

Italy by Ingredient: Pecorino 8.20/2021

You may think of pecorino simply as the other grating cheese, but if you say pecorino to an Italian you are evoking a wide world of flavor and texture sensations varying from tang and cream to caramel and crumble and everything in between.

Pecorino is the name given to any cheese that is made with sheep's milk. The area of production encompasses all the central and southern regions as well as the islands of Sicily and Sardinia.

The best known pecorini are Romano and Toscano.

Despite its name, Romano's main area of production is the island of Sardinia. At 5 months of aging, Romano has acquired the delightful firm and slightly spicy quality that make it an engaging table cheese best paired with honey and fresh fruit. But it isn't until 8 months that it comes fully into its own as the decisive grating cheese we have all come to love. Either way, a wheel of Pecorino Romano weighs in somewhere between 40 and 50 pounds. It is recognizable by the diamond shaped dots and the black thin film around it.

Toscano is produced mainly in its namesake region – Toscana – but also in selected municipalities of Lazio and Umbria. Its character changes according to the micro-areas of production. It can be as small as a couple of pounds and up to 8. It can be young, soft and tender or older and with a sharp, gritty character. The minimum age requirement is 20 days for the fresco – fresh and 4 months for the stagionato – aged. The other main difference is also in the size of the curd, which is cut to the size of a hazelnut for the creamy young and to rice kernel proportions for the crumbly mature.

Both these cheeses are sealed as Productions of Designated Origin (PDO), a brand that indicates strict criteria of productions regulating anything from the provenance of the milk and diet of the sheep, to the amount of salt needed for preserving, to the times the wheels need to spend in each production phase.

Other pecorini have the same branding but a much smaller production with characteristics imparted by the environment in which they are made. I personally have yet to meet a pecorino I do not like, from the sweetest to the spiciest, they all give me joy and a sense of belonging. I always keep a fresh, an aged and of course some for grating.

Tonight, we will cook with the 2 that are more commonly found. But I invite to continue exploring the amazing world of Italian sheep cheeses, you are in for a treat.

Sources:

Disciplinare Pecorino Toscano
pecorinoromano.com

Involtini di spada al pecorino fresco

Swordfish rolls with fresh pecorino

1.5 pounds swordfish loin
1 tablespoon currants
1 cup fresh pecorino Toscano
2 cloves garlic
1/2 cup parsley leaves
1 tablespoon grated lemon zest
1 tablespoon pine nuts
1 teaspoon salt
black pepper or chili flakes to taste
olive oil as needed
1/4 cup coarse unseasoned bread crumbs

Place the swordfish on the freezer to harden without completely freezing – it should take 20 to 25 minutes.

Place the currants in water to reconstitute. Chop the pecorino. Mince the garlic into a paste. Finely chop the parsley.

Drain and gently squeeze the currants and place in a bowl. Add the cheese, garlic, parsley, zest, herbs, pecorino and nuts. Toss to combine all the ingredients evenly. Season with pepper or chili flakes to taste and 1/2 teaspoon of salt.

Cut the swordfish in 4 slices, depending on the circumference of the piece. Layer each slice between 2 parchment paper sheets and gently pound with a meat mallet all over until it is about 1/8" thin. Divide each slice in 2 and lay flat on your working counter. Sprinkle both sides with the remaining salt.

Divide the pecorino mixture evenly among the swordfish slices and place it in a mound in the center. Fold about 1/2" of the top flap toward the bottom then fold in the 2 side flaps. Roll down into a tight bundle. Brush the outside of each bundle with olive oil then roll into the breadcrumbs to coat lightly.

Grease the bottom of a small baking dish with 1 tablespoon of oil and arrange the swordfish bundles in it. Bake in the middle of the oven at 350° F for 12 to 15 minutes. Serve while still warm so that the cheese flows out when you cut into it.

Tagliolini cacio e pepe

Cacio e pepe tagliolini

for 4 people

1/2 pound dry egg tagliolini
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup grated pecorino romano + some for serving
lots of freshly ground black pepper

Place the tagliolini in a sauté pan and barely cover with hot water — keep additional hot water on hand. Add the salt and turn to medium heat to bring to a low boil.

Continue cooking shaking often until the pasta starts to lose its stiffness. It will absorb water. Stay close, as you don't want to risk overcooking it. There should always be at least 1/4" of starchy water in the pan, if it goes lower add a bit of hot water.

Using the suggested time on the package as a guide, taste about 2 minutes before it is supposed to be cooked. Taste it then, it should be quite al dente. Make sure there is about 1/2" of starchy water surrounding the pasta and add the pecorino.

Finish cooking while stirring to emulsify the starchy water and the pecorino. If necessary you can add a little more hot water while continuing to stir. Long chopsticks or tongs are great for this task.

Dust generously with freshly ground black pepper and swirl once more. It should be creamy, glistening and speckled. Eat right away.

Cooking with Viola Buitoni

Shopping List

Produce

- 2 garlic cloves
- 1/2 cup parsley leaves
- 1 lemon

Dairy

- 3/4 cup grated Pecorino Romano
- 1 cup young pecorino Toscano

Protein

- 1.5 pound loin swordfish

Pantry

- 1/4 cup coarse unseasoned breadcrumbs
- 1 tablespoons pine nuts
- 1 tablespoon currants
- 250 grams box of tagliolini all'uovo – egg tagliolini
- extra virgin olive oil
- salt
- pepper
- red chili flakes

Equipment List

- apron
- kitchen rags
- 1 big bowl for refuse
- 4 or 5 small bowls
- chef's, paring and bread knives
- small baking dish
- 12" sauté pan or skillet
- meat hammer
- parchment paper
- wooden spoons
- tongs
- zester
- serving bowl
- tasting spoons

Prepping List

- print recipes
- pull all ingredients and divide according to recipe
- pull all equipment and have within arm's reach