops—right on the highway and much easier to access—aren't anywhere near as busy. But Roncadella is where the locals will happily wait in line to pay a bit more but get something really special." Pretty clearly, this one sounded like a Zingerman's kind of cheese!

Marisa's story, and with it, that of the Roncadella cheese, is an unusual one. Her husband was the casaro at the dairy for many years, during which time he was widely recognized for the excellence of his cheese. As is so often the case, his wife had been helping him from the start, but of course it was his name, not hers, that got the public credit. When he died at a relatively young-middle age, the co-op members, shaken up though they were, started the search for a new cheesemaker. It's not a small job to fill. When cheese is all you make, it's like a playoff team who suddenly has to find a new quarterback, or a restaurant that's lost its chef. While others on the team are, of course, also critical to the production process, it's the casaro who oversees everything, the one who brings farmers, makers, maturers, and marketing all together. They're the conductor that brings everyone and everything together to produce a high-quality concerto of flavors.

Shortly after the search commenced, the president of the co-op had the idea to talk Marisa into becoming the cheesemaker. She was not immediately amenable. She was already over 50 years old. In Italy, and especially with the Parmigiano Reggiano, there have historically been few women cheesemakers. But somehow he talked her into it. Happily, for cheese eaters in the area—and now, in Ann Arbor as well—she's still going. Karl shared that, "She's been doing it for ten years and people say the cheese is even better than when her husband had it."

To be clear, Marisa's chosen professional path is not an easy one. The cheesemaker—male or female—has a hard job. They work year-round, many without a day off, let alone a vacation. And, as Karl explained, "The cheese dairy is only half the job...you have to coordinate all the farmers, the milk delivery, the sale of the cheese. You are the player, but also the coach." Of late, there's been a lot of cheese theft. It's an easy thing for thieves to work with. There's a guaranteed market. And once the wheels are cut, there's no way anyone can prove which dairy the cheese came from. "She had thieves again recently," Karl conveyed. "Usually, the casaro sleeps on the first floor of the cheese dairy to guard the cheese. But they broke into the warehouse in the middle of the night." We should, I suppose, add "security guard" to the list of the casaro's duties. "It's a tough job," he went on "And being a woman in a man's world is very difficult.

Honestly, she needs to be twice as skilled as a man to succeed." And yet, she's doing great work, and seems to be having a lot of fun in the process. "In theory," Karl said, "she should be tired. But she doesn't want to stop because it's her life." As delicious as it is, we came very close to not finding this cheese. We'd been scheduled to go on the first day of our visit, a Friday, but then found out that our excellent importer, Carrie Blakeman of the Rogers Collection, was going to take us there on day two, so we cancelled our original visit.

Zingerman's
Catering & Events *Zingerman's*
DELICATESSEN

READY TO TRY SOME PARMIGIANO REGGIANO BUT DON'T FEEL LIKE COOKING?

- Ask about all the ways we can make some of these Parmigiano Reggiano cheeses a part of your next party! Zingerman's Catering makes it easy for you!
- The Caesar salad at the Deli will be made with one of the cheeses.
- Watch for a new Parmigiano Reggiano spread. Grace and I learned about it at a little restaurant south of Parma town on our last visit!

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Carrie had met Marisa years before on the tip of a friend who knows she has good taste. Given Roncadella's low profile and elusive location, the friend was giving her a nice little gift. A special artisan source that might otherwise likely get missed. As luck and travel often have it, Saturday's schedule ran long and Roncadella didn't fit into the agenda. Fortunately, Carrie was determined to get us there. She woke up on Sunday morning with the idea to borrow a friend's car and drive us to the dairy herself.

Many shops in Italy—especially in the countryside—aren't open on Sunday at all. We were still about half an hour away. He'd gotten ahold of the co-op shop. "They close at noon." With still half an hour to go, it wasn't even close. Carrie called Karl on the phone, "If you're there in two minutes," he said, "keep going. Otherwise they're closed. I tried calling the president of the co-op but he said there's nothing he can do." Grace, Carrie and I conferred for a minute in the car. Carrie wanted to push on. Grace and I agreed. "Just keep going. At least we'll be able to see the building." Thanks to Grace's great backseat navigating we got there. It was 12:25. Way beyond the point of hoping that they'd have casually stayed open a few minutes past closing. The door was locked and the shades were down. We were going to miss the dairy for the third day in a row!

