



The Grana Principle

The name Parmesan broadly represents

Italian-style grating cheeses worldwide. In Italy however, there are a number of hard, cooked grating cheeses made to strict guidelines and given their own designations to distinguish them from the generic 'parmesan'.

Grana is a large family of hard grating cheeses made from cow's milk and named for their grainy texture. The partly skimmed raw cow's milk from the morning and evening milkings are combined, curdled, cut into very fine pieces so that it releases as much whey as possible, then heated to shrink the curds and release even more whey, making the cheese quite elastic. It is then drained, pressed (removing even more moisture) and submerged in a brine bath for about one month, before being ripened in temperature- and humidity-controlled rooms for one to three years, during which the wheels are routinely checked, turned and cleaned. The resultant cheese has a sweet, nutty flavour from the caramelisation of the lactose when the milk is

heated and is sold in large wheels of 20kg to 50kg.

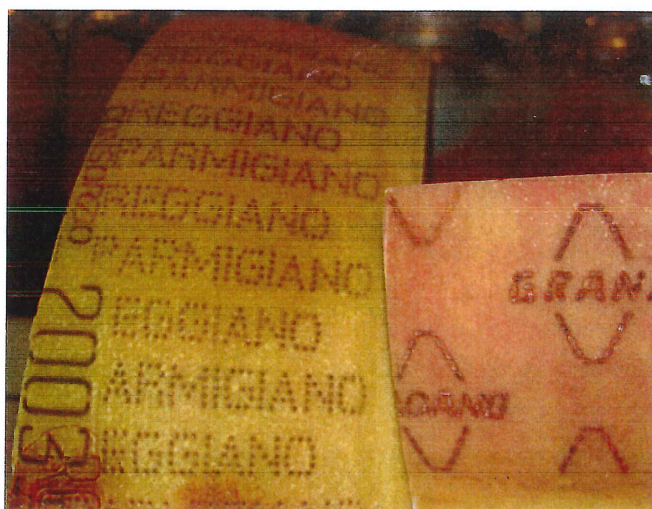
Grana is distinguished by the region and season in which it is made (cheese made from April to June is called 'di testa' and is considered the best), and the length of maturation (minimum six months at the dairy then distributed to dealers for further maturation of up to three years). Cheese over 12 months is called 'vecchio' (old), becoming 'stravecchio' (extra old) and later 'stravecchione' (super extra old). It develops a sharper taste with age and is more expensive. This style of cheese had great importance in medieval times as its low moisture content meant it kept well and so could be easily stored and transported.

Grana Padano is the most common of the Grana family. It has been made in the Po Valley and Trentino (including regions of Milan, Venice, Bologna, Turin and Como) since at least 1000 AD when monks in the Po Valley started irrigation and intensive dairy farming, thus producing milk on a large scale. It is made in 24kg to 40kg wheels year round, is straw yellow with fine grain

and breaks away in flakes when cut. The consortium mark, dairy number and date of production are stamped on the rind, along with the designation 'Grana Padano'.

Parmigiano Reggiano, produced in five provinces of Emilia-Romagna (Modena, Reggio Emilia, Parma, and parts of Bologna and Mantua), is considered 'the prince of Granas'. Production of this style of cheese in this region is believed to date back to around 700 BC. More recently, the two different appellations for Parma and the neighbouring province of Reggio Emilia were joined in 1955 when the appellations for grana cheeses were developed. Production still takes place on an artisanal scale, with over 500 small, mostly family-run, farms each making four to twelve 25kg - 35kg wheels a day. It takes 570 litres of milk to make one 35kg wheel of cheese. Raw milk from the evening milking is left to separate overnight, then skimmed and mixed with next morning's whole milk. It is poured, never pumped, into copper vats and mixed with naturally soured whey from the previous day's cheesemaking as a starter. The young wheels are left to drain overnight then 'Parmigiano Reggiano' is stencilled on the outer rim in tiny dots, before they are floated in brine baths to seal the rind. The mark of the consorzio is also stamped on the rind with the code number of the dairy and the date of production; space is left for the grader's stamp, which will show a grade from one to five. They are matured for at least 14 months, often in huge centrally-controlled warehouses. Up to 18 months the cheese is considered 'fresco'. At two years, it develops a sweet-salty crunch from enzyme crystallisation, is called 'vecchio' and is an ideal table cheese, and at three years it is 'stravecchio' and is better used as a cooking cheese. It has a sweet, delicate, slightly nutty, flavour; it should never have a strong taste, but is softer and sweeter the younger it is. The best cheeses are made in autumn from late-lactation milk. Colour varies from ivory white to straw yellow, and the texture is flaky and finely grained with barely visible eyes. It is best to buy Parmigiano Reggiano 'broken' from a whole wheel using a special Parmesan knife, which pries pieces off.

Pecorino is similar to Grana, except it is made from ewe's milk ('pecora' is Italian for 'sheep'). It is made in many parts of Italy, sometimes aged and sometimes eaten young. The best is said to come from Umbria and Tuscany, and it is a classic cheese of Sardinia. It has the white to ivory colour typical of ewe's milk cheeses, may have a few eyes and can be quite strong and pungent when aged. It is usually quite heavily salted, and Pecorino Pepato from Ragusa in Sicily is studded with black peppercorns. One of the best known Pecorinos is Pecorino Romano from the region of Lazio, the export version of which is encased in black wax, harking back to the days when the rind of this cheese was massaged with oil and ashes as it matured. Pecorino Toscano (from Tuscany), Pecorino Siciliano (from Sicily) and Pecorino Sardo (from Sardinia), are also popular and have Protected Designation of Origin (DOP) classification. Some Pecorino have a woven pattern on their rind, reminiscent of the days when they were stored in woven baskets.



BUYING & STORING

All of these cheeses are best bought cut freshly from a whole wheel so that you can determine their authenticity. The cheese should be moist or waxy. Avoid those that are discoloured, dry or cracked, semi-soft, or have eyeholes (except for pecorino, which may have a few). Store them wrapped in wax paper, or cheesecloth smeared with olive oil, and place inside a loose plastic bag or inside an airtight plastic container in the refrigerator.

USAGE

Grate over pasta, polenta or soups. Shave onto salads or over carpaccio. Store the rind from Grana or Parmigiano Reggiano in olive oil and in a cool place for a delicious flavoured oil to drizzle over salads and pastas. Include in breadcrumb stuffing for meat or vegetables or whip up a batch of basil pesto or Parmesan biscuits. Serve young cheeses at the table with fresh crisp pears and thin crackers. **T**

PESTO

1 bunch basil (yielding about 2 cups packed leaves)
1/3 cup pine nuts
2 cloves garlic, chopped
1/2 cup freshly grated Parmigiano or aged pecorino
1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

1) Pick basil leaves, discarding any brown ones. Wash and dry well. 2) Roast pine nuts, either under the grill or in a dry frying pan (watch them as they burn quickly). 3) In a food processor, process the garlic and pine nuts and Parmesan until fine. Add the basil and continue to process. 4) With the motor running, add the olive oil a little at a time until a smooth paste is achieved. 5) Taste and season with salt and pepper.

Pesto keeps for a couple of weeks refrigerated in a screw-top jar with a little olive oil covering the surface. It's great spread on toasted Italian bread, over chicken or lamb before baking, swirled into soup or tossed through pasta or boiled potatoes.