Fortunately for us, Carrie wasn't quite ready to give up. She walked closer. Hearing muffled voices through the closed shop window, she went up to the door and knocked softly, then quietly said, "Hello!" We heard a voice call back from inside. An instant later the door was being unlocked and we were ushered inside! A short woman—"five foot nothing," Grace said later—with big, curly, black hair, and equally big glasses, let us in. It was, of course, the casara herself—Marisa. I don't know how old she is, maybe in her fifties, wearing the white work pants and button-down shirt that nearly all the casari in the region sport (imagine the old ice cream delivery man). She welcomed us in. They knew no English; we spoke only spotty Italian. We all smiled. Marisa remembered Carrie from their original meeting a few years ago. We all smiled and nodded some more. We exchanged a few words of Italian to convey our appreciation. They started asking what we'd like...a chunk of cheese was quickly broken into pieces (Parmigiano Reggiano, properly handled, is never cut, only broken so that you get uneven textures and a terrific mouthfeel). It tasted wonderful. Excited, we tried to make small talk but given the language barrier—Marisa speaks no English—we were limited.

To be clear, Marisa is a very determined woman and she does things her own way. While other shops offer a range of ages, she generally will sell only at the age she believes best, more often than not, about 24 months. While others have built fancier shops along the highway to get easier access to travelers, she's stayed stubbornly and groundedly off the beaten path. When the Slow Food folks came around doing research for their *Guida al Parmigiano Reggiano* (the equivalent of the Michelin Guide for Parmigiano Reggiano), she basically told them to take a hike. How she makes the cheese, she told them, was none of their business. She's not afraid to walk her own path.

As we drove away, I reflected that even though it was the end of her work week, at the end of her day, Marisa's energy was still great. So rare in the world, and yet so common amongst those who are attaining excellence. Her generosity of spirit and their willingness to help out a customer are what made the whole thing happen. I could only smile. It was right out of *Zingerman's Guide to Giving Great Service!* Rather than wag their finger at us and point to the clock, they welcomed us in. And, she cut us a couple of big wedges of the cheese. We tried to pay. She refused. More generosity. We took two kilos, and headed home. Happy that we'd made it! And now, as I sit here in Ann Arbor and nibble on small chunks of it, I'm happier still. Marisa's cheese really is something special. The first time, best I can tell you, that Roncadella's Parmigiano Reggiano is for sale in the U.S. Hopefully it's just the beginning. I look forward to selling it, and eating it myself, for many years to come. Balanced. A bit caramelly. Toasty. Creamy, but not too soft. Nicely aged. Excellent. A tiny touch of spice on the palate. Really long finish. Fabulous.

TASTING NOTES FROM AN

Italian Expert
Roncadella

*Perfume-rich and complex, I like it because I can smell
fruit (which is quite rare to find), broth and caramel.
What really strikes me is the abundance of flavor once I
bite one piece. The aroma is of dried fruits (in particular,
hazelnut) and a lot of spices, like nutmeg. The taste
is rich, perfectly balanced and persistent, with a
long-lasting finish.*



BORGOTARO

*Bold flavors from the top of the
Parmigiano Reggiano peak*

The dairy at Borgotaro is located up in the mountains, about sixty kilometers southwest of the town Parma and about as far from Parma and Reggio-Emilia as you can get and still be in the region. “If you drive fifty kilometers more you will be in Liguria and the coast,” our host Simone Ficarelli, a long-time staffer at the Consorzio Parmigiano-Reggiano, said. The city of Genoa is only 64 kilometers away. Head south and you get to Tuscany. Because of its location on the frontier of all of these regions, Borgotaro has long been a center of regional trade.

The dairy is located in the town of Albareto, at the center of the Borgotaro district. It’s housed in a practical, but beautiful, little squared-off building on a large, clean hand-laid red brick terrace. The energy of the building reflects the cheese that’s made inside. Calm, grounded, confident, vibrant, appealing, high quality. It’s still most definitely Parmigiano Reggiano, but it’s a whole different world here in the mountains than down in the plains where Valserena and Roncadella are made. Everything from the weather to the air is altered. At Valserena my mind was focused on surviving the summer heat and intense humidity. Here, we turn into the parking lot and see snow plows sitting off to the side. “They have to be ready. The snow comes early here. And,” Simone said, “this is one of the roads that goes from northern Italy to the south, so they have to keep it clear.”

The area is known more formally as Borgo Val di Taro, but the name has been shortened in casual conversation to Borgotaro. The father of the late great actor, James Gandolfini of Sopranos fame, came from the village. It’s a big tourist destination for Italians. Not too far away from bigger cities with plenty of fresh mountain air, a beautiful river and good food. The Borgotaro is a member of the Slow City movement, which encourages support of local food and drink and a generally slower pace of high quality community life. The town is on the upswing. “Many families left the mountains after WWII because it was so poor. Summertime here, people come from all the cities to have vacation here.” It’s important to understand just how much the caseificio is a part of the local culture. If you live in Ann Arbor, think perhaps of a small scale high altitude version of what would happen here if the University were to close. Not just for the jobs, but for the connection. “It’s always a pity when a cheese dairy closes,” Simone explains, “but in the mountains even more, because if that happens, the community comes apart.”

The folks at the caseificio understand this. “The whole economy here depends on us,” its president, Stefano Cacchioli, told us. Borgotaro is a co-op owned by its farmer members. Roughly two thirds of the caseifici that make Parmigiano Reggiano are set up in the same way— co-operatively owned by the farmers whose milk is used to make the cheese. In the mountains, nearly all of the dairies are co-ops. The co-op here is relatively “modern,” founded only in 1967. To give you a sense of how things have developed with the cheese over the years, the co-op originally had 300 members; generally each had only 1 or 2 cows back then. Today they have only 20 producers, plus five small farms from which they buy a bit of milk. Most of the Borgotaro farms now are like 20 or 30 cows.

Stefano, the president of the co-op, has the biggest herd—about 80 cows, roughly half of which he’s milking at any given time. He and his wife do the milking every day, twice a day. He took us to the farm to see it. “Have you ever seen an American president milking cows?” he asks us with a big smile. Located on the side of a mountain, Stefano’s farm is, again, a whole different world from working on the flatlands. “It’s much harder to farm on the hills,” he tells us. “Tractors last only half as long.” The average price of milk is .36 cents a liter. The average milk price of Parmigiano Reggiano milk is .50 cents a liter. And here it’s probably even higher than that. But the mountains inform the milk, which of course, makes the cheese what it is. The Borgotaro logo shows a farmer milking the cow behind a range of colorful wild flowers. “Our cheese is the expression of the milk of the area,” Stefano says proudly.

The soil here is firmer by far than that of the lowland plains at Valserena. But even in most of the region’s higher altitudes, soil management in the region is a problem. A man-made problem. “Each conqueror took away wood from the Apennines,” Karl-Heinz Berthold explained, “so the area has a huge problem with erosion.” As a result, many mountain farms still keep their cows in the barns year-round. Borgotaro seems an exception (as is La Villa)—the cows here are actually out in the fields during the spring, summer and fall. The soil is firmer and not at risk. There are far more trees still intact to anchor the soil, as well. 95 percent of what the cows eat here is grown by the farmers in the co-op, consumed either directly from the fields in the warmer months or as hay in winter. The milk from the farms is still collected here the old-fashioned way—in cans. Cheese is made within two hours of milking. The cheesemaker is Gianpiero Forlini. They have 13 kettles in which they make about 23 cheeses a day, roughly 7000 per year.

They don’t add any additional fat back to the cheese production—they’ve stuck to the traditional and typical way of doing it where the partially skimmed evening milk is added to the whole morning milk.

For some reason that I’m not quite clear on, their cheeses have slightly straighter sides than most. I’m sure it’s caused by something they do in the making or aging, but I imagine it more romantically, even if less realistically, as straight-shouldered mountain pride.

It’s fascinating to me to compare and contrast the different dairies. While down in the valley at Valserena it was humid and hot, and the days we were there more overcast, the day we went up to Borgotaro it was sunny, bright blue skies overhead, breezy and beautiful, cool but not cold. It’s only a few hour’s drive from one dairy to the other, but as is true in so many places in Italy, a relatively short physical distance can feel like a world away. Located at over 400 meters above sea level with the Taro river running through the center of town, the sun shining on the hill and glistening on the river water, it’s a beautiful spot. The village here seems much more connected to other more famous mountain regions of Northern Italy—in the east in the Alto Adige or in the west in the Val d’Aosta, than Parma or Reggio. It’s big truffle and mushroom country—people come from all over to hunt porcini in the local woods. They have a particular variety of wild mushroom that grows and has a formal denomination of origin. There’s a porcini festival in mid-September! It was a big center for the Italian resistance in WWII, which gives you a sense of the independent and forceful spirit of the locals. There’s a sense of pride and autonomy. “People from the mountains, they like to be by themselves,” Simone told us. “They don’t like too many outsiders around.” As an introvert, even though I grew up in the flatter than flat city of Chicago, I realize that maybe this idea makes me more akin to being in mountain spaces like Borgotaro. There’s something peaceful for me up here. The people have a very calm energy about them. They’re not trying too hard to impress; not full of themselves. Happy to see us and super glad to have us there, but not falling all over themselves to sell cheese to us either.

One of the things that makes this cheese so special is that they use almost exclusively natural aging at temperatures throughout the year. Though they have refrigeration in the aging rooms, they use it only on the hottest days to protect the cheese, but 95 percent of the time, the cheese is maturing. That means it’s much colder in the winter, warmer in spring, and even warmer still in summer. Most of the time, they leave the windows open to allow for natural air flow through the aging rooms. The cheeses actually have quite a view—you can see the mountains out the windows.

This is essentially the same process that everyone used in the old days. It’s also the way prosciutto di Parma is aged. And traditional balsamic vinegar. The changing of the temperatures by season is a big piece of what impacts the flavor development of the final products. While you can change temperatures nowadays inside a sealed room, there is still something special about letting fresh natural air do its thing. It’s one of the “secrets” behind the excellence of the Prosciutto di Parma from Pio Tosini (if you haven’t tried their prosciutto, come by and ask for a taste! If you want to read the article I wrote about them last year, email me at ari@zingermans.com). Borgotaro’s methods are beautifully old school, but very effective. All the cheeses go through two summer “sweats” to make sure they mature fully and properly.

By contrast, many more mechanized and modern dairies don’t even let the temperature swing very much. Higher heat means more sweating, which means more weight loss. If you hold the cheese strictly at colder temperatures, you lose less moisture, which means at two years, you have an extra kilo or so of cheese to sell. For the same work. When you’re selling your cheese off en masse to big distributors who aren’t that focused on the nuance, why not hold the weight?

You can tell the difference from the aging room aromas alone. As soon as we walk in, Simone says, “Wow! This smells like the cheese dairies I remember from when I was a child.” The aging rooms make a big difference. When the co-op was expanding a decade or so ago, they needed to “borrow” maturing space from other dairies to age the cheese. “You could tell the difference,” Stefano said with certainty. “The cheese was not the same.”

If you get up their way, be sure to stop to visit the folks at Borgotaro. The caseificio up here is much more a center of cultural life, than merely an important culinary adjunct. They have a beautiful little shop at the dairy, with a selection of terrific specialty foods from all over the region. They also have a full specialty butcher on site. Most importantly for our immediate purposes, the cheese tastes great. Big round flavor. Sweet, but not at all out of balance. Really nice finish. A nice amount of low notes to go with the high. Good crystal formation from the well-aged amino acids. Nice golden color. Great on pasta or in risotto with porcini or other mushrooms. Fry the porcini first in pancetta fat. Or, of course, you can eat it as is. It’s got a great finish still in my mouth long after we’ve left to drive back to Parma. What my good friend Randolph Hodgson who founded Neals’ Yard Dairy in London calls “a thirty miler.” Thirty miles down the road it still tastes terrific. If you want another opinion, the recently published *Slow Food Guida al Parmigiano Reggiano* listed Borgotaro as one of their “top” cheeses—“flavors of fresh milk, dried and fresh fruit (pineapple, citrus and apples), walnuts and muscat. In the mouth it’s complex, particularly fruity (pear, banana) with notes of flowers, hay and walnuts.” Well said! As you can tell, I love it! I’m guessing you will, too.

TASTING NOTES FROM AN

Italian Expert

Borgotaro

The color is golden, really rich in perfume with fruity and broth notes. The flavor is full and fills the mouth, with rich notes of cooked butter, broth and spices. The crystals in the cheese are really defined and create a nice experience in biting the piece, which completely melts in the mouth, leaving a complex and very long taste of meat broth, dried fruits and spices.

HOW TO EAT *Parmigiano Reggiano*

The quick and accurate answer is: any way you can imagine. Here are few of my favorites:

- 1 On pasta—of course! In its home region, it's used a lot on stuffed pasta. The locals say to “drown” the tortellini in butter, then “rescue” them with a generous “raft” of grated Parmigiano Reggiano.
- 2 A simple dish of top quality pasta (we have many—Martelli, Rustichella, Faella, and more) cooked al dente, then dressed with a great olive oil, a good bit of freshly ground pepper and a LOT of freshly grated Parmigiano Reggiano is a world-class meal. And you can make it in under 20 minutes from start to finish!
- 3 Grated onto salads—this is an easy and really delicious way to take the quality of your salad up a few notches.
- 4 Broken into small pieces and served with slices of Prosciutto di Parma—they're from the same region and go hand in hand! Both are amazing!
- 5 With honey—the best Parmigiano pairs beautifully with varietal honeys—I'm particularly partial to the sweet flavor of chestnut honey, but really any of the great varietal honeys at the Deli will be delicious. Taste, compare and enjoy!



LA VILLA

*The new wave—organic farmstead
cheese from south of Parma*

About half an hour due south of the city of Parma, the La Villa (in Italian you pronounce the “ll”s) farm is one of the most interesting new developments in the Parmigiano Reggiano world. It is a look at what progressive cheesemaking can do to take things to the next level. If you want a wholesale sense of what creative disruption can achieve, this is probably the place to go. Or at least, the cheese to eat!

La Villa is a beautiful farm located up in the mountains, just to the southwest of the village of Urzano. It's at about 530 meters above sea level (130 meters higher up even than Borgotaro). La Villa is owned and run by two families, the Carburri and the Folezzani. Carlo Carburri serves as both the farmer and the cheesemaker, and is doing wonderful work in both roles.

The farm and everything about it is organic. He grows all of the crops, which are turned into the feed for the cows, and every day he mills his own mix of barley, corn, oats, and bran for the herd. In 2011 he eliminated all of the soy from his fields and hence from the cows' diet—the only person in the Parmigiano Reggiano world, he says, who's done that. He mixes sea salt from Cervia (on the east coast of the region of Emilia-Romagna) into the cows' feed in order to add natural minerals to their diet. Carlo built his own mill to process all the grains for the animals, so that his cows are getting freshly milled grain every day. Eating the grains so close to milling means less oxidation and more flavor, which in turn leads to better milk quality.

La Villa is a very small farm. Carlo and his brother have only a couple employees. He has about 300 head of cattle, 180 of which were being milked when we visited in the spring, a mix of brown and red cows. He's one of the few Parmigiano Reggiano producers who lets the animals out in the fields. The day we were there they were literally frolicking on the hillsides in the sun! If you were a dairy cow looking for work, La Villa seems like a fun place to apply for a job. The care with which Carlo works with the animals and the feeding has resulted in small yields of very high-quality milk. He uses all gravity feeds for moving the milk—pumping is more efficient but can damage the milk globules. He also salts very lightly—the cheese is in the brine solution for three or four days less than many of the producers' (20 instead of 22 or 24).

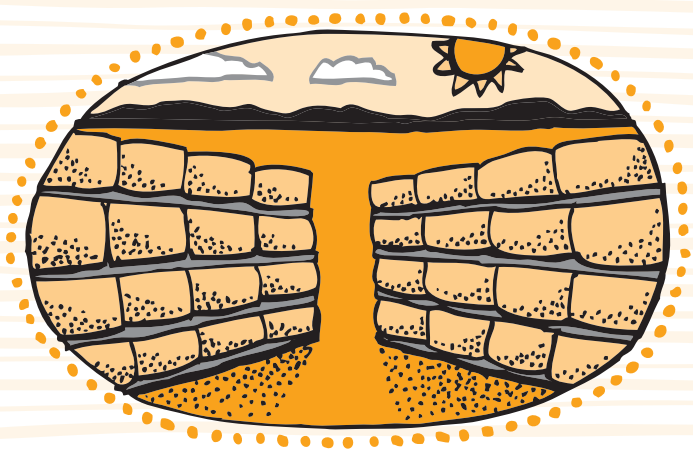
The oldest cheese he had when we were there was 18 months and so what we'll be getting was held especially for us to get it to the 24-month mark. The cheese was a bit young when we were there so it's hard to give great flavor assessment, but it seemed to have really good potential. It's sort of like selecting a 17-year old in the NBA draft—it's hard to judge what will happen but the upside is very high if it works out well. His quality has been consistently high—out of his last 600 wheels he told us, none have failed the Consorzio's tests.

The flavor of the La Villa cheese is bright, more buttery than the others, perhaps with a bit more moisture and a hint of an almost gouda-like character. Carlo has very limited amounts of cheese—only 4 to 6 wheels produced a day. Really, he already sells all he makes so we're lucky to get our hands on a few wheels. La Villa, of course, means “the home,” or “country home”—and this small progressive caseificio is really very much the home of Parmigiano Reggiano for the 21st century. Every bite is a positive piece of a better future!

TASTING NOTES FROM AN *Italian Expert* La Villa

The perfume reminds me of cooked/warm milk, hay and hazelnut. While tasting it, I really appreciate the sweetness. A distinctive aroma of raw vegetable with hints of toasted and brown butter aroma.





RAVARANO

Sweet elegance from the mountains

We “discovered” the Ravarano cheese, unexpectedly, not at a village dairy, but in the center of Parma, at a restaurant set back on a small street named after Antonio Gramsci, the intellectually powerful, 19th century left-wing politician. (One of his best quotes was, “The challenge of modernity is to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned.”) It was last spring, the first night of our second trip to the region. We’d arrived in Parma mid-afternoon, and, after going for a quick run, we headed out to meet my friend, food writer Elizabeth Minchilli, at Ristorante Cocchi. Elizabeth excels at finding the best places to eat in any Italian town and Cocchi continued her run of really good recommendations. Around since 1925 and still family run, it’s a big favorite of the locals. Shortly after sitting down, a plate of local salumi arrived at the table, along with another small plate with golden nuggets of newly “broken” Parmigiano Reggiano. Thinking back, I don’t even know that we ordered either of them—I think the plates just showed up as apertivi while we were figuring out what to order. They’re kind of “required eating” in the region—I don’t think you can call it a real meal in Parma without them.

Tired, hungry, and a bit disoriented in that way that even the best travelers are when you’ve only been in an unfamiliar place for a few hours and in on the wrong time zone, we tasted. Always on the lookout for excellence, we were happily surprised with how good everything tasted. Doubting our jet-lagged palates, we tasted everything again a second time. We looked at each other for confirmation? One of us—I can’t remember quite who it was—said, “That cheese is pretty good.” A pause, another piece got eaten. “Yeah, it is good.” It was sweet. Delicate. Clean aftertaste, like I like. No off flavors. Another pause, another hand reaching in for a taste. “Yeah, it really is good.” Other dishes started arriving but we kept nibbling at the cheese til it was gone. My friend Randolph Hodgson, founder of Neals’ Yard Dairy in London, taught me years ago not to get too caught up in what people say when they first taste a cheese, but rather to watch their actions. If they keep going back for more, it’s probably a very good piece of cheese. In this case, we asked for more while salads and plates of pasta arrived. Tired as we were we still had the presence of mind to ask the waiter which cheese it was, unsure whether he’d reveal the restaurant’s source. “Ravarano” he answered matter of factly.

Old time, high end restaurants in Italy are, almost always, likely to serve very good examples of the local specialties. In Parma that means great cheese, great cured ham and great salumi. After all, they have access to every producer in the region, and if they’ve been at it as the folks at Cocchi (fyi, in Italian it’s pronounced “Co’-KEY”) for nearly a century, they’ve had plenty of time to source and secure top-notch offerings. And while the politics of the region lean to the left (hence the naming of the street after Gramsci), its culinary preferences are stubbornly conservative. For a young local chef, I can see where that would seem to confine; but for me—someone who studies, sells and serves solely traditional food—it’s a beautiful thing.

Two days later, we were in the car with one of our other hosts, the Consorzio’s marketing director, Maria Chiara Passani, heading to the southern end of the Parma district to visit the dairy from whence the cheese had come. We kept climbing in the mountains, winding roads, through the tiny town of Calestano (about 2000 people) til we pulled up next a small white walled caseificio. This was the even tinier village of Ravarano. The opposite of working in an industrial park—this was a small dairy with an incredible view from almost 400 meters (roughly the same as Borgotaro). If you look to the south you can see Tuscany. The dairy itself is small, rather unassuming. Nothing as historically significant as the elegant Valserena or as mountain majestic as the newly renovated space at Borgotaro. The star here is the cheesemaker. The milk which comes from cows eating feed grown in the mountains. And, of course, the cheese.

The casaro is Damiano Delfante. Third generation as a master cheesemaker, following in the footsteps of his father, Giovanni, and grandfather, Armando. They though worked at a different dairy. He grew up playing in it as a kid so he’s known cheese since childhood. As a young man though Damiano opted out. Decided to pursue his profession as an engineer. He was recruited though to this dairy to take over their cheese. He made the decision to return to his roots. He took over the dairy; his mother and his wife committed to helping him. He dedicated himself to bringing the cheese back to excellence. The turnaround work was terrifically difficult, he tells us. “I lost fifteen years of my life in three years” he tells us. But in under a decade, he’s done it. No small thing when you realize you have to wait two or three years to see how your initial efforts worked out. The Ravarano Parmigiano Reggiano has won multiple awards in the last few years. And, as we know from our visit at Cocchi, it’s served and sold in some of the region’s best culinary establishments.

The dairy is a co-op. There were 11 farms, but one closed. Damiano ended up buying that farm so he’s now both producer and cheesemaker. Part of what makes the cheese so delicious is that he uses a special method of making whey that he learned from his father and grandfather. Damiano is driven to produce quality. “I grew up in the dairy. If a cheese wasn’t right and we couldn’t sell it, was a tragedy for the family.” He has great passion for Parmigiano in general, and for his own cheese in particular.

“If you’re going to work every day like I do, you have to understand why!” he told us. Every day? “Yes, every day. The first vacation I take, I’m probably not coming back,” he said with a smile. If the cheeses we’ve put together for this project were a classical ensemble, then maybe Valserena would be the violin, Roncadella the viola, Borgotaro the cello. La Villa, a bit on the edge, could be the clarinet. Ravarano would be the flute, its high notes flitting elegantly and lightly above the others. Each is playing from the same seven-hundred-year-old musical score, but each, in turn, has its own unique take on the notes. The Ravarano cheese, as it was at Ristorante Cocchi, is remarkably subtle and sweet. It would be great after dinner, or as an aperitivo with some sparkling wine. Great shaved onto a salad of delicate fresh lettuces. Or, of course, served as it was at the restaurant, broken into beautiful, rough-edged, golden bits to be nibbled on along with thin slices of equally sweet Prosciutto di Parma from Pio Tosini. An excellent, elegant addition to our list! ■

Ari

TASTING NOTES

FROM AN

Italian Expert

Ravarano

Deep brown-golden in color. The aroma is complex with notes of cooked milk and butter. Slightly pungent; the flavor is rich, while the beginning is sweet. Immediately a great concentration of umami is released. We can taste dried fruit, hazelnut and spices. The taste is long and persistent with a nice finish of caramel and mou, plus the interesting third dimension offered by a slight spiciness. Serve it by itself with a good sweet wine but also grated on warm food, giving it many different shades and nuances.

ATTENZIONE! IMPORTANT SERVING NOTES

SERVE MORE THAN ONE PARMIGIANO REGGIANO CHEESE AT A TIME!

With this wonderful new range of cheeses, one of the things I’m most excited about is the opportunity to serve five different Parmigiano Reggiano cheeses next to each other. Since each has its own flavor, mixing producers, seasons, etc. will make for a super interesting cheese board.

SERVE AT ROOM TEMPERATURE!

Right out of the refrigerator the cheese will still be too cold to get its full flavor. Be sure to always serve your Parmigiano Reggiano at room temperature.

GRATE TO ORDER!

When you’re using grated Parmigiano, be sure to grate it as close to the time you use it as possible. Pre-grating means the delicate cheese is exposed to air for far too long. Flavors and aromas get lost. In the same way you grind your coffee right before you brew, keep your cheese grinder close by and use it regularly. The aromas and the flavors of the cheese will then always be at their best!

BREAK, DON’T CUT!

Perhaps most important of all—the best way by far to enjoy Parmigiano Reggiano is always to break it into small rough-texture pieces. The eating experience is significantly more interesting because you get more cheese exposed to your tongue. The uneven surface allows you to experience the cheese’s full complexity. By contrast, our “normal” American routine of slicing cheese with a knife leaves a surface that looks smooth but makes for suboptimal eating! Instead you’ll want to use the small, almond-shaped knives made especially for this purpose.